

IBM announces support of Digital4Agriculture Initiative

IBM recently announced that it is assisting the Digital4Agriculture Initiative (D4Ag). The initiative fosters African startups in the agricultural sector and strengthens the long-term living conditions of local small farmers by increasing productivity and quality.



Photo by Luke Thornton on Unsplash

D4Ag has reportedly successfully launched and is helping over 36 African agricultural companies become better prepared for the digital future with the help IBM Services. The initiative also has access to weather data provided by IBM's The Weather Company.

Reliable weather forecasts are very difficult to make for Africa's agricultural industry due to IT infrastructure unavailability. Small agricultural enterprises not only lack internet access and suitable hardware, but existing data is often unreliable or difficult to process.

By making high-resolution weather data available to agricultural startups, D4Ag is providing valuable information to small farmers that can help them make important decisions with greater confidence. For example, historical weather data from a tea plantation served as training material and showed how data analysis can be used to increase yields, as well as to determine the best time to harvest or the optimal use of fertilisers or pest control.

Desiree Winges, a consultant at Make-IT in Africa and responsible for D4Ag, says: "We want to help local startups to reach more customers and develop new markets. To this end, we provide them with basic knowledge in the areas of data analytics, interoperability and business modelling. We also want to promote cooperation between start-ups and platform

operators to fully exploit the opportunities of the digital world."

On behalf of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the German Society for International Cooperation (Giz) is implementing the D4Ag programme within the framework of the project Make-IT in Africa.

This project is designed to promote the startup scene in the digital sector of developing and emerging countries together with - primarily - European technology companies, startups, associations, research and science and non-governmental organisations. IBM joined the Make-IT Alliance in 2017 as part of its #GoodTechIBM programme.

Three-stage training expands skills of agricultural startups

Experts from Giz and IBM Services have been working together on the project for about three years and have developed a digital coaching concept for startups offering agricultural services to African farmers.

To achieve this, IBM Services and Giz have created a three-stage, interactive training concept consisting of individual e-learning, workshops on business modelling, interoperability and data analytics and detailed materials with tips and suggestions for future projects.

The virtual training lasted several weeks and showed the participants how to use high-resolution weather data and up-to-date alerts to help smallholders grow their products more sustainably and healthily.

Reading tea leaves in the digital age

In the workshop, participants were able to analyse historical data about a tea plantation - crop size, temperature, rainfall, etc. - and determine whether there is, for example, a correlation between weather conditions and yields.

Silas Macharia, a trainer at D4Ag's capacity development workshop, says: "The next step was to use the results for the future. If you discover a pattern, you can plan future harvest phases accordingly and thus increase yields in the long term."

Overall, the use of weather data can make our food healthier: if a farmer adapts the use of fertilisers to the weather, he can reduce the amount of fertiliser needed. Consumers benefit from healthy products, while farmers can get a better price for high-quality products. This can be tracked - right up to the supermarket shelf - by block-chain-based platforms such as FoodTrust.

Access to information from the industry enables start-ups to establish themselves successfully on the market in the long term, thus ensuring more jobs in the region and stable growth. In the first edition of the training sessions, more than 36 startups from 13 countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana and Zimbabwe in Africa took part. The participants overwhelmingly realized a positive outcome and look optimistically into the future.

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