NEW FRAMEWORK FOR DIGITISED FARM DATA

Project duration: January to December 2017

A ground-breaking data digitisation project led by UTZ and supported by the ISEAL Innovations Fund. Kaushik Ramakrishnan, Programme Manager at UTZ, explains how and why this new framework can improve data gathering for all ISEAL members in the agricultural sector.

Why did you decide to focus on data digitisation?

We are increasingly seeing a trend towards the use of digital tools and technologies in the agriculture sector. Many of the organisations UTZ works with are actively thinking along these lines. In most cases, we are all trying to collect similar information such as the identity of a farmer, the location of his or her farm, the shape of the farm and so on.

However, we are all taking different approaches towards digitising this information – leading to the existence of multiple databases that contain similar data. Not aligning on the way we collect farm data at this point would be a big missed opportunity.

What does the project aim to do?

We are looking at what the basic information needed about a farm/farmer for certification is, and then looking at ways in which this information can be digitally collected and stored. We have set ourselves a couple of key guidelines to help keep us focused. These are:

- Taking a technology-agnostic approach. There is a plethora of IT tools available to manage digital farm data initiatives. We want to look at methods and approaches that will not tie users to any specific tool or technology. We would like to come up with a reference framework for digitised farm information that organisations can implement with any tool or technology they choose.
• Looking at common practices as well as best practices. In order to come up with a framework that can be easily and quickly adopted, we are looking not only at best practices, but also common or currently prevalent practices.

For example, a large number of cocoa farms in Cote d’Ivoire and Indonesia have already been mapped out by different organisations. So we are trying to look at the approach taken by these organisations to see if there is a practice that can be taken into the framework.

The project is still in its early stages, but what are the main lessons learned so far?

This project is part of the UTZ First Mile programme, where we are using digital tools to support smallholder farmers, improve the efficiency of farmer groups and innovate and strengthen the certification lifecycle. We experimented with many different models to implement the programme on a large scale, and realised that when it comes to digital farm initiatives the data is more important than the technology or tool. We tell all partners they are free to choose any tool or technology they see fit (we are happy to help with recommendations or advice based on our experiences). What is more important is setting up systems to collect data in a consistent way.

You’re a large organisation with your own resources. Why apply for the Innovations Fund?

One of the key benefits of working on an ISEAL Innovations Fund project is the opportunity to take a step back and look outside your core sphere of work. In this project, we are trying to build a framework that is relevant and useful to many standards systems, and in order to do that we need to make an active effort to remove any UTZ-specific biases. We hope this will bring new perspectives and help us look at the problem in different ways.

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Kaushik Ramakrishnan, Programme Manager, UTZ

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