



**BRIEFING
NOTE ON:**

**The Learning Topics of Farmers and
Service Providersⁱ**

Some twelve learning topics were identified and discussed using the LLL internet learning support service. Some of the topics were similar such that four more general 'domains' were recognised as follows.

Learning topics concerning farmer demand and service provision included:

- How to break through the dole-out mindset? When dealing with development programs, farmers have so far only experienced free or heavily subsidized services. On the other hand program officials cannot think past the poverty of farmers and therefore have difficulties to imagine how farmers will pay for services.
- How can villagers learn to become reliable service providers? At present services are too thinly spread, intermittent, or poorly focused on local conditions. Some villagers learned how to provide commercial services in their villages.

Marketing access and chains formed another domain of discussion. This domain explored how can farmers learn to make better deals on the local markets. Farmers usually have high transaction costs even on their local markets. Furthermore they are often victims of unreliable buyers or monopolizing buyers. The challenge was to improve the organization of local markets and more specifically:

- How can contract farming improve income security?
- How can cooperation in grading and bulking products by groups of producers provide a win-win for both producers and traders?
- How can group-marketing improve the deals?
- How can producers reach down the marketing chain to access specialized buyers?

Learning topics concerning farmer groups and their finance included:

- How can farmer groups learn to sustain themselves financially? Many programs operate with groups of farmers', however most programs have little success in sustaining the service provision of the groups to their members after the program ceases. Groups learned how to fund their activities through means that they can access themselves.
- How can low-income farmers learn how to pay for services: Groups started to discuss ways that allow farmers with little available cash to pay for services that are profitable to them.

Given the importance of rapid communication between learning groups and the use of email and internet to do this, a number of learning topics dealt with information and communication. The topics within this domain looked for answers to the following questions:

- How can local entrepreneurs bring ICTs closer to villages?
- How can local entrepreneurs learn to sell agricultural information?
- How can farmers learn to use new technologies to enhance their existing information systems?

Even though the discussions of learning topics have only been going on for some four months learners are progressing and making changes to the learning topics. While there is much still to discuss in "How to have effective demand on service providers by low income farmers?" progress has been made in practical ideas on how to sustain farmer groups. In future learners want to enhance the performance of their groups through learning more about "How to resolve conflicts that arise in groups?"

Similarly, there is much still to discuss in the learning topic of “How to have effective provision of services?” Even though good ideas for farmer groups and service providers are emerging on how to increase access to the internet a new learning topic has been proposed on “Effective communication between farmers and service providers”. An exciting idea emerging here is that of farmer groups partnering with local extension agents to set up closer to home their own internet cafes and farmer information and news services.

Learning to make demand-driven services work on the ground happens not in the abstract but in the context of real service needs. Currently, there are two major service needs. The first is in increasing farmers’ access to markets and setting up marketing chains. The second is in how to diversify agricultural production and organize organic vegetable production. A new learning topic has been added to these on how to mitigate HIV/AIDS effects in rural communities.

ⁱ **For more information contact:**
clive.lightfoot@linkinglearners.net /
kevin.gallagher@fao.org / Ueli Scheuermeier at
uscheuermeier@dplanet.ch / Jacob.Nymand at
jwn@lr.dk

The ‘LLL’ internet learning support service can be viewed at <http://www.linkinglearners.net>. (Log in with username = guest and password = readonly)