



**BRIEF 34.  
Developing New  
Services Needs an  
Effective  
Knowledge  
Management  
System**

The Linking Local Learners (LLL) online platform [www.linkinglearners.net](http://www.linkinglearners.net) has emerged as an indispensable tool for sustaining the critically important business-to-business learning between rural entrepreneurs developing new market access services through their local networks<sup>1</sup>. The LLL platform has provided network members with a tool to generate and manage knowledge about their developing business operations. Network members generate knowledge through peer-to-peer exchanges assisted by mentors. Mentoring peer exchange is a critical support service provided by national service providers<sup>2</sup> and RAVI. Mentors encourage peer exchanges between network members through workshops, visits to their businesses and facilitating online learning exchanges. Knowledge generation from one face-to-face event to the next is maintained via the internet and mobile phone. Knowledge generation focuses on inventing and enhancing business operations and business opportunities. The knowledge generated through peer exchanges is captured in the form of operational procedures, stories of experiences, and briefs on lessons learned. These documents are then made available for use to network members on the LLL platform.

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<sup>1</sup> LLL platform is the knowledge management tool for the IFAD supported Firstmile, Rural Knowledge Management, and Local Market Services Development Projects.

<sup>2</sup> AgriTrade [www.agri-trade.biz](http://www.agri-trade.biz) in Kenya and AgriNet [www.agrinetug.net](http://www.agrinetug.net) in Uganda. Rural African Ventures Investments (RAVI) [www.ravinvest.biz](http://www.ravinvest.biz)

**Breakthroughs with business-to-business learning**

Over the years many breakthroughs have been achieved through peer exchanges on the LLL platform. The platform has also been used to exchange trading opportunities on cassava, maize, white sorghum, tomatoes, onions and many other commodities. The most important breakthroughs, however, have been the insights for operating ‘Transaction Security Services’ and its critically important ‘cash-on-the-bag’ funds. The LLL platform is now the forum for exchanging experiences on the management of such funds. Similarly, operational details for transaction security services are being refined through peer exchanges. This was the case both for conducting auctions and operating double loop deals. Detailed descriptions of these practices are available to network members on the platform website. The evolution in thinking about business models for providing support services to the networks has also taken place on the platform. Most important here was the insight to spin off the regional manager function from the national service provider to become a separate business in its own right. The LLL platform has gradually evolved into a tool for business-to-business learning among active members of the network. Some of the major milestones in that learning follow.

**Building a business to address clients’ problems**

Local learning exposed farmers’ problems of poor knowledge of market prices and demand and poor links to buyers. Problems with middlemen and the low prices they get because they need money immediately also came out. Farmers’ lack of trust in warehouses and buyers means they are unwilling to bulk or sell without money up front. Big buyers are also

not prepared to trust farmers because they cheat on weights and quality. Network members have developed their transaction security service and cash on the bag payments to address these problems.

### **Responding to local market information needs**

Local learning prompted our move away from providing general market information from the main markets to focussing on local market intelligence linking local prices with local offers to buy or sell and local network members to assist those interested to access the market. There are now so many ways farmers and traders can get main market prices for free that commercialization of this service has become impossible. Network members are now developing tailor made alerts to local clients sending locally relevant market intelligence directly to their mobile phones as SMS texts.

### **Developing a service for secure transactions between small farmers and larger buyers**

Local learning stimulated a long struggle for network members to change their operations from trading to brokering. Clients also struggled to appreciate the difference. Buying cheaply off farmers and selling on at higher prices to make your money on the difference is the universal marketing experience. Client appreciation that brokers do not own the product and make their money from commission on the service provided only comes with practical experiences. Client appreciation comes when they actually see the quality checking and tagging and bagging for traceability of produce. Network members are now refining operations for sourcing produce for processors, auctioning produce to get competition between buyers and forward contracting with farmer groups.

### **Going commercial through branding and financing**

Local learning has helped network members to become better entrepreneurs. Providing experiences through RAVI loans for members allowed them to develop the necessary discipline to handle commercial loans. Local learning has allowed them to build the skills to prepare simple financial plans for their

enterprises and develop business records on their trading, understand the unique selling points of their market access services and market them through radio, print and online websites. Network members are now seeing the need for a brand to protect and market their transaction security service as well as the need for strict discipline to maintain brand quality.



*Training on LLL knowledge management tool*

### **Knowledge management goes beyond network members**

These milestones show how the platform has emerged as an indispensable tool for sustaining critically important business-to-business learning for network members. However, it is not only network members who participate in the LLL online exchanges. Network members invite clients on to the platform especially from among the farmer groups and buyers as well as 'supporters' from local government, ministries and NGO projects. Not all of those invited participate in the exchanges. Many just follow the discussions. These 'lurkers' when asked, say they get value from their passive participation as these examples show.

*"I am still interested in LLL because it has assisted me in promoting opportunities to my farmer groups and also enlightening me in various marketing strategies." Patrick Kuria (Regional Manager KENFAP, Kenya).*

*"Briefly, LLL is a wealth of information and the ideas we exchange are invaluable. Of course besides the networking established."*  
Christopher Magoba (Ministry of Agriculture, Busia, Kenya).

*"Of course I am still very interested in Linking Learners. Its contributions from various members, from various areas has and is helping a lot, especially in the areas of marketing of different value chains. Right now I am working with farmers with value chains of passion fruits, onions, tomatoes, kales and bananas where we are trying to zero in on marketing constraints and their solutions in the rural setting."* Carol Kamau (District Agriculture Officer, Bungoma, Kenya).

*"This is to inform you that LLL has been quite helpful in various ways. It has been interesting and encouraging to see how groups are progressing and to see them exchange business ideas."* Annastacia Kiio (Ministry of Agriculture, Nairobi, Kenya).

*"I have been learning a lot from the experiences that are coming on board every day. For example the issue of maize in Uganda. I am a maize farmer in Uganda and I have already harvested the maize and I want to ship to Kenya for selling during December. From what I have heard I already know the challenges a head of me."* Habbakuk Khaamala (Farmer Field Schools Network, Kakamega, Kenya).

*"LLL is helpful to me through various exchanges about business ideas among the members. I wish to start a company that will be dealing with rural development particularly the company that I wish to build will be extension service delivery. Market, business development will be my basic components."* Maulid Chatto (District Council Ludewa, Tanzania).

*"In fact LLL has improved my capacity in developing a sustainable market access to smallholder farmers in my area! Hopefully soon will get a feedback of a proposal written to European Union for funding smallholder simsim growers in Manyara region. The project aims to link producers groups with buyers by developing a sustainable value chain."* William Swai (FARM AFRICA, Arusha, Tanzania).

*"The platform has been very helpful to me in my work of supporting smallholder farmers using value chain approach. Currently I am working for farmers in the following districts: Mkuranga (cassava), Same (poultry), Simanyiro (onion and goats) and Chunya (sunflower oil)." Kain Mvanda (FAIDA MALI, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania).*

*"In my work LLL is very important. In my Women Information Center we are in the preparatory stage for our structures. We will let you know the performance."* Sophia Mwenda (Ministry of Community Development, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania)

*"The LLL helps me in linking smallholder farmers with different market intermediaries. By the way the LLL is very useful in getting different market opportunities that can be linked to the smallholder farmers."* Clarence Chitemi (FAIDA MALI, Arusha, Tanzania)

*"LLL is helpful to me because I am now able to communicate with several people throughout the country concerning different things such as marketing, prices, peoples requirements, and several opportunities."* Nicolous Malema (Mbalizi Agro-inputs Co. Ltd, Tanzania).

*"It is true the LLL is helpful to us as a Farmers Association since we have started a marketing arm for the Association. I hope LLL will be of use to our marketing efforts."* Samuel Ejoku (UNFEE, Soroti, Uganda).

*"This is to inform you that we find LLL useful as it is informative and brings on board various experiences."* Peter Ochepea (Good Service Ltd, Soroti, Uganda).

*"I write to remind you that I still want to be with LLL for I am learning a lot from it. So do please include me in the team."* Nelson Omoding (Gweri Dairy Assoc., Soroti, Uganda)

*"I am still most interested in LLL although I have not been contributing a lot recently. I have been following especially the market opportunities on the net and have advised my clients to take advantage of the information."* Charles Aben (NAADS District Coordinator, Soroti, Uganda).

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