



DIGITAL CONNECTORS FOR FARMING COMMUNITIES



USING DIGITAL TOOLS IN AGRICULTURE CREATED DIGNIFIED EMPLOYMENT FOR KASAMBA SALIM: A STORY OF HOPE

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Salim Kasamba, 35, is a digital connector and Chief Executive Officer of IEC (Information Education Communication) Materials Consultants Ltd, based in Bugiri District under the Bugiri Agribusiness and Institutions Development Association (BAIDA) Innovation Platform. IEC is a one stop digital shop providing packaging materials for agricultural products and information across Africa.

When Salim lost his job as an Illustrator with the Vision group in Kampala City during Covid 19, he retreated to his village in Bugiri District. Uncertain how he would earn a living, he stayed with his mother and would wake up to join other family members at the farm. However, he was mocked by his village mates. "My villagemates laughed at me because seeing a degree holder back in his parents' home is not good. They label you as a failure." he painfully narrated.

While there, he linked up with the farming communities and took a keen interest in the crop value chain. He realized a challenge- after producing the crops, farmers did not have the materials to package their produce from the gardens and stores to the marketplace. He

mobilised farmers, and engaged with BAIDA and Nabigingo SACCO, and realized that they were in need of extension services.



"They needed better packaging for their products to get better prices." He started a business to supply farmers with the much needed packaging materials.

However, Salim was so uncomfortable dealing face-to-face with the farmers because some would disguise themselves as clients, yet they came to mock him. *"I lost hope and kept in-house for fear of being laughed at since I was a graduate who failed to make it in the city"*

A new lease of life: becoming a Digital Connector

On one lucky day, Salim scrolled through the WhatsApp platform of Bugiri District Cooperative Forum and saw the call for proposals to become a Digital Connector. He immediately applied through BAIDA and, fortunately, he was selected. From several trainings and engagements with the experts, he realized that he could connect digitally with the farmers -from making orders of the packaging materials through the phone to advising on the farm enterprises.

The project has been a life-changing opportunity for Salim. Among other things, it has

- Increased his income through the sales he made to the farmers, in the comfort of his home.
- Boosted his confidence as a businessman. He has gained skills in pitching, collaboration, and engaging with the farming communities
- He also got a chance to train other young people in digital skills.

To facilitate the adoption and integration of digital technologies among farmers, Salim has employed several strategies, including intensifying digital training about packaging and the entire extension services using the available technologies like a solar projector and training more digital connectors to reach out to the farmers in every farmer group. He makes sure at least one farmer is trained, either physically or virtually, by sharing screens, using visuals to simplify scientific content for even the illiterate farmers.

"I train them [farmers] on many things [...] including how to use smartphones, basic button phones to call and place orders for the packaging materials" says the agri-preneur.

He also believes that his intervention significantly helped farmers;

"After profiling and providing a group of farmers producing soybeans with packaging materials, they have been allowed to produce both seeds and grain because having good packaging is one of the requirements for setting up a local seed business and grain processing. They are now in the final process of acquiring certification". Salim narrated.



Hasna (L), the farmer that uses Salim's services

One of his clients used not to sell her value-added produce after milling because she lacked packaging materials. From Salim's advice, she acquired the plain and general packaging materials. Salim plans to seek credit and produce for her at least 1,000 pieces of more customized packages with her company details at once and keep selling to her in small quantities.

"Bulk production of minimum pieces like 1,000 is cost-effective and profitable, but not affordable to smallholder farmers like her," he says.



Salim (2 L) with farmers packaging soybean in packaging materials he supplied

Beyond digital connection to include brokerage Salim has linked his farmers to financial institutions to give them loans to purchase packaging materials. So far, he has given out over 300 million UGX (~US\$ 83,000/ 75,000 Euros) through the Agricultural Credit Facility in partnership with Opportunity Bank and Bank of Uganda to provide packaging materials and other inputs to smallholder farmers. He has also gained popularity due to the work he does in the area. *"I am now famous and important in the community. Now people in the village who used to laugh at me see me as a technical person who uses digital tools and makes money. [...] they admire me,"* remarked Salim.

“In Bugiri, if you don't have my signature as DC [Digital Connector], you will not get money from the bank”, he added.



Not all is rosy with digital tools in agriculture

His business model of digital connection has not been smooth all the way. Salim says digital penetration was not easy for most farmers because:

- Most farmers preferred to meet him physically,
- Some didn't know how to use electronic gadgets
- Poor internet connectivity makes communication difficult at times, given that some farmers are in remote areas
- Some fear fraud and were hesitant to trust him. “At the start of this project, the farmers used to fear us digital connectors, thinking that we are fraudsters...” said Salim. He overcame this through detailed explanation, regular engagement, and training “Now they are okay that they don't have to see me [...] In fact, they are now very happy with the efficiency of my extension services since I can serve many of them very fast and in a short time. I serve virtual clients first” he says.

LOOKING AHEAD:

Salim has big dreams. His goal is to produce bulk customized materials and supply entire Africa, open up an e-shop, and keep selling small pieces to smallholder farmers who can afford a few pieces at a time. He has plans of capitalization to boost his ability to produce minimum production quantities and smallholders' purchasing power through training and preparing them to acquire loans that are affordable and interest-free. With more support, his dream will be a reality. He is

already expanding his horizons. Weeks before our interview, he was invited to Juba in South Sudan to discuss the possibility of providing digital packaging materials and extension information. The clients liked his business idea, and discussions are underway to have a Memorandum of Understanding signed. Whenever he makes presentations in various fora, many people express interest in working with him, and “this is exciting”, Salim says.

To him, the future for digitalization of agriculture is bright, and it is evolving. “Without these gadgets (pointing at his phone), you can't do much”, he

“ *Before meeting Salim, I used to leave my work, home and children, move long distances and spend a lot of money on transport looking for packaging bags for my soybeans. If I don't get them, I would just sell soybeans in basin or basket. Now I just use my phone to call him, I then send mobile money and he sends me the bags. I no longer have to move long distances,”* Husnat Nabirye, Soybean farmer, Nabingogo A village, Bugiri district.





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