**BRIEFING NOTE ON:**

Internet Communication Practice of Learning Groups[i]

As a matter of agreed practice members of a local learning group share their ideas and experiences with other learning groups. They agreed to this because they found that sharing or communicating between local learning groups stimulated innovation and encouraged members to try out something new. So, the important information flows in local learning were between one farmer group and another and between farmer groups and their local service providers. Farmers shared their challenges with each other and got back new ideas from each other. Farmers shared their service demands with service providers and got back advice on what to do next. It is this horizontal communication between peers across local areas that were important not the hierarchical top down flows national to local as illustrated in the figure below.

The rapid sharing of experiences and pooling of knowledge was enabled by the use of the LLL internet learning support service[1]. While the primary aim here was to build a base of locally relevant information from real life challenges and locally invented opportunities, using the internet enabled farmers and service providers to search for any information they wanted. Most were searching for market information and new agro-based enterprises and technologies.

Figure. Important Information Flows in Linked Local Learning
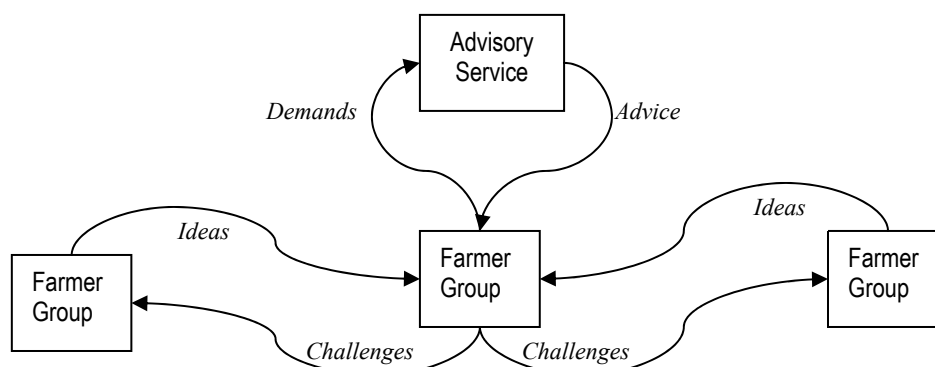
Learning groups are linked to all users of the service allowing them to pool their knowledge so that it can be shared among all teams using the service. For example: When a group of learners decides they want to explore a new topic they can search all the discussions and documents of the other learning teams in the 'knowledge-pool'. When they find anything interesting they can take up contact with those who already have experience to share.

Notwithstanding the fact that local practice in using the internet to share ideas and experiences emerging from the field based action learning process is only a few months old local learners were clear that the internet learning support service gave significant benefits to them. Chief among these was getting information from people outside the usual people they talk to. Learning groups got information from their peers in other countries learning about bulking maize production for marketing, producing organic vegetables and improving access to information and communication technology. They also got information from researchers and market organizations in their own countries organizations they had never communicated with before.

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[1] *The Linking Local Learners(LLL) internet learning support service can be viewed at www.linkinglearners.net The learning support software is Instantteam. This is shareware, ie. it is free for anybody to install and use it as they wish, or develop it further. Instantteam was developed in a partnership between Helvetas (a Swiss NGO http://www.helvetas.ch) and the Swiss software company IDESO http://www.ideso.ch*

Such was the benefit of internet access to farmer groups and service providers that some from Kenya and Tanzania took up the challenge of bringing the internet closer to villages. It is important to stress here that farmers interests in internet access is not just to join in LLL discussions but also for direct email to contact persons and getting information from third party websites. Their idea was to get into the internet café business themselves. They argued that setting up their own internet café nearer where they lived would not only give them better access to the internet but also provide a source of income for the group. They have seen internet café's springing up in the districts and all making profits not from customers browsing the internet but from other services like photocopying and printing that they offer their clients. While the 'Habari za Wakulima Kilosa' (Kilosa Farmers New Service) as already got started in Tanzania they like the others they are communicating with are struggling with business planning and the complexity of setting up small enterprises in rural areas.

The practice of using the LLL internet learning support service produced two further insights into the process of internet supported learning. The first insight was the importance of mixing face-to-face meetings of learners with internet discussion. The benefits that face-to-face meetings bring lies not only in the chance to build trust and integrity, but also in the stimulation and innovation that always emerges from group 'brainstorming' sessions. Even though our practice is young we appear to see some motivating effect a chance of a meeting brings to peoples intensity of discussion using the internet. While we cannot know yet, we suspect that face-to-face meetings once every six or twelve months will greatly enhance the intensity of sharing over the internet. Our second insight concerns the use of the English language on the internet. Conventional wisdom suggests that people would find working in their second and sometimes third language a disincentive to engage. Practice has shown the opposite to be true. Learners reported that the process of translating and writing down their ideas in English helped them crystallize their ideas and more accurately articulate their demands. Better articulation of demand appears to result from a discussion in a local language being translated and then written down in a second language.