

# **Unlocking entrepreneurial capacities of rural youth to provide e-extension to their community, cases from Uganda and Kenya in the Digital Connectors for Farming Communities project.**

*Renaud Guillonnet, Lydia Kimenye, Myra Wopereis, Anne Mbaabu, Rosemirta Birungi - Ag-Connectors, March 2025*

## **Core assumptions, a brief Theory of Change.**

The Digital Connectors for Farming Communities (DC4FC) project was designed under the assumption that gaps in extension in Uganda and Kenya, i.e. shortage of extension agents and possibly outdated extension information, could be filled by rural youth if these would be equipped with the ability to become entrepreneur e-extension service providers.

A second assumption was that these rural youth were more naturally digital savvy, and they could help farmers access openly available information on the Internet. Placing rural youth in the capacity to become Digital Connectors (DC) and provide e-extension services to farmer would therefore trigger a cascade of benefits for themselves, in terms of employment and inclusion, and for their communities in terms of improved agricultural performance.

A third assumption was that Innovation Platforms (IP) could provide leverage for these Digital Connectors, by linking them with farming communities.

The short Theory of Change of the project was that if rural youth with digital abilities were trained and supported to develop effective business models of service delivery, with the support of IPs, and local policy makers in an environment that would favour their incubation, mechanisms of change at the level of IPs, Policy makers and farming communities would benefit the whole local ecosystem.

## **Training Digital Connectors and embedding them in their environment**

Potential DC were therefore identified by AFAAS country fora in Uganda (UFAAS) and Kenya (KeFAAS) in the vicinity of Innovation Platforms (IP). Two existing IPs were selected in Uganda (BAIDA in Bugiri and ZAABTA in Luwero) and a nascent one in Kenya (MAVOC in Murang'a).

All either had a business project or were already active in providing services or selling products (inputs in particular) to farmers. An additional digital layer to their initial business was regarded as an opportunity to broaden their offer and therefore improve its sustainability.

As a first building block, Ag-Connectors had meetings with all DC candidates and facilitated an ideation process during which they presented their business idea and were invited to further define it. From this point they were provided grouped training on basics of Business Development: defining a range of products and services, developing a client base, etc. They were then mentored on an individual basis to develop a fully tailored business model that allowed them to further define, test and adjust their business idea to make it viable. DCs were also trained in pitching their business model with a view to convince external partners, in particular IPs and farmers but also government agencies and funders, including banks.

This process lasted for almost a year and was mostly implemented remotely through digital platforms (Google classroom, WhatsApp, Zoom) in an iterative and incremental manner through which DCs were allowed and encouraged to test their business models "in real life" and gradually adjust them. Grouped workshops were organised towards the end of the training cycle. This long-term process had several effects:

- Business models were concrete and provided hands-on contexts for application of input from training,
- DCs had a permanent sounding board and mentoring support with whom to share doubts and reflect on actionable solutions,
- This allowed refining the business models thanks to viable decisions on types of products, prices, customers, providers.
- The iteration and reflection, as well as the very concrete components of the business model, allowed DCs to develop a documented pitch that built on real-life experiments,
- Assertion grew as the business models firmed up, gradually translating into increased entrepreneurial skills and self-confidence.
- DCs recognised each other as members of the same community.

In parallel with the training process, Country Fora ensured that regular contacts were maintained with the IPs, allowing them to be informed of the DC process, keep track of their evolution and assess how DCs could be of use to the farming communities around them. Such contacts were established on occasion of local events such as extension or agricultural fairs that also provided DCs with networking and business opportunities with both farmers and providers. Local governments officials were also invited to attend face to face meetings and events where DCs would take part, hence producing a similar awareness and ownership effect.

These multistakeholder mechanisms acted as an incubation process where DCs received direct support while they could start evolving in a secure and benevolent environment.

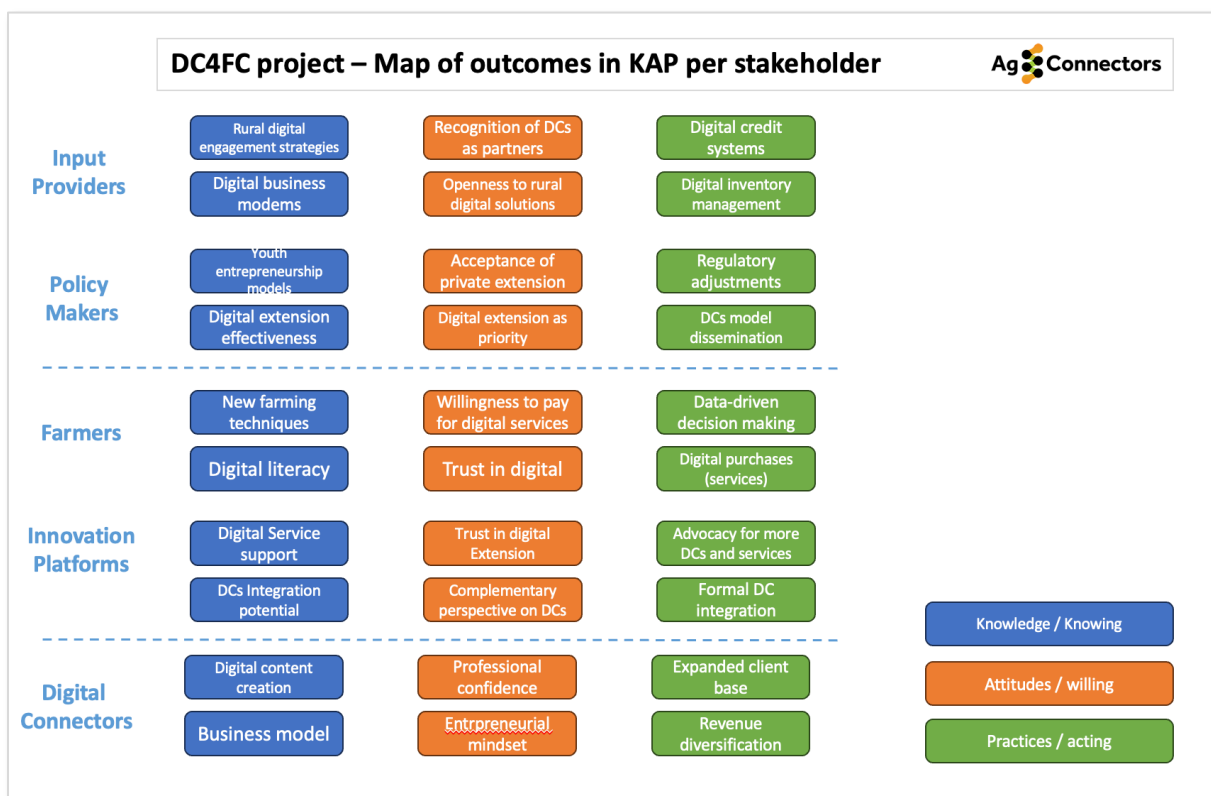


Ukulima Modern Digital community @Ukulima Modern 2025

### Multidimensional changes and outcomes

As a result, changes can be measured at several levels: DCs, IPs, Farmers, Governments and other partners, in particular input suppliers. Measuring these changes and how they happened was ensured by Ag-Connectors who provided methodological guidance, data collection mechanisms and an analytical framework that combines outcome mapping and realist evaluation approaches. The short time for capitalization process at the very end of the project allowed for a relevant sample of interviews and focus group discussions to map outcomes and make recommendations for scaling.

Key outcomes were mapped against a range of assumptions and grouped under natures of changes in three dimensions: knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) and the drivers they unlocked: knowing, willing and acting.

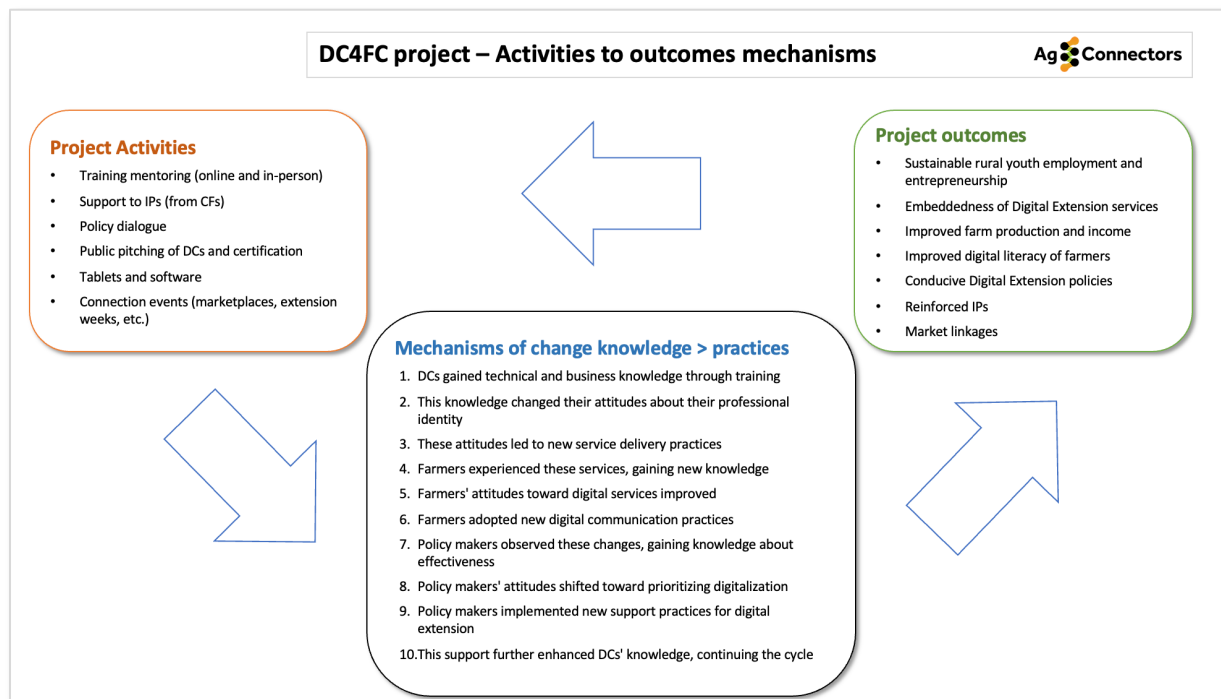


©Ag-Connectors, 2025

These remarkable outcomes should be understood not as a sequence in time but as combined turning points at which some knowledge, and awareness, was acquired by a group of stakeholders that favoured a change in the attitudes expressed in the boxes in orange and consequently contributed to new practices registered in the boxes in green. Levels do not express ranks in importance but rather concentric strata through which the project

extended its reach, starting from the DCs, who were the very core target group. In this process, changes in knowledge, attitudes and finally practices should be read as contributing to one another across groups and levels, rather than linear transformation processes for a single group.

A key achievement of the DC4FC project was its ability to install similar mechanisms of change in three different contexts. Thanks to the analysis performed by Ag-Connectors in the capitalization phase at the end of the project, these mechanisms could be brought to light as follows, based on the realist evaluation model (Westhorp, G. (2014)):



©Ag-Connectors, 2025

### Scaling pathways and recommendations

The DC4FC project achieved interesting results in a short and bound timeframe with limited resources in three different contexts. It highlights how combined actions can trigger multilevel changes mechanisms for various actors that favour the development of sustainable e-extension services by rural youth. It also shows that hands-on tailored training and mentoring over a long term is necessary and needs to be combined with incubation processes and embeddedness.

While digital literacy increased throughout the project, both for DCs and farmers, the provision of concrete products was the basis on which service delivery could form. Trust was also accelerated thanks to a web of well-established partners, in particular the Country Fora and the IPs into which the DCs were able to develop services with real value addition for farmers. As such “digital” should be regarded as a complement to value addition, in its ability to shorten distances, alleviate farmers from unnecessary travel and speed up access to and payment of information, inputs and services.

Further spread of the DC model would however require improved infrastructures and internet connectivity with lower data prices, its multiplication at a larger scale would require structured training and certification processes, including technical and higher education, as well as the leveraging of community effects both at the level of DCs and that of farming communities. IPs could play a key role thanks to their ability to nurture multi-stakeholder processes including learning, networking, knowledge production and exchange, and dialogue, particularly policy related. Country fora could provide for structured coordination and bridges with policy makers who, in turn, should further secure favourable environments into which incubation of more DCs could be ensured and structured into a more varied set of services that could help reinforce value chains.

### Reference

Westhorp, G. (2014) 'Realist impact evaluation: an introduction'. Methods Lab. London: Overseas Development Institute.