

Testing of Tradenet platform to facilitate mobile-to-internet link (Deliverable Nos. 5 & 6 IFAD First Mile Project Phase II, Year 2.)

The objective of testing the tradenet platform was to: *“Conduct trials of SMS-market info service using Tradenet and analyze the commercial viability for sustaining such a service. Negotiate contracts with BusyLab in Ghana to obtain licensed use of Tradenet in Tanzania, and also negotiate a “Third Party SMS connection” contract with a provider (ie. Celtel, Vodacom, etc) to test the Tradenet platform. Design protocols for market price enumeration in at least five main markets as well as a trial for the Tradenet platform.”*

Lessons Learned and Present Status

The work on using the Tradenet platform concentrated on understanding the operational details of its use, and what this means in the context of the emerging set up with the National Marketing Company in Tanzania. This work was somewhat delayed through re-arrangements in the NMC, ie. the shift from Agribusiness Development Company Ltd to a consortium of new Regional Managers.

At present we have a contract with Busylab in Ghana for using Tradenet, limited from October through December 2008, for setting up a test-operation. If learning continues to be effective, a prolongation of another full year is envisaged.

Suitability of the Tradenet platform

We have been looking for an internet trading platform that:

- Allows for constantly updated price information.
- Allows for constantly updated offers and responses to them.
- Provides an SMS bridge to the data-base.
- Allows clients to profile themselves.
- Allows profiling of clients through tracking their information use.

So far the platform appears to be suitable, even though various bugs and inconsistencies have been found, which are however being taken care of immediately by Busylab, the company operating Tradenet. Furthermore there are too many functions for beginners to start with. Busylab is in the process of reprogramming the whole platform to take care of such issues. The release of the new platform under the name “eSoko” is planned by Busylab early next year. Our feedbacks are contributing to the upgrading of the platform. If our further testing proves successful and the learning continues to be useful, we intend to continue with eSoko in 2009.

SMS capabilities

We intend to make sure we have:

- A useful SMS-bridge that allows our IBMs in local and main markets to upload and request market price information onto the platform.
- A useful SMS-bridge that allows our IBMs to send SMS feeds and SMS alerts to their clients.
- Easy interfaces that don’t overwhelm rural users, probably also in Swahili, at least for some.

Tradenet has an SMS bridge installed that allows to send SMS alerts and requests for regular price information (“subscriptions”) to Tanzanian mobile numbers. This bridge is operating via servers based in Ghana. However, a bridge can also be set up between the Tradenet data-base and a mobile provider operating in Tanzania, thereby reducing the costs.

The learning efforts with the SMS have been considerably delayed due to the restructuring of the National Marketing Company and its reconfiguration among the Regional Managers. This restructuring resulted in late establishment of a market price information network that can upload prices. An SMS bridge only makes sense in connection with such market price information being loaded daily into the data-base. It is only since mid-November 2008 that price information is beginning to be available on the platform.

However, what has already emerged is that SMS alerts and subscriptions are a feature still very new to the market, and therefore still difficult to grasp for the operators (Regional Managers, Market Access Companies and their IBMs) and clients (traders, farmer groups, transporters, etc). This means we need to do “manual” test runs that take people through the steps of setting up SMS alerts and subscriptions. The operators still need a chance to explore the most beneficial and effective use of SMS alerts and subscriptions for their businesses, and learn the detailed operations for doing it. Only then does it make sense to trigger the automation through the Tradenet platform.

For this reason a contract with an SMS-service provider in Tanzania is postponed to 2009 after the test runs show that there are enough people around who have learnt to make this work for themselves.

Training and R&D

We intend to develop a steady and reliable competence on the ground in Tanzania that knows how to manage these tools, can train people to use it, and can engage in R&D to further develop the use of these tools.

We have had a contract with the Ugandan company Farmgain that has experience in using the Tradenet platform in Uganda. Farmgain trained the Tanzanian Regional Managers in the use of Tradenet in Dar es Salaam from 17th to 19th September. The Tanzanian consortium of RMs that presently acts as the National Marketing Company has designated one RM to become the platform specialist taking care of Tradenet and SMS issues.

Recommendations for Continued Learning

1. Continue to test Tradenet to end December 2008 and then negotiate with Busylab a 3 month testing of the new eSoko platform.
2. Make a trial run with “manual” SMS-alerts and subscriptions operating through the Busylab bridge in Ghana. Only after traffic picks up negotiate an SMS bridge with one or several mobile providers in Tanzania, and only if prices are favourable compared with Ghana.
3. Arrange for technical backup to the RM in Tanzania responsible for the Tradenet and SMS issues. This support shall be organized via the “First Mile” learning team on the Linking Local Learners platform and through coaching the interaction between the RM and Busylab.

Supporting Documents

1. Busylab Contract for Tradenet platform use to December 2008.