Strengthening Smallholder Farmers’ Resilience through Digital Solutions
STARLIT PROJECT

With the support of IFAD and China, the Strengthening Agricultural Resilience through Learning and Innovation (STARLIT) project was implemented in the period of 2021 - 2023 by CORDAID in Rwanda and Kenya, to build the resilience of smallholder farmers against existing and future global challenges.

One of the STARLIT’s thematic areas includes enhancing smallholder farmers’ access to agricultural digital information.
BACKGROUND
The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the already critical situation of maize production in Kayonza, largely due to smallholder farmers’ restricted access to vital extension services and training. Traditional training programmes have been criticised for their lack of inclusivity, often favoring leaders of farmer cooperatives and sidelining other farmers while also neglecting to actively involve women. Additionally, high illiteracy rates among smallholder farmers further hindered their access to training opportunities.

To address these challenges, a transformative digital approach was implemented to provide convenient and inclusive training and extension services. The Interactive Voice Response (IVR) training approach by VIAMO emerged as a solution, removing distance and time constraints and enabling farmers to access training and extension services from anywhere. Using mobile phones, smallholder farmers were introduced to better agricultural practices which enhanced their productivity and improved their livelihoods, even amidst challenging times.

Steps involved until the training was delivered
This concise process outlines the steps involved in developing and delivering digital training on good agricultural practices for maize production, taking into account the limitations posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for efficient and accessible extension services.

Select service provider
Chose VIAMO as the reputable service provider with expertise in delivering digital solutions tailored to farmers.

Determine training approach
Figured out the most effective training delivery approach, including suitable timing for farmers to receive the training.

Collaborate with RAB
Collaborated with the Rwanda Agriculture and Animal Resources Development Board (RAB) to develop content based on good agricultural practices and maize related extension information.

Contextualize the content to the Kayonza context
Adapted and customized the training content to suit Kayonza specific agro-climatic conditions, farming practices, and challenges.

Validate and approve the content
Engaged maize value chain actors to validate the content.

Test farmers’ skills before the training
Farmers’ skills on maize GAP were tested before the training.

Deliver the training
Rolled out the training to farmers, using the digital extension services platform provided by VIAMO. Ensure accessibility to a wide range of farmers, including those with high illiteracy rates.

Follow up with constraints after the training
Measured the impact of the training by assessing the farmers’ newly acquired knowledge and skills in maize production.
After extensive engagement with diverse agricultural stakeholders to ensure content quality and effectiveness, the training modules and digital extension services offered by the STARLIT project have gained official approval from the Rwanda Agriculture and Animal Resources Development Board (RAB). As the governing body responsible for standardizing extension services, RAB has not only endorsed this approach for maize but also commended its applicability to other value chains. This achievement underscores the project’s commitment to delivering valuable and widely applicable solutions for the agriculture sector.

The digital training focusing on good agricultural practices for maize has significantly enhanced farmers’ capabilities and resulted in improved farming methods, leading to increased production and higher profits. By utilizing their phones, farmers can easily access vital market information and explore additional agricultural information, thereby empowering them to maximize their agricultural potential.

**SOUTH-SOUTH AND TRIANGULAR COOPERATION**

The partnership with VIAMO, an international social enterprise enabled the development and dissemination of the digital extension services model, providing high-quality digital services to farmers. Through this collaboration, Cordaid utilized external expertise and resources, enhancing the project’s effectiveness and exemplifying the spirit of South-South collaboration.

This IVR approach has been successfully tested and proven efficient in multiple regions where VIAMO operates, encompassing Europe, North America, Latin America & Caribbean, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East/North and Sub-Sahara Africa. The implementation of this approach in the STARLIT project in Rwanda has yielded inspiring results, positively impacting the rural livelihoods in the project area. Its success stands as a testament and inspiration for potential replication in other countries seeking to enhance their agricultural practices and uplift rural communities.

**OUTREACH**

The digital extension services model increased access to extension services for 2,623 farmers in total (65% males, 35% females) exceeding the initial target of 1,772 farmers in the year 2022.