

Improving Registration and Coordination

Research with Farm Direct in Uganda



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FARM DIRECT OVERVIEW

Producers Direct, an organization that supports smallholder farmers in building sustainable businesses, developed the Farm Direct platform to offer farmers access to more profitable, diverse markets. Farmers register for the platform using an app or USSD, indicating what crops they are growing and the quantity they want to sell. Youth agents employed by Farm Direct then purchase the produce. They also help recruit new farmers to register for the platform.

Busara's Research: Improving Registration and Coordination Between Farmers and Agents



Farmers receive several unique benefits from selling to Farm Direct's Youth agents:

- Immediate cash payment
- Ability to negotiate prices with youth agents
- Different prices for different quality standards
- Offtake for all types of produce

While these features are more appealing than other selling options, the Farm Direct team observed low uptake for registration and sales through the platform. In response, Busara conducted research to better understand farmers' decision-making processes and identify ways to increase the adoption and usage of Farm Direct as the preferred solution for selling their produce.

The DIG-it-AL Project

With support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Busara is researching ways to increase the adoption and use of digital agricultural services among smallholder farmers. Our research uses human-centered design to identify and address behavioral barriers to digital service use, such as cognitive biases, preferences, and beliefs.

Methodology

Phase 1: Diagnostic Phase

We started our research with 24 in-depth interviews with farmers to understand their experiences accessing Farm Direct and their challenges in selling through the platform.

24 in-depth interviews

Phase 2: Co-Design Phase

We identified challenges in various areas of the Farm Direct model. We then organized three co-design workshops – one with Farm Direct youth agents and two with farmers – to collaboratively develop solutions. These ideas were transformed into prototypes.

3 co-design workshops

Phase 3: Testing Phase

We conducted two experiments to understand whether the proposed solutions effectively addressed the barriers they targeted. The first experiment involved 582 farmers, who completed a three-part pre-programmed experiment. The second experiment was a randomized controlled trial in which we sent SMS reminders to 600 farmers, prompting them to contact their youth agent.

582 farmers who completed a three-part experiment

600 farmers that received SMS reminders

Phase 3: Testing Phase Experiments

For the first experiment, participants received information about registering for Farm Direct in an easy-to-understand written format. Next, they were presented with three options for selling their produce. Finally, we simulated a short farming cycle and presented them with various scenarios to respond to, including scenarios where they had to engage youth agents. Throughout the experiment, we gathered data on:

- Comprehension of the Farm Direct registration process
- Feedback on the options for selling produce to understand why they preferred different options
- Willingness to pay for reminders to call youth agents, shedding light on how much farmers would value a reminder to contact their youth agent proactively

For the second experiment, we divided the farmers into groups and sent each group a slightly different version of the same message. We then compared the groups to assess the effectiveness of the messages in encouraging farmers to contact their youth agent.

KEY INSIGHTS

Insights From Our Diagnostic

» **Limited Awareness of Farm Direct**

Most farmers we spoke to learned about and registered for Farm Direct by attending a training or meeting organized by Producers Direct. As such, awareness of Farm Direct and registration was limited to farmers who lived close to the training or could afford transportation.

» **Farmer Satisfaction with Payments**

The farmers who were registered and sold on the platform report being satisfied with timely and fair payments.

» **Proactive Communication and Coordination**

Some farmers miss out on selling through Farm Direct because they do not proactively coordinate with youth agents before harvesting. If an agent is not scheduled to visit their village that week, they opt for alternatives.

Our Co-Designed Ideas

Farm Direct is an app that farmers use to sell their produce. To use the app, the farmer selling his/her produce needs to be registered by a youth agent.

Who are youth agents?

Youth agents are young members of the community employed by Farm Direct to reach and help farmers register and sell through the app.

What do you need to register?

The registration is free of charge, and the documents to be captured during registration include:

- Your name
- National ID card number
- The crops you grow
- Location of your farm.

How do you sell after you register?

Once registered, farmers call the youth agents to pick their produce once it is ready for sale. Youth agents have set prices for the produce, but there is room for the farmer to negotiate.

1 Posters

Since some farmers cannot attend training or meetings, we designed a marketing poster to spread awareness of Farm Direct. The poster also provided step-by-step instructions on how farmers could register using their phones.



2 Reminders to call the youth agent

We designed several messages for farmers to encourage them to proactively contact their youth agent to sell their produce.

In addition to developing prototypes to overcome the identified barriers, we also designed an experiment to uncover what farmers value about their various options for selling produce. For example, the interviews revealed farmers preferred Farm Direct because of the timely and fair payments. We wanted to understand what other factors farmers valued. Farm Direct can use this information to emphasize these factors in their promotional materials or modify their offerings.

Results From Testing Our Solutions

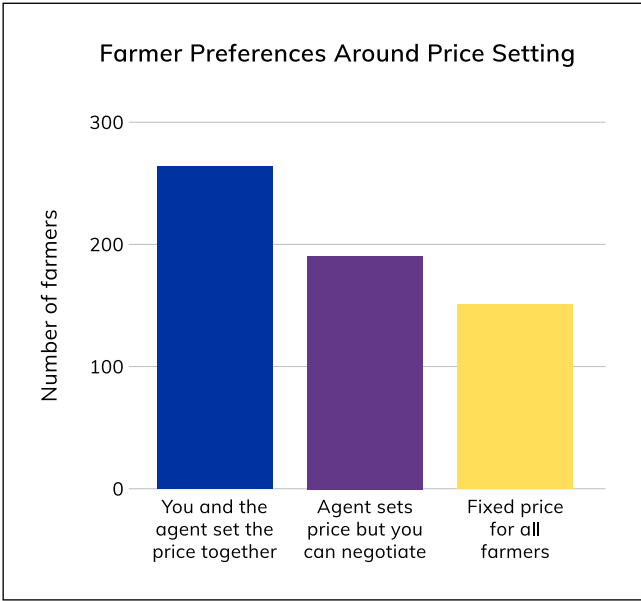
1 Members of cooperatives preferred selling through their cooperative above all else, despite receiving only a fixed price and having other options with clear benefits.

2 Most farmers were unwilling to pay to receive reminders to proactively contact their youth agent during the simulation, suggesting that they do not highly value this service.

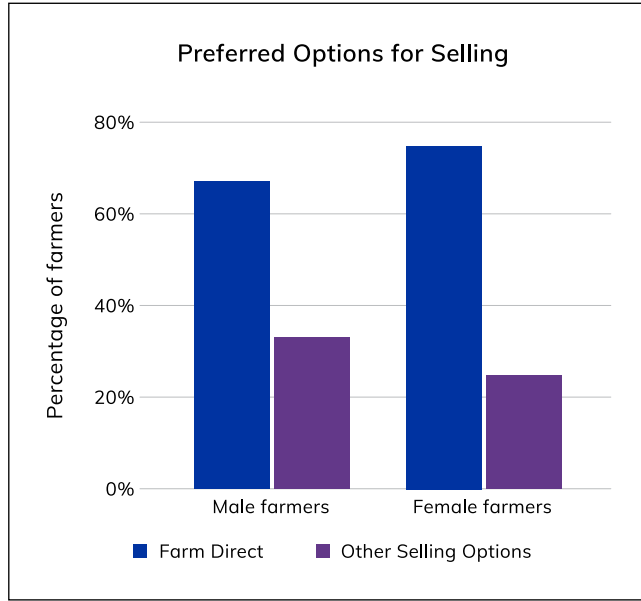
3 After receiving SMS reminders, most farmers did not contact their youth agent. However, among the few who did, most received a message emphasizing the potential losses they might face if they did not reach out.

4 The poster did not increase comprehension of the registration process for Farm Direct.

5 Most participants preferred to set prices and negotiate with buyers rather than being offered a fixed price or having the agent set the price.



6 Women tended to prefer Farm Direct more than their male counterparts.



RECOMMENDATIONS AND AREAS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION TO IMPROVE REGISTRATION AND COORDINATION

1. Emphasize Ability to Set Prices

Whenever possible, platforms should allow farmers to set their prices and then negotiate with agents, not vice versa. They could also emphasize this benefit in their promotional materials to increase registration and adoption.

2. Targeted Marketing and Promotional Strategies

We found that preferences regarding selling through different channels varied by gender and whether the farmer was a cooperative member. These preferences should be considered when trying to reach different groups of farmers.

3. Highlight Potential Losses

While our SMS reminders for farmers were largely ineffective, we found that highlighting potential losses of not seizing a given opportunity had some effect on farmer behavior. Platforms should explore ways to incorporate “loss framing” into their communications with farmers to spur action.



For more information on this project and Busara’s work in leveraging behavioral science to increase the uptake of digital agricultural services, contact Morgan Kabeer at morgan.kabeer@busara.global

