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AGRICULTURE TIPS

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For Ugandan Farmers, Agricultural Tips Just a Phone Call Away

By Peterson Ssendi
Kampala
25 June 2007

Report on Uganda Farmers Using Cell Phone Technology, mp3
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In Uganda, a new project is using cell phones to send farmers valuable farming tips by text message. The scheme is also helping farmers focus on growing lucrative export crops. The development experts behind the effort say sharing knowledge between – and among -- farmers will help increase food production and reduce poverty. From Kampala, Voice of America English to Africa reporter Peterson Ssendi tells us thousands of farmers are involved in the project.

The three-year-old effort is called CELAC, or “Collecting and Exchanging of Local Agriculture Content.” It’s exclusively funded by a Dutch NGO, HIVOS. As part of the project, a team of information and communications experts collects information on improved farming methods and updates on agricultural commodities – and circulates the information to farmers through cell phone text messages. Farmers say the project is helping improve their earnings and food security by sharing knowledge and also telephone and computer skills. Edam Peter is a farmer from the northern Ugandan district of Apac. He says, “We benefit a lot because we are sharing ideas…and making friends around. It has done a lot for improving our production.”

Besides sharing knowledge, the CELAC project also encourages farmers to specialize in new and potentially more lucrative ventures, including raising livestock.

Farmer Evelyn Ogwang of Apac district in the eastern Uganda says CELAC officials persuaded her to take a different approach: “They introduced to us how to keep ducks. Before… we were farmers, keeping (only) bees. Now we have added on keeping ducks. Before… those middlemen used to cheat us but now we are getting market information from CELAC… This year we are going to start group marketing.”

Apac district farmers say that because of improved information on production and marketing – including ways to eliminate the middle men -- the market price for ducks went up to $1.43, or about 2500 Ugandan shillings. Before, middlemen used to buy ducks from the farmers for only half that price and keep the profits. Now, farmers earn the extra money.

CELAC is helping Lira District farmer Alobo James to grow cassava, and to teach other farmers how to grow it. Alobo uses his cell phone to give out information and advice: “They have chosen cassava in Lira district so I am the coordinator. They are actually helping us in communication in case there is any problem based on agriculture. Any problem concerning agriculture in the country, they send for us. Like when there was a problem of bird flu they

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actually sent for us [warned us].

For those who can not read text messages, CELAC has engaged a number of farmers to help teach their neighbors how to read. As a result of the project, rural farmers have increased their production of cassava, maize, bananas and ducks. The chairman of CELAC, Vincent Waiswa, says people are responding positively to sharing information by phone.

Project coordinator Maria Nakirya says the plan costs about $54,000 dollars, or 100 million Uganda shillings annually, and is expected to last for the next three years. Now, more than 300 rural farmers are trained and equipped to teach new farming methods to illiterate farmers at the village level.

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