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The landscape of e-agriculture in the Kenyan context

There is a lot of discussion in the ICT4D sector about the impact of mobile phones on the lives of farmers, especially in terms of access to market prices for rural small-scale farmers. This debate is part of a larger sub-sector of ICT4D recently named “e-agriculture”, involving issues ranging from localised weather forecasts delivered via mobile phones to e-learning platforms for the dissemination of information on good agriculture practices.

A lot of literature engages with technological platforms and interface design for “the next billion users”. It often seems that content and communication issues do not matter as much in the planning and implementation of e-agriculture. In addition to this, little clarity exists on the actual meaning of e-agriculture and the sector's boundaries.

As part of my first year of PhD I am currently living and working in Nairobi, Kenya.

Even though Kenya's economy is stronger compared to other East African countries, Kenyan farmers - and small-scale farmers in particular - face similar tensions to their peers across the continent, including difficult access to markets, high costs of intermediation and the on-going questionable agenda of a new Green Revolution for Africa.

ICTs can help provide suitable solutions to a number of problems faced by Kenyan farmers, such as improving the sharing of knowledge on appropriate practices and technologies in the local context and languages. In addition to this, farmers' interaction with middle-men and distribution patterns could potentially change as a result of availability of up-to-date market information as well as digital platforms bringing together supply and demand.

The potential of ICT in this field is however challenged by poor literacy levels, scarce availability of content in local languages, lack of access to devices, combined with poor energy and telecommunication networks in many rural areas. As a result, the new services might also result in the creation of new information and knowledge divides.

My presentation will focus on the main directions practitioners are taking in applying ICT4D to rural agriculture development in Kenya, including community-led initiatives and larger initiatives, and the primary gaps in the services provided.

The initial questions I am addressing are:

- What does the term “e-agriculture” actually mean?
- How does e-agriculture differ from other forms of rural communication and agriculture extension in terms of equitable access to information?
- How are the contents of the current services negotiated between designers, information providers and users?