

ICT helping scientists engage Innovation citizens in southern Nigeria: A case of ICT reinforced Maize Innovation Cluster in Ago-Are, Oyo State of Nigeria.

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Difficulty experienced by researchers in engaging citizens along the commodity chain is one major reason for low productivity in African agriculture. To rectify this, and thereby increase the speed and quantum of impact of ARD, the innovation systems approach has been proposed. Innovation systems approach calls for research to widen its partnerships beyond the famers and to include other non-traditional partners along the commodity chain.

It is normally a big challenge for researchers to reach out and benefit from the innovative capacity of the available farming groups at the grassroots; but ICT could help.

A multi-purpose community-based information access point using ICT was used to bridge this gap and ensure that research effectively engaged the citizens required for innovation in agriculture. The access point was based in Ago-Are to directly strengthen 5 maize-based innovation clusters and ensure that scientists located at about 200 kilometers away engage the community members in the innovation process. It also indirectly strengthened 2 innovation clusters located in more remotely based Tede community. Farmers in the Tede Clusters communicated with the access point using mobile telephone aided by a contact person who shuttles on a motorcycle. The innovation clusters included all relevant partners along the commodity chain working with researchers from the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, and Bowen University in Nigeria.

ICT facilities including internet connection were provided at the information access point within the community to bridge the gap between scientists located in the cities and the community members. It cost-effectively complemented the physical engagement made by scientists working with the maize clusters. ICT was used to train and link farmers with technologies, market prices, inputs and output markets. ICT was further used by scientists to provide real time solutions to farmers' problems through the research station-based help desk and the community-based support desk.

Three years after the project commenced, and through participatory varietal selection and crop management research, yield of maize more than doubled to become 2.46 tons per hectare, the income of farmers increased from an average of \$1632 per year to \$2572 per year, use of external inputs and farm size rose by 300 %, and 70% respectively. All these were possible because researchers were able to use ICT to engage the innovative capacity of various partners along the commodity chain including rural communities.