

## Combining SMS messages to enhance services of farmers unions to its members

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The African Cashew Initiative supports various farmer groups and union in their effort to become more and more professional and offer value services for their members. Producer organisations in the African context are often weak when it comes to service delivery to their members limiting the attractiveness for producer to adhere. The limited interest in joining the farmer associations/farmer based organisation in its turn reduces the capacity of the organisation to deliver quality services to its members, perpetuating the situation.

Within the framework of the African Cashew Initiative 27,000 cashew farmers in Ghana received training on good agricultural practices. The Wenchi farmer Union regroups several farmer cooperatives associated with cashew production and marketing. To improve transparency in marketing transaction an ICT system for price and weighing information has been introduced in 2010 and successfully implemented amongst in five districts of Ghana in the Brong Ahafo region and expanded to all buying district in 2011/12 season. This system is active during the marketing season (March to May) and is now used by approx. 700 farmers who registered with the union for price and loading information. During the rest of the year the system is not used.

Member farmers receive training on good agricultural practice during interactive sessions organised by agents of public extension system with support from ACI. One element of support is the training of the extension agents in extension methodology and in the use of picture material and questions and answers to stimulate discussion and learning amongst farmer groups. The training is complemented by practical demonstrations and radio broadcasts. The interactive training covers several modules (installation of plantations, management of cashew „good agricultural practices“, harvest, post-harvest and quality aspects of raw cashew nuts as well as phytosanitary information. The training sessions are organised according to the cropping calendar but interaction between farmers and extension personnel is limited to 3 to 5 sessions per season. During the cropping season and especially at peak times interactive sessions and grouping of farmers are difficult to organise and some of the newly acquired information and skills cannot always be applied immediately during the training and would need some reminder/refresher at the appropriate time. Also training is always organised in advance to the actual time of implementation of the recommended practice.



The existing ICT system and staff from the farmers union has been trained in using SMS texts send to their fellow farmers. The short text in English contains key messages taken from the training material and validated by researchers, extension staff and farmers. It is now send at the appropriate time for application in the field.

Apart from purely technical message, the union uses the system to communicate information about meetings, elections and other topic relating for the functioning of the union and of interest to its members. Messages on general subject like HIV/AIDS complete the range of information shared through the SMS service which is currently free for registered members. The currently used software is FrontlineSMS and it is intended to integrate the service into the SAP based software for price and weighing information for automated sending. Receiving replies for monitoring purposes will be added.

The full document<sup>1</sup> describes the experiences with formulating messages adapted to farmer's language, the use of mobile phones, the training of members to assess the service, assistance in using the services, costs of broadcasting, the use and perceived usefulness of such services. It also addresses the challenges for up-scaling to benefit from the large distribution of mobile phones amongst farmers but who have often little information about the potential usage and remain still largely illiterate. The mutual assistance offered especially by youth in the farming families used to mobile phones and their manipulation is assessed. The willingness to pay for the services has been evaluated positively as well as the impact on the adoption of technical recommendation in cashew farming. The service has been highly appreciated by all members of the union and the same service is now requested by other farmer based organisations in Ghana too.

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The full document is available here: <http://aci.africancashewalliance.com/eng/downloads.html>

