



Mobile phone information network gives Indian farmers new hope

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Two's company: a farmer ploughs his field in the Medak district in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. Photograph: Krishnendu Halder/Reuters

While farming in the developing world has become more sophisticated through developments in chemicals, crop management and machinery, the mobile phone is at the forefront in bringing the latest 21st-century improvements to the poorest rural communities. Growing numbers of Indian farmers are now seen studying their mobile phone screens for information on subjects such as market prices, crop volumes and weather forecasts. And this data is bringing about vast improvements to the farmers' income and livelihoods.

For example, using the Reuters Mobile Light (RML) mobile phone service, one grape grower in Maharashtra state, India, began sending his product to Russia for a higher price after subscribing, while a maize grower received an SMS message about bird flu in West Bengal which would cut his sale price, so he decided to store his produce, selling it for an increased profit when the market improved a few weeks later.

RML has been available to farmers in India since October 2007 and today counts 75,000 subscribers, with an average user spending about \$5 a month. However, the information from the service is usually shared within the 20,000 villages being targeted, so as many as 1.5 million Indian farmers are benefiting from the service. RML also affects the local economy in another way - it employs 300 local people to produce, distribute and market the service so that people know about it and how to use it.

Farmers in India need some convincing to use the service, says RML managing director Amit Mehra. "We have used a lot of market research to get the product right. Only 6% of our original sample said they wanted RML when we asked them but, when we showed them a prototype, that figure went up to 85%.

In addition, some farmers were uncomfortable using SMS messaging at first; they just wanted to make phone calls," says Mehra, who with a team of 200+ has had to educate the farmers that the information and forecasts on the service are not cast-iron instructions.

Local and national governments are supporting the project because it can help combat

large-scale agricultural problems. In particular, they hope better information provided to farmers will significantly reduce the 590bn rupees (£8.4bn) in food wasted each year in India.

"Our customers are putting their faith in us and we know that we have a moral responsibility as well as a commercial one.," says Mehra. "We want to be best in class with our intelligence to the rural markets, so we give them fast, factual information that is individual to them, in their own language and that is sourced without bias.

"We do add value to the farmers, but no one can be 100% accurate, especially with a service that is still relatively new. So, if a weather forecast is for rain and none falls, we do have to remind our subscribers that the information was a forecast. We have learned from the consumers as well as them learning from us."

Mehra says RML is committed to profitability, but although that is not in sight at the moment, expansion of the service is a certainty. "We want to extend within the existing 12 states first and consolidate and then extend [further] in the next 12 to 18 months. Plus other countries, particularly in Africa, want us to come there."

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