DISCUSSION STARTER

JUNE 2026

Lessons from a Digital Climate Advisory Services Pilot in Rwanda

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Photo credit: CIAT/Neil Palmer

Introduction

Rwanda's smallholder farmers face growing climate uncertainty. With maize production central to national food security and cooperative livelihoods, access to timely, accessible, and actionable climate advisory services can make the difference between a good harvest and a failed one. Access to such services, particularly for women, remains structurally unequal. To address this gap, Agriterra, in partnership with the Global Center on Adaptation (GCA), and supported by Clim-Eat, piloted a Digital Climate Advisory Services (DCAS) model across five maize cooperatives in Rwanda between October 2025 and January 2026. The pilot aimed to develop a replicable private-sector business model for climate-smart advisory services, while strengthening cooperative capacity and promoting women's leadership. The following sections reflect on the pilot's design and consultation process, examining how stakeholders were engaged, and what lessons the experience holds for future deals in digital agricultural advisory.

2,724
Farmers registered on the AgriCoach platform (grouped into 5 cooperatives)

52.4%
Female farmers among all registered beneficiaries

"The Deal"

Early in the process, Clim-Eat hosted meetings with Africa Improved Foods (AIF) and other stakeholders in Rwanda to understand the issues and needs for building the resilience of maize production and securing reliable value chains. Clim-Eat also helped AIF connect to GCA where AIF laid out their plans for DCAS. The eventual result was a pilot project to be funded by GCA, with Agriterra - and its strong connections to farmers cooperatives - as lead implementer.

Clim-Eat helped the implementation process by bringing in a DCAS expert and by funding local stakeholder engagement. This deal represents a commitment to a functional, gender-responsive, and farmer-centric DCAS that could be sustained and scaled by Africa Improved Foods (AIF) after the pilot concluded.

The pilot's core structure brought together five key parties with distinct roles:

- **GCA** provided strategic direction and funding for the pilot period (October 2025 – January 2026).
- **Agriterra** led implementation, managing consultations, procurement, and coordination across all cooperative partners.
- **Africa Improved Foods (AIF)** served as the private sector anchor, sourcing maize from the five cooperatives and identified as the future owner and operator of the platform.
- **Auxfin International** was contracted through a competitive process to customize and deploy the AgriCoach DCAS platform.
- **Clim-Eat** acted as an implementation catalyst, connecting the right actors to make this pilot successful in the long-term, and supporting on lesson learning and coordination.

The deal's ambition was to move beyond a one-off donor-funded intervention and establish a commercially viable advisory model, where AIF's business interests in farmer productivity are aligned with farmers' needs.

How effective was the consultation Process?

The consultation process followed a structured, iterative approach that moved from broad scoping to targeted cooperative-level engagement. The consultation process engaged a relevant mix of institutional actors: a technology provider, a private sector off-taker (AIF), cooperative leadership across five districts, and Agriterra's own technical and field staff. This diversity ensured that operational, commercial, and agronomic perspectives were all represented.

Scoping and consultations for customisation

The foundation of this work was a mapping of available off-the-shelf DCAS solutions operating in Rwanda, especially in the maize value chain, seeking to identify which existing tools could be adapted to cooperative needs to avoid duplication of efforts.

Based on this mapping, Agriterra conducted structured consultations with AIF and five selected maize cooperatives across Rwanda. Field visits enabled direct engagement with cooperative leadership and members, ensuring that practical realities — crop calendars, literacy levels, phone access, and advisory preferences — were captured and fed into platform customisation.

> *"Significant progress was made under the stakeholder consultation activity through structured engagements with AIF and selected cooperatives... The information gathered has been effectively integrated into the customization of the DCAS solution, ensuring it is demand-driven and aligned with the practical realities of participating cooperatives."* **- Agriterra Activity Report, 2026**

The insights gathered during consultations were a core strength of the process, directly shaping the AgriCoach platform customisation. Content priorities, language requirements (including local language translation), and advisory formats were all informed by what cooperatives said they needed.

Gaps that emerged during implementation

Practicing farmers were underrepresented

While cooperative leaders and AIF staff participated in consultations, direct engagement with ordinary smallholder farmers, especially women, was limited during the design phase. As a result, some usability issues only surfaced during rollout. Text-based advisory content proved impractical for farmers working in the field, and many farmers lacked the digital confidence to independently navigate the platform.

> *"Most farmers received basic orientation but did not have enough hands-on practice to explore all features, ask questions, and build confidence to use the platform independently."* **- Agriterra Final Narrative Report, 2026**

Women farmers were systematically missed

The consultations surfaced a structural problem: in many cooperatives, formal membership is registered under male household heads, while women do the majority of farming. This meant that consultation participants skewed towards male cooperative officials rather than the women who would ultimately be the primary users of climate advisories. Scheduled group meetings, used as the primary consultation format, because women's participation was constrained by household responsibilities and time inflexibility.

What worked well

Despite these gaps, the consultation process succeeded in building genuine ownership among cooperative leaders and AIF. The Training of Trainers, engaging 15 lead farmers and 3 AIF sourcing staff, created a layer of local champions capable of supporting farmer onboarding. Notably, 7 of the 15 Training of Trainers (ToT) participants were women (46.7%), strengthening gender-responsive advisory leadership at the cooperatives.

Did stakeholders feel heard?

Cooperative leaders felt engaged, while Farmers felt the gap between registration and use

At the cooperative level, the consultation process built strong ownership and clarity. Leaders understood the pilot's objectives, were actively involved in farmer registration, and maintained enthusiasm for the platform throughout implementation. AIF expressed satisfaction with progress and committed to continuing engagement post-pilot. However, while 2,724 farmers were successfully onboarded onto the AgriCoach platform, most did not receive structured training to use it. Registration created an expectation of access that the project's timeline could not fully deliver on. Farmers were heard in the scoping phase but less so in the rollout phase, where their practical needs for training went unmet.

> *"While this represents significant outreach and interest among farmers, several planned activities could not be completed within the project timeframe."* - **Agriterra Final Narrative Report, 2026**

Photo credit: CIAT/Neil Palmer

Women farmers raised unresolved structural concerns

Gender analysis during registration confirmed that women are often excluded from official cooperative membership, have lower mobile phone ownership, and face scheduling barriers to group-based advisory delivery. These are structural barriers that the consultation process identified but could not resolve within the pilot's scope. The project's report explicitly flags that without proactive redesign of the platform and advisory model, existing gender information gaps risk being reinforced rather than reduced.

Digging deeper: gender perspectives

The headline numbers are encouraging; 52.42% of registered farmers on the platform were women. This majority female representation reflects results from the deliberate outreach of the pilot, as well as the reality that women are the primary workers in Rwandan maize production.

Gender was written into the objectives of this pilot from the start,explicitly aiming to promote women's leadership in cooperatives and ensure meaningful inclusion in advisory service access. The pilot had some success, but revealed several structural barriers that require more intentional design from the onset. commitment at the programme design level.

> *"This high level of female participation reflects the central role women play in maize production and provides a strong foundation for gender-responsive digital advisory delivery."* **- Agriterra Activity Report, 2026**

Barrier 1: Cooperative membership is gendered

In many cooperatives, formal membership is registered under male household heads, even when women perform the majority of agricultural labour. This means women are invisible in cooperative records, and to digital advisory systems that rely on those records for targeting and access. Unless this is addressed directly, DCAS platforms will systematically reach male-registered members more reliably than the women who work the land.

Barrier 2: Mobile phone ownership gaps

Women in the pilot cooperatives have significantly lower rates of personal mobile phone ownership than men. In a phone-centric or tablet-based advisory model, this translates directly into unequal access. Even where women were registered on the platform, their ability to independently receive and act on advisories was contingent on access to a shared or borrowed device, introducing dependence and reducing the frequency and reliability of information access.

Barrier 3: Group meeting formats exclude women

The pilot's primary consultation, through scheduled group meetings, systematically disadvantaged women. Household responsibilities, childcare duties, and time inflexibility meant that many women could not attend meetings at fixed times, reducing both their input into the consultation process and their access to advisory content during rollout. Smaller, community-proximate sessions with flexible scheduling were introduced as a mitigation measure, but were not consistently available across all cooperatives.

> *"Advisory approaches that rely on scheduled group meetings can also reduce women's participation because of household responsibilities and limited time availability."* **- Agriterra Final Narrative Report, 2026**

Major learnings

Despite its achievements, the pilot surfaced clear areas where the consultation and implementation process could be strengthened in future iterations, which provides transferable lessons for anyone designing digital advisory services in smallholder agriculture.

▸ Start consultations earlier and align with the crop calendar

The maize season begins in September; implementation started in late October. This timing mismatch meant the platform could not deliver crop-stage-specific advisories during the critical early growing period. Future programmes should complete scoping and procurement before the season begins so that advisory services are available from day one.

Directly engagepracticing farmers, not just cooperative officials

Consultations were conducted primarily with cooperative leaders and institutional partners. Farmer voices were captured through registration data and field observation rather than structured dialogue. Future pilots should include participatory design sessions with ordinary farmers to surface usability issues before rollout.

Use flexible consultation formats to include women

Scheduled group meetings systematically excluded women with household responsibilities. Smaller sessions, flexible timing, and women-only spaces would allow for more inclusive input.

Build a multimedia-first platform from the start

Text-based advisory content was identified as a key usability barrier early in rollout. Video demonstration content was not completed within the project period. Multimedia design (audio, video, visual guides) should be treated as a core platform requirement.

Maintain transparent communication on outcomes and next steps

As the platform transitions to AIF ownership, clear and proactive communication with all partners is essential. A structured handover process, including a monitoring dashboard and defined responsibilities, will determine whether the pilot's momentum translates into sustained impact.

Demand-driven design pays off

Grounding the platform in structured cooperative consultations produced a solution that felt relevant and owned by partners. Cooperative leaders understood why AgriCoach was built the way it was because they helped shape it. This participatory foundation is what enabled strong farmer registration numbers and secured AIF's buy-in for scale-up.

Private sector anchoring enables sustainability

The decision to structure the deal around AIF as the future platform owner was strategically sound. AIF has a direct commercial interest in farmer productivity and cooperative reliability, which aligns its incentives with sustained platform use. AIF's positive response to the pilot and its expressed commitment to further development validates the private-sector-anchor model as a viable pathway to DCAS sustainability beyond donor funding.

The overarching lesson from Rwanda mirrors what is true of effective deals everywhere: getting the right people in the room is necessary but not sufficient. What matters equally is what happens after the consultation: whether insights are acted upon, whether partners are kept informed, and whether the most marginalised voices filter through to the delivery.

What needs to change

The pilot generated clear, evidence-based recommendations for closing the gender gap in digital advisory delivery:

- **Direct registration:** Cooperatives should register women farmers in their own names, independent of household membership structures, so they can access advisories directly.
- **Phone-centric transition:** Gradually shifting from a shared tablet model to individual phone-based access, with support for mobile phone acquisition, will improve women's independent, frequent use of the platform.
- **Flexible advisory formats:** On-demand digital advisories accessible at any time, combined with shorter local sessions scheduled around women's availability, are more inclusive than fixed group meetings.
- **Visual and audio content:** Simple visual user guides and audio-based advisories reduce the literacy barrier and enable self-directed learning, reducing women's dependence on intermediaries.
- **Gender-disaggregated monitoring:** Tracking not just registration but actual platform use, by gender, will reveal where adoption gaps persist and allow for targeted response.

Photo credit: CIAT/Neil Palmer

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