

Owen Barder - IFAD Innovation Talk

Thank you Gladys and Meike for that warm introduction. We are meeting today against the background of another tragic chapter in the coronavirus pandemic. Our thoughts are very much with our colleagues, partners and friends in India as they grapple with this frightening and unpredictable new wave of infections. We wish you strength and good fortune and we send love.

The pandemic has cruelly reminded us that we all have obligations to our fellow human beings, not only because it is ethically right but because each of us depends for our health, livelihood and wellbeing on being part of a global community that leaves no-one behind.

And we are reminded too of the value of shared knowledge as the foundation of our common well-being. Vaccination is an excellent example of this. Vaccines are the result of iterations of scientific advances, testing and learning. We have developed systems to test vaccines to ensure they are safe, and a network of delivery to get them to every part of the world. Today about 85% of the world's children get the main childhood vaccinations. This is a striking example of how much the world benefits from spreading actionable ideas and knowledge, quickly, cheaply and at scale. As Michael Kremer has just said, sharing knowledge has either very low costs, or very often no cost at all, and it generates huge benefits.

At Precision Agriculture for Development we build digital information sharing systems to distribute high quality, actionable, targeted information at scale and at very low cost per person to people who - in the absence of our services - would not otherwise have access to it. We work every day to ensure that this information is valuable to the user, and we constantly iterate and improve to increase its usefulness for the people we serve.

I am immensely grateful for our collaboration with IFAD which has enabled us to pursue that mission.

In the eight months since this grant was activated we have served 1.8 million farmers with agricultural advisory information in three very different national contexts.

In Kenya and Pakistan we did this by leveraging our existing systems

- In Kenya, our two-way sms-based digital extension system - dubbed MOA-INFO - which we operate in partnership with the Kenyan Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries and Co-operatives and the east African mobile telecommunications company Safaricom - has increased its reach by approximately 75 percent during the lifespan of our collaboration with IFAD, and is now serving 650,000 registered farmers. With IFAD funding, we have designed new decision support tools and developed new advisory content for IFAD priority crops, providing information across 11 crops to help farmers

make more informed decisions and more easily access information. Many of these users are beneficiaries of other IFAD-funded projects - the Upper Tana Natural Resource Management Project and the Kenya Cereal Enhancement Programme - Climate Resilient Agricultural Livelihood project, who have been enrolled into the service in March-April.

- In **Pakistan**, we have been able to reach roughly 1.15 million smallholder farmers via the voice and SMS-based platform that we designed on behalf of the Agriculture Department of the Government of Punjab (AD GoP). We are now in discussions with IFAD to expand these services to additional beneficiaries of the Southern Punjab Poverty Alleviation Project and other IFAD-funded projects and partners, with a particular focus on reaching women and livestock farmers.

In **Nigeria** - which is a new geography for PAD - we have been able to use what we have learned elsewhere to quickly build (from scratch!) a new service targeting smallholder farmers in Nigeria's poorest regions. In the past decade the northern states have been significantly affected by conflict and population displacement.

Beginning in September, we rapidly recruited and activated an extremely talented team on the ground. Using our in-house tech platform - Paddy - we were able to quickly deploy and adapt an automated voice-based system, with built-in analytics for rapid and rich learning.

With support from our colleagues at IFAD, and in collaboration with the federal and local governments in seven states, we have brought on board an initial 6,000 Nigerian farmers to our service, and successfully ran an advisory campaign during the dry season. In collaboration with IFAD, we have profiled 39,000 additional beneficiaries of the Climate Change Adaptation and Agribusiness Support Programme, and we are currently integrating the results of a needs assessment survey of these farmers and onboarding additional farmers for a campaign that will run through the primary growing season in June-October.

Farmers continue to seek information which empowers them to improve their incomes and sustain livelihoods. At a time when the free movement of people, goods and services continues to be restricted, digital extension and digital information systems are more important than ever.

And when we bring the pandemic under control everywhere, as Meike said in her introduction, a lesson from this experience is that we can share targeted, customised information, at scale, at little cost. I think it is very unlikely that we will want to go back to slower, sleepy, more expensive systems in the future.

Our collaboration with IFAD has demonstrated:

- First, that our services can be replicated, adapted and scaled in new geographies, and can be scaled up to new target populations in existing geographies.

- Second, that we have been able to develop and deploy surveys and A/B tests to quickly and accurately gather and analyze information from users to improve our services and adapt to evolving challenges in near real time; and
- Third, the combined capabilities of governments, multilateral organisations and non-profit service delivery organisations can deploy services quickly and at scale, using local talent and shared knowledge and systems.

We envisage this new partnership as both a mechanism for recovery from the devastating effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on smallholder farmers, and an investment in better ways of delivering agricultural information in the long term.

There is much rhetoric about the need to build back better after the pandemic - we believe that putting in place systems to spread the world's knowledge - cost effectively and targeted especially to those who would otherwise be left behind - is a key ingredient of building back better.

We hope that this collaboration - international and at scale - will be the first step in the development of a long-term partnership with IFAD to expand the use of digital agricultural advisory services throughout the world, to more fully integrate those services into governments' existing agricultural extension systems, and to absorb these services into countries' long-term budgets.

We are excited at our progress in advancing our systems to complement IFAD's work in support of poor rural farming families and look forward to further success as we continue to work together to service poor, rural families with valuable and productive information.