

Govi Mithuru – A Mobile Advisory Service for Farmers

Project of Dialog Axiata PLC conducted in collaboration with DFID-UK, GSMA global, CAB International and Department of Agriculture

Abstract

70% of Sri Lanka's population lives in rural areas and their main livelihood is agriculture. Lack of access to timely or relevant information has always been reported as a prominent issue in this sector. Empirically it is shown that the majority of the farmers own a mobile phone, which they largely use only for voice calls. Govi Mithuru (Farmer's Friend or "Ulavar Tholan" in Tamil) is a mobile advisory service for farmers with the theme "Secure Crop and Family Health", created to address the information gap in the sector.

The service is a result of a partnership between the GSMA and Dialog, working with the Department of Agriculture, Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Health of the Government of Sri Lanka, facilitated by CABI South Asia, supported by human-centred design expertise and funded by DFID, the UK's international development agency. The project is part of the mAgri Challenge Fund, an initiative by the GSMA targeting improved livelihoods of small holder farmers in African and South Asian countries using mobile services. Dialog is among six operators worldwide who successfully won the challenge fund from among the mobile network operators in the 13 countries eligible for the programme.

To access the service, farmers simply dial 616 from any Dialog mobile phone. For just Rs. 1/- a day (plus taxes). Farmers may listen to voice recordings that provide customized advice on

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| 1. Land preparation | 6. Crop planning |
| 2. Cultivation | 7. Price information |
| 3. Harvesting and post-harvest | 8. Improving family nutrition |
| 4. pest and disease Management | 9. Sustainable agriculture practises and new methods |
| 5. New technology and agriculture related new inventions | |

Govi Mithuru advice is customized for Wet, Dry and Intermediate Zones, supporting all irrigation types. By the end of December, 2018 over 570,000 farmers island wide had registered with the Govi Mithuru service, obtaining advice for cultivating Paddy (rice), Maize (Indian Corn), Potato, Tomato, Brinjal (aubergine), Big Onion, Tea, Chili, Cinnamon, Pepper, Mango, Papaya, Mushroom and more. Paddy remains the most popular crop in Govi Mithuru, with growing interest in the home gardening segment as well.

Govi Mithuru presents a multitude of benefits and value additions to all its stakeholders. For agriculture sector officials, the platform presents the capability to promote strategic crops, and disseminate time-critical information on weather and disease control, plus, insights into upcoming yields and timings. For the officials at the grass-root level, the service allows for better insights and tracking of farmer progress and needs, enabling targeted advice and a focus on vulnerable sections. For farmers, Govi Mithuru provides information on crop security, better profitability, enhanced engagement with officials, and guidance for nurturing a healthy and well-nourished family.

Govi Mithuru has been welcomed by farmers all over Sri Lanka, with exceptional growth in traditionally agricultural areas such as the North Central, Central and Eastern provinces, with users providing independent testimony to the benefits or advantages provided by the platform.

By the independent research carried out by GSMA, it revealed that,

1. 62% of users regularly use the service
2. 90% regular users report that they have made at least one on-farm change based on advises received from Govi Mithuru service
3. 25% report changes to planting methods
4. 12% report changes to post harvest handling and storage
5. 60% report decreased fertiliser and pesticide use

Dialog Axiata PLC is committed to working towards achieving the SDGs and enhancing the livelihoods of Sri Lankans on a day-to-day basis, by delivering simple yet effective products and solution as mentioned above. By focusing on SDG 1 (No poverty), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 9 (Industry innovation & infrastructure) and SDG 13 (climate action) Dialog aims to contribute to the overall agenda of Sri Lanka's commitment towards achieving global goals while transforming and uplifting the lives of Sri Lankans. Therefore, this service will be opened for other networks from this year onwards. Farmers who use other network connection, can access the service in near future.

Dialog's mobile-based Govi Mithuru agriculture development programme also serves as a case study for global development and regulatory agencies such as DFID and GSMA who keenly follow its progress, to leverage best practices for the expansion of mobile agriculture all over the world. Dialog is privileged to be at the forefront of this global programme, and worked closely with all agencies towards its fruition.

Keywords: Crop management, Livelihood development, Poverty alleviation, SMART Agriculture, SMART advisory service

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