

WTO Public Forum 2013

Workshop „How can the digital economy contribute to vibrant rural economies?“

Summary

Nikolai Fuchs, President of Nexus Foundation in his introductory remarks pointed out, that since 2008 it has become clear, that in the hunger question agriculture and rural development need more focus and special attention for development. The vicious cycle of rural poor migrating into cities which makes rural areas even more vulnerable which again leads to rural exodus would at least have to slow down, as most of the hungry live in rural areas. Export oriented monoculture-industrial agriculture has not delivered the results it had promised: more decent jobs for the rural inhabitants. Most of the jobs for the unskilled labour are seasonal and precarious. Besides, this industrial forms of agriculture cause, despite of „greening“ efforts serious environmental damage. So a new focus would have to be directed to strengthening rural economies (which, in the end, would deliver surpluses for trade, as well).

Su Kahumbu, founder of ICow/Green Dreams, Kenya has invented different, mobile phone based services for farmers, most prominent the ICow application. With this tool farmers gain knowledge about their cows concerning fertility and health care. It improves, not the last the yield of milk and economic stability of the – often women – farmers.

Gülcehre Yildirim, international relations manager of Tarimsal Pazarlama/Tabit, Turkey presented an internet based platform and mobile apps for farmer informations. The platform provides useful, partly local adapted knowledge for farmers, including for informations of the market like sources and pricing. Aim of this platform is to improve rural welfare. Up to today 250.000 active members have joined the platform since its implementation in 2004. The mobile SMS service has had 750.000 subscribers since 2009. A TV production with special farmers information and training visits (12.000 villages) complement the offer.

Angelika Hilbeck, senior scientist of ETH Zürich was interested as a scientist in how to improve participation and incorporation of local and indigenous knowledge in agricultural and rural development. In a project „Sauti ya wakulima – the voice of farmers“ in Tanzania she and her colleague Eugenio Tisselli supplied a group of farmers with smartphones, to mainly record and interview farmers themselves for sharing the knowledge. The farmers, gathering audiovisual evidence of their practices improve their agricultural practice through posting their experience on the internet. This starts a process of mutual learning and social cohesion. Farmers, normally sceptic about innovations coming from outside are highly motivated when they can take the lead in documenting their problems and solutions. It can be argued that the creative freedom given in the project motivated farmers to contribute.

An overall topic of all three presentations was that farmers often feel ignored by governments. The need and already partly solved problem of accessible and easy to be used technology for the farmers was another, overarching issue. Official extension services could collaborate with these private initiatives. These initiative help for food security and rural welfare (which creates new markets, too).

Governments should give room and provide space for this private initiatives, besides delivering more on infrastructure, extension services and proper land tenure. Governments can collaborate and give support to self-help schemes and to foster rural initiatives, like the Kenyan government restrained from a banking license for MPesa. To strengthen rural welfare procurement schemes should be allowed to preferentially purchase local produce.