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ZAMBIAN FARMERS SMS

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SMS trading a boon for Zambian farmers

An SMS system which allows farmers in Zambia to compare prices in different locations is creating a revolution in the way farmers can now trade. Without comparative market data, farmers were often short-changed by middlemen who bought cheap and sold expensive. Dominique Magada reports.

An SMS market information service recently launched in Zambia could be the first step towards creating a mobile phone commodity market for the whole of Africa and link up previously isolated small farmers. After a year of pilot testing, the SMS trading system is showing great promise in Zambia's rural regions. "From the beginning, we realised that there was a great potential for the system to develop and engage small farmers," said Dick Siame, manager of the market information development programme in Zambia. "Because Zambia is sparsely populated, it is very difficult for them to get information and to be an active part of the trading process."

Until the system was put in place, farmers had very little knowledge about market prices and had to sell their crop to intermediary buyers at prices often well below market rates. With the new system, they can request the latest market price being sent via SMS for any given commodity. Within seconds they receive information on best prices and the best buyers in a specified province or district. The SMS service, which costs $0.15 for each message, enables farmers to compare prices and selected buyers to start trading."The system is very accessible for small farmers because mobile phone technology is cheap. A SIM card cost $1 here, and a telephone about $25. If they can't afford a phone, they borrow their friends'," explained Gibson Kapili, in charge of the programme's contract management and procurement.

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