

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL DIGITALLY ENABLED FIELD FORCE

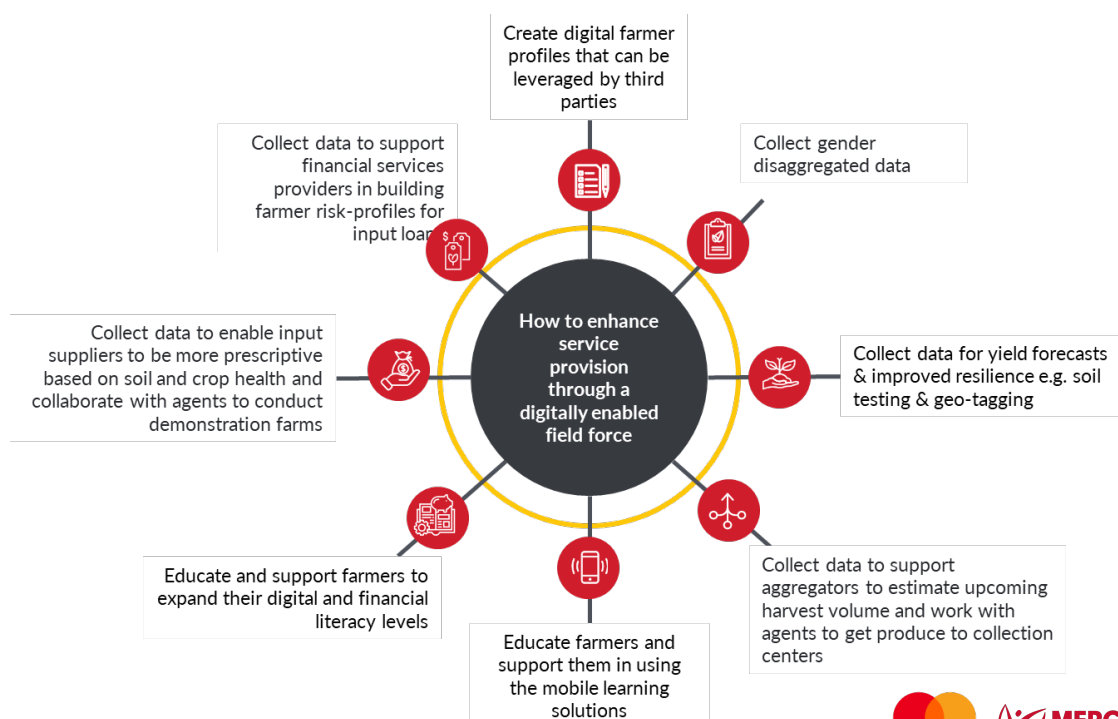
FIELD FORCE MODELS FOR AGRICULTURE: KEY LEARNINGS AND INSIGHTS

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In 2015, Mercy Corps launched the AgriFin Accelerate (AFA) Programme; a six-year, \$24 million project funded by the Mastercard Foundation. AgriFin Accelerate is addressing the inclusion gap for smallholder farmers (SHF) who lack access to affordable, accessible, demand-driven financial products and services that drive higher productivity and income for farmers. Over the past two years, several AgriFin partners have developed digital platforms to encompass complex bundles of services, including financial services, access to inputs, markets, new services and learning. Through multiple engagements and partnerships, AgriFin has been able to recognize several success determinants for the development and management of field forces that are digitally enabled at critical points.

SHIFTING DELIVERY MODELS TO BETTER ACCESS AND SUPPORT SMALLHOLDER FARMERS

More than 500 million smallholder farmers worldwide play a pivotal role in food production, accounting for 80% of production in the global south. Historically, it has been difficult for organisations to get information, products or services to or from smallholder farmers, compounding existing infrastructural problems such as access to inputs, financing, training and access to markets. However, the increase in available and affordable digital tools including mobile technology, remote-sensing data, climate smart-technology and data management tools, represent an opportunity to revolutionize the sector's modus operandi.



Mirroring digitalisation trends, the way that organisations engage with smallholder farmers has evolved - from manual data collection and service delivery, using highly skilled agronomists in the field – to fully digital models where services are deployed solely through mobile devices. Given the complexity of services, organisations are understanding that a blended model is required, and investing in digitally enabled rural field forces to enhance their service provision with a combination of human interaction and digital tools.

The onset of COVID-19 has amplified their value and relevance. The agriculture sector has been significantly affected by COVID-19 lockdowns with disruptions to regional supply chains for fertilizers, quality seeds, pesticides on the one hand, and access to markets on the other. For organizations that work closely with smallholder farmers, the crisis has severed direct access thus amplifying the need for agent touchpoints and digital tools for:



Linkages:

Agents are a crucial information source for organizations that can no longer reach SHFs due to mobility constraints. They also act as a conduit for the dissemination of critical information



Continuation of service provision:

Ensures that farmers can continue gaining access to increasingly critical extension services e.g. loans for inputs



Digital training:

COVID-19 is increasing the urgency for digitalization for access to information, education and extension services, thus amplifying the relevance of agents if their role included support in conferring digital literacy skills to SHFs



Digital information dissemination:

Agents and digital tools can be leveraged as accessible and trusted conduits for the dissemination of information relating to COVID-19 (both relating to health and disruptions to the season)



Customer acquisition

Increases the importance and uptake of digital tools for customer acquisition

The challenge now facing agricultural organizations is how best to leverage the power of digital tools, blended with human touch points in a way that optimizes *delivery* and *cost*. The 10 guiding principles below are synthesized from previous AgriFin engagements, partnerships, extensive human-centered design (HCD) research, expert interviews and a benchmark of best practice across 10-15 organizations with field forces within sub-Saharan African and Asia. They provide guiding principles for the development and management of a successful, digitally enabled agricultural field force:

10 PRINCIPLES FOR ADOPTING 7 SUCCESSFULLY IMPLEMENTING A DIGITALLY ENABLED FIELD FORCE MODEL

Cross-cutting gender considerations

Women make strong digital agents and evidence shows that their deliberate inclusion directly correlates to higher rates of female farmer recruitment. However, focused considerations and deliberate interventions need to be made to address gender-specific barriers. Each organisation reviewed in the best practice assessment made unique interventions with positive implications for both the number of women agents and farmers. Organisation had success when ensuring agent *recruitment drives were gender sensitive*. These included the use of recruitment quotas and strategic advertisement placement to ensure visibility to all genders. In addition, organizations who monitored their agent networks were able to identify factors that influenced performance and attrition including mobility and contextual gender roles and perceptions.

Ultimately, for organizations to progress their gender ambitions, they must be intentional about *integrating women and a gender perspective into their digital agent model*.

10 Principles for adopting & successfully implementing a digitally enabled field force model

01



When establishing a field force, the model should be aligned with the organization's objectives and vision

Field force models fall into two broad archetypes: entrepreneurial models and employee models and impacts the model structure.

02



The field force design and desired outcomes should inform the agent persona that an organisation recruits

Each model type favours different agent characteristics. The field force design and desired outcomes should therefore inform the agent recruitment criteria.

03



It is crucial to make early investments in a strong management and support network around the agent

Agent management and networks are crucial for training, data validation, issue identification and escalation, reconciliation of agent activities and performance management.

04



Investment in onboarding and training should be made upfront to ensure agents are fully prepared and supported in their role

Considerations around onboarding and training need to be made across three dimensions: training content, the mode of delivery and training incentives.

05



Incentive schemes should be designed to drive the right behaviours and achieve desired outcomes and be clearly communicated to all actors

Incentive schemes should be carefully designed to drive agent motivation. Misaligned incentive schemes and delayed payments are the highest drivers of attrition.

06



Digital tools are critical success enablers, but need to be underpinned by clearly defined processes

For digital tools to be successful organisations need to clearly define processes around communication, agent monitoring and payment reconciliation processes.

07



Identify and plan for agent's critical touch points throughout the season to ensure their experience, and that of the farmer, is optimized

Investments into critical agent and farmer touch points throughout the season ensures that the model is optimized and primed to achieve the best results.

08



Map the agent journey throughout the season and plan for both the busy and quiet periods to mitigate against the associated risks

Mapping the agent journey shows that the occupation rate and compensation of agents varies throughout the season.

09



Take time to understand local complexities, adapting products and ways of working to meet the needs of agents and farmers

There are sub-national complexities that need to be accounted for including: infrastructure, value chain, sub-national language differentiation, levels of digital literacy and variations in perceptions of gender and cultural practices.

10



Monitor and evaluate agent and SHF performance and put agile processes in place to allow for pivots in the model

The success of the model can be assessed through agent and farmer performance, the successful uptake of digital tools and the accuracy of data collection.

LOOKING AHEAD

Smallholder farmers are facing an ever-changing world and continuously shifting needs, augmented by the unique challenges presented by COVID-19. Hopes and expectations for the digitalization of agriculture are high. As organizations evolve their delivery models to meet the increasingly digital landscape, it is critical that they remain introspective and optimize both digital tools and human touch points to ensure that they are meeting the needs of smallholders most adeptly.