

Mobile changes lives of Thai farmers

KOWSHER JAHAN KHALED

THAILAND has become an excellent example of how mobile technology can create immense opportunities for farmers in improving their crops and selling their produce to the right people at fair prices.

The technology has also opened doors for Thai farmers to reach overseas markets without going through middlemen.

Farmers can access useful information on agricultural developments from their mobile phones for free by using a service -- *1677 Farmer Information Superhighway.

Farmers said they can improve productivity, reduce costs and increase income by using the service in Thai language.

"After I got information from the service, I started using biofertiliser instead of chemical fertiliser because of what I learned from the superhighway," said Rungnabha Yordmai, a rice farmer and subscriber since May 2009.

This saved her two-thirds of the cost of fertiliser, down from 15,000 baht to only 4,700 baht, she said.

"I've increased my productivity from 85 bags of jasmine rice to 115 bags, and sticky rice from 50 bags to 60 bags."

FARMER INFO APP GIVES ACCESS TO:



BUYING PRICES

Farmers can check and compare prices from several buying sources all over Thailand to get the best prices and benefits

PRICES AT FRESH MARKETS

Farmers check and compare prices of fresh and dry food at six major fresh markets in Bangkok

NEWS

Agriculture news, breaking news and general news

TIPS

Useful tips such as production techniques and farming tips from experienced farmers shared through VDO clips

SMS KNOWLEDGE DATABASE

Access to data, information and news about farming and agriculture. Open 24 hours daily, the service connects farmers to useful information and links to further studies

Three categories of information are available: rice and grain, fruits and vegetables, and cattle, livestock and fishery that they can also share with fellow farmers.

Besides SMS, if farmers call *1677, they will have access to free advice from experts who will be answering questions on agricultural production and other related topics.

The project was introduced in 2008 as an SMS-based service by Telenor-owned mobile operator Dtac. Since then the project has evolved into MMS, videos over 3G, mobile phone apps and a mobile marketplace.

Subscribers may also access information through a 'help centre' dedicated to farmers. The information centre, which is accessible throughout the country, also provides a network of successful farmers and academics for experts' consultation.

The mobile operator and its partners in the project also organise seminars and workshops for farmers all over the country to make the services easier to understand.

Not only that, in May this year, Dtac launched Farmer Info mobile application through which farmers can check the latest agricultural prices and news.

The two key features of the application is the daily update on the prices of key household farm products at every key farmer's market in the country. In this way, farmers would know what to grow and where best to sell them. The second key feature is the collection of short and easy to understand "How To" video clips in the application that teach farmers how to grow and care for their crops.

Somsong Sangtawan has been growing pomelo (a citrus fruit) for more than 30 years. An advocate for organic plantation and environment preservation, he came across a secret of how to naturally sweeten the fruits by mixing byproduct of salt pans into the soil. His agricultural technique has also won several awards.

"I have shared this secret on Dtac's SMS service and Farmer Info app," said Sangtawan who owns several pomelo orchards. "This will benefit the Thai farmers and contribute to national growth."

As of October 2013, the operator had 250,000 members for the SMS-based service and 22,000 members for the Farmer Info app. The company aims to increase the number in both the categories by 50,000 soon.

There will be increased exchanges of news, information and knowledge about agriculture, and the services will serve as one of the best sources of information on agriculture in Thailand, said Jon Eddy Abdullah, CEO of Dtac.

"I am confident that Dtac will bring even more opportunities for farmers. They can check and compare latest prices so that they can plan ahead when and to whom they should sell their agricultural produce to receive the



Dtac Chairman Boonchai Bencharongkul, left, and CEO Jon Eddy Abdullah, right, pose with a pomelo farmer -- Somsong Sangtawan -- during a field trip last month.

highest returns," he said in email replies.

"This will certainly lead to a higher standard of living for farmers, which in turn will contribute to the growth of our national economy."

Next year, the operator plans to launch e-commerce service to make it possible and convenient for farmers to conduct financial transactions such as buying and selling farm produce on cellphones, according to Abdullah.

Norwegian telecom giant Telenor has 55.80 percent share in Bangladesh's leading mobile operator Grameenphone.

Dtac officials said farmers in Bangladesh can also benefit from such a service. Farmer Information Superhighway and Farmer Info app are excellent examples of how

telecom operators can harness the power of technologies to benefit the farmers, they said.

News and information company Thomson Reuters has also rolled out similar services in India to bring commodity prices, crop and weather data to the farmers via mobile phones.

The World Bank has upgraded Thailand's income categorisation from a lower-middle income economy to an upper-middle income one in 2011.

Thailand's GDP (gross domestic product) grew by 6.4 percent in 2012 and is forecasted to continue growing at 5 percent in 2013, according to the WB. Its agricultural sector produces around 9 percent of the GDP.

khaledstar@gmail.com

India keeps rates on hold despite surging inflation

AFP, Mumbai

INDIA'S hawkish central bank surprised markets by keeping its key interest rate unchanged Wednesday, but warned it "will act" to tighten monetary policy if inflation soars further.

After meeting in the financial capital Mumbai, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) said its benchmark repo rate, at which it lends to commercial banks, would remain at 7.75 percent.

Most economists had predicted an increase after the widely watched wholesale inflation rate unexpectedly soared to a 14-month high of 7.52 percent in November, well above the RBI's five percent comfort zone.

Recently appointed RBI governor Raghuram Rajan said Wednesday's rate decision was a close call.

clamouring for looser monetary policy to help spur a sharply slowing economy.

India posted growth of 4.8 percent in the second quarter ended September, far below the near double-digit expansion enjoyed when the economy was booming.

Rajan last week said the bank was "very uncomfortable" with the inflation level but added that growth was "weaker than we would like".

He also kept the cash reserve ratio -- the percentage of deposits banks must keep with the central bank -- unchanged at 4.0 percent.

Shares on the Bombay Stock Exchange jumped 260.89 points or 1.27 percent to 20,873.03 points in afternoon trade, cheered by the move to keep rates on hold.

Siddhartha Sanyal, chief India economist with Barclays Capital, welcomed the decision.



REUTERS

Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Governor Raghuram Rajan leaves after a news conference for the mid-quarter monetary policy review at the RBI headquarters in Mumbai yesterday.

But he said there was "reason to wait before determining the course of monetary policy" given indications that vegetable prices -- the main inflation driver -- may be dropping, after surging 95 percent from last year's levels.

If inflation fails to soften when the next set of figures are published "the Reserve Bank will act," Rajan stressed after chairing his third monetary policy meeting.

"In an environment where there is uncertainty, we have to wait for more data and see the impact of the last couple of rate hikes," he told reporters after the decision.

"Another month's reading will not put us way behind the ball. We are trying to be responsible central bankers."

The bank raised rates in both September and October, saying it was determined to fight inflation, but government and business leaders have been

"A rate hike at this stage would have unduly penalised the industrial sector in which the momentum is already weak," he told AFP.

The Confederation of Indian Industry also praised the decision, and urged the government to boost agricultural supplies and productivity to help tame food prices.

"The RBI has demonstrated restraint and foresight to strike the right balance between inflation and growth," said director general Chandrajit Banerjee.

But Sonal Varma, India economist at Nomura Financial Advisory and Securities, said inflation was likely to remain high and forecast the RBI would raise rates by a cumulative 50 basis points in the first half of 2014.

Indian Finance Minister P Chidambaram expects the economy to expand by five percent this year, but some private economists see growth as low as four percent.

Merkel says EU must be ready for treaty changes

AFP, Berlin

GERMAN Chancellor Angela Merkel on Wednesday said European Union members must be open to treaty changes to strengthen joint economic governance in the 28-nation bloc.

Merkel was speaking a day after starting her third term as leader of Europe's biggest economy and ahead of a visit to Paris, followed by a two-day EU summit in Brussels.

She told parliament that the EU needs to work toward more centralised financial and economic governance, where members can be compelled to meet certain fiscal targets, even if this requires changes to key EU treaties.

"Since the Lisbon Treaty we have a situation in Europe where everyone says, 'we can develop everything but we can't change the treaties'," Merkel said.

"I don't think that we can build a truly functioning Europe that way."

French President Francois Hollande has rejected changing EU treaties, pushing for more pro-growth policies and less austerity within the existing European charters.

Other EU members are also sceptical about renegotiating treaties, which may require referendums, amid rising euroscepticism in many countries.

Merkel, making her case for evolving charters in the EU, said "we have a situation in Europe where Germany is often accused of resisting certain developments. This is not the case."

"We are among those who say



AFP

German Chancellor Angela Merkel (R) and German Vice Chancellor, Economy and Energy Minister Sigmar Gabriel attend a session of the Bundestag lower house of parliament yesterday.

that we must, if treaties are no longer sufficient, develop those treaties."

"Those who want more Europe must be ready for new rules on some competencies," she added.

Merkel was sworn in for a third term on Tuesday, almost three months after winning September 22 elections, leading a "grand coalition" with the centre-left Social Democrats.

Addressing the Bundestag legislature, Merkel said that her new government wants for Germany, as a founding member of the EU, to continue "to take a responsible role and one that promotes integration in Europe".

Looking back at 2013, she said "Europe has made a fair bit of

progress on the path to stability and growth", citing the banking union project, keeping the common currency competitive and the fight against youth unemployment.

"It could reap the first fruits -- I stress, the first," Merkel said, pointing to progress in Ireland, Greece and Cyprus.

But she said Europe's credibility had suffered because it had often pledged a lot and not done enough -- for example, failing to meet spending targets on research and development in order to stay innovative and globally competitive.

The aim now was to ensure that in future countries don't again plunge into crisis, as they have amid the sovereign debt and economic troubles of recent years,

including by correcting some of the founding flaws of the EU, she said.

"We say this can be achieved if the necessary structural reforms can be demanded" from member states, Merkel said. "That means we must significantly strengthen the policy coordination... that has so far been non-binding."

She said at the moment, the European Commission sends each EU member reform recommendations annually.

"The member states receive these happily -- and here Germany is little better than others -- and then life goes on," she said.

"However, there is no obligation, and that's why we want to work toward treaty changes in future, on the European level."

Disaster losses \$130b in 2013: Swiss Re

AFP, Geneva

DISASTERS caused global economic losses of about \$130 billion (94.5 billion euros) this year, Swiss Re said on Wednesday, but there was little insurance coverage for the deadliest catastrophe, Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines.

In a preliminary estimate of the impact of natural and man-made disasters, the Zurich-based reinsurance group noted that the economic impact was sharply down from \$196 billion in 2012, a year marked by Superstorm Sandy in the United States.

But the total loss of life

climbed to about 25,000 people from 14,000 in 2012, it said.

Last month's Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines was the deadliest single disaster, killing more than 7,000 people, Swiss Re noted.

But despite the devastation wreaked, insured losses from the typhoon are expected to be modest, it said.

It pointed to the low proportion of insurance coverage in the Philippines -- a common issue in developing nations, which are also amongst the globe's most disaster-prone countries.

Swiss Re did not release an estimate for the Philippines, but insurance- and disaster-risk modellers AIR Worldwide recently

put the economic losses at \$6.5-14.5 billion, and insurance coverage at \$300-700 million.

The latter figure accounted only for physical damage to insured buildings and their contents, and did not include such areas as losses of crops or business interruption, AIR Worldwide noted.

"In many parts of the world, insurance penetration remains low," Swiss Re's chief economic Kurt Karl said in a statement.

"Together with preventative measures, insurance can lessen the destructive impact and financial burden that large catastrophic events can have on people's lives. It can also help

accelerate reconstruction efforts, as we have seen in areas where insurance penetration is higher," he added.

The insurance industry is likely to cover about \$44 billion of the 2013 disaster losses, Swiss Re said.

It noted that the figure was substantially lower than the \$81 billion in payouts last year, largely down to Superstorm Sandy.

The costliest single disaster of 2013, both in terms of losses and likely insurance payouts, was the flooding in June that battered Germany, the Czech Republic and neighbouring countries in central Europe.