



# India's AI-Enabled Bharat VISTAAR Platform: Lessons for Bridging Agricultural Information Gap in Sub-Saharan Africa

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## 1 Introduction

Agriculture continues to play an important role in Africa's socioeconomic development. However, its relative importance varies across the African continent. North Africa has a more diversified economic landscape, characterized by lower dependence on agriculture for income as well as employment. On the other hand, agriculture remains central to the economies of Sub-Saharan Africa, which accounts for approximately 80 per cent of continent's land and 83 per cent of its population. Agriculture contributes 15–20 per cent to the gross domestic

product (GDP) and accounts for 45–55 per cent of total employment across Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2025). Furthermore, this region is one of the poorest and most food-insecure globally, with 33–40 per cent of the population living on less than US\$ 2.15 per day per person (World Bank, 2022), and 55–65 per cent facing moderate to severe food insecurity risks (FAO, 2025). For these reasons, this brief note concentrates on Sub-Saharan Africa to prevent the generalization of conclusions that might arise if the entire African continent were treated as a single homogeneous unit for analysis.

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While poverty and food insecurity persist in severe forms, agricultural systems remain subsistence-oriented. Agricultural productivity is significantly lower than the global average. For instance, the average cereal yield in Sub-Saharan Africa is approximately half of the global average. Low agricultural productivity is attributable to several factors, such as heavy dependence on rainfall, increasing frequency and severity of extreme weather events such as droughts and heatwaves, underdeveloped irrigation infrastructure, seed systems, and extension services. Moreover, agriculture is dominated by smallholders, with approximately 85 per cent of farms being less than two hectares in size (Lowder et al., 2025). Smallholder farmers face several challenges, such as limited access to technology, inputs, weather forecasts, credit, insurance, and markets, all of which hinder their efforts to enhance agricultural productivity.

Notably, agricultural systems are inherently complex, involving a wide range of activities, such as crops, animals, fisheries, aquaculture, and agroforestry, each demanding distinct production methods and management strategies. Thus, farmers' information needs are diverse and extensive, while agricultural service delivery systems are underdeveloped and fragmented. To meet their information needs, farmers rely on fellow farmers, relatives, input suppliers and traders. Although these intermediary information sources are easily accessible and cost-effective, there is a possibility of losing information during the transmission. On the other hand, formal systems,

which include government agricultural departments and research institutions, provide reliable information, but their outreach is limited. Evidence indicates that in Sub-Saharan Africa, an agricultural extension worker serves 1,000 to 10,000 farm households, as against the recommended 400 to 500 (Agwu et al., 2023; FAO, 2023). This leads to weak last-mile connectivity, often resulting in delayed, generalized, or inaccessible advisories for farmers.

Bridging this information gap is essential for improving the productivity, sustainability, and resilience of agriculture, and thereby rural livelihoods and regional food security. In this context, digital technologies hold significant potential. Remote sensing, big data analytics, geographic information system (GIS), and artificial intelligence (AI) have opened new avenues for the generation and timely dissemination of authentic information. This can help farmers make informed decisions regarding crop choices, inputs and their application rates, pest and disease management, harvesting, packaging, branding, and marketing. Digital innovations can significantly extend the reach of extension services at a relatively low cost, particularly in regions where traditional public extension systems face resource and capacity constraints.

India has recently launched an AI-enabled multilingual, interoperable digital platform, "Bharat VISTAAR," to ensure timely access to reliable information. This platform is designed to integrate various datasets related to land records, cropping patterns, soil

health, weather conditions, market trends, agricultural technologies, and agronomic practices to generate and deliver reliable, location-specific, and personalized information to the farmers.

Bharat VISTAAR is particularly relevant for Sub-Saharan Africa, where, much like in India, agriculture is dominated by smallholders, and public extension systems remain underdeveloped and fragmented. Its importance is further highlighted by the fact that current digital agricultural platforms lack both interoperability and linkages with research institutions.

## 2 Impact of Information on Farm Outcomes

Although information is not a direct factor in agricultural production, such as land, labor, and capital, it is no less important. The use of information in farm decisions leads to the efficient and sustainable use of resources. Moreover, access to better and timely information helps farmers to continuously improve their farming practices. By observing the outcomes of their decisions and comparing the performance of different crops, inputs, and management practices, farmers can identify the best practices under their local conditions. Such informed decision-making can contribute to higher productivity, improved profitability, and more sustainable agricultural systems.

Information influences farm outcomes in several ways. First, information enables farmers to make informed decisions regarding the

choice of production portfolios, technology, inputs, and farm practices. This can potentially enhance both technical and allocation efficiency, and consequently, reduce production costs and improve agricultural productivity. Evidence shows that farmers who use information in their decision-making can reduce production costs by 5–10 per cent (Fafchamps and Minten, 2012; Porciello et al., 2025) and realize 2–25 per cent higher crop yields (Fabregas et al., 2019; Porciello et al., 2025).

Second, climate change has become a significant threat to agriculture, reducing agricultural productivity by more than one-fifth in the past five decades (Ortiz-Bobea et al., 2021). Evidence indicates that timely weather advisories can empower farmers to adopt mitigation measures, which can reduce crop losses by 5–15 per cent (FAO, 2022b; Fabregas et al., 2019).

Third, access to market information on commodity prices and supply and demand conditions improves price discovery and enhances farmers' bargaining power to obtain better prices for their produce. Evidence shows that when farmers have access to market information, they can realize 3–8 per cent higher sale prices for their crops (IFAD, 2022; Negi et al., 2018).

Fourth, the lack of adequate transportation and storage facilities, coupled with poor handling practices, results in considerable post-harvest losses, ranging from 10 to 20 per cent for grains and exceeding 30 per cent for perishable commodities (FAO, 2019). By ensuring timely access to reliable information on grading, packaging,

and storage practices, these losses can be significantly reduced.

Finally, farmers incur significant costs when acquiring financial services, including credit and insurance. Institutions that offer these services also incur similar costs. Evidence shows that information by facilitating farmers' access to financial services and government schemes can reduce transaction costs by 20–30 per cent (World Bank, 2018). For financial institutions, having access to information about farmers and farm characteristics reduces the costs associated with information searches, thereby mitigating adverse selection and moral hazard. Overall, the use of information in agricultural decision-making can potentially lead to 11–20 per cent higher returns from farming (Birtal et al., 2015; Fabregas et al., 2019).

### 3 Status of Digitization in Agriculture

Digital science has made significant progress, giving rise to several innovations that can be utilized in agriculture and rural development. However, their application in most developing countries remains limited (Table 1). Compared to other regions in the Global South, mobile phone ownership, internet access, and the adoption of digital agricultural services are significantly lower in Sub-Saharan Africa. Only 10–15 per cent of farm households in Sub-Saharan Africa use digital services, compared to 20–30 per cent in Asia and 25–35 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean (Table 1).

Several factors are responsible for the lower adoption of digital services in agriculture in developing countries. One of the major constraints is the low

**Table 1: Status of Digital Agricultural Services**

Region	Rural mobile phone ownership (%)	Rural internet access (%)	Farmers using digital agricultural services (%)
Sub-Saharan Africa	65–75	25–30	10–15
Asia	70–75	40–50	20–30
Latin America and the Caribbean	75–85	50–60	25–35

*Source:* Compiled from FAO (2022c), and GSMA (2023), FAO and ITU (2022).

penetration of digital infrastructure in rural areas. Weak signals, low Internet speed, and poor connectivity continue to persist. Additionally, the high costs of smartphones and mobile data services limit poor smallholders' access to digital services. Furthermore,

low digital literacy and the lack of availability of digital services in local languages, particularly in multilingual settings, are significant barriers. Finally, the most crucial factor is the lack of interoperability among various digital platforms, which results in fragmented

**Table 2: Digital Agricultural Platforms in Sub-Saharan Africa**

Platform	Country	Services offered	Delivery mode	Impact / Evidence
DigiFarm	Kenya	Inputs, advisory, credit, insurance, market linkages	Mobile (app/SMS/ USSD)	Improved access to inputs and financial services; enhanced productivity and market participation
Hello Tractor	Kenya/ Nigeria	Tractor hiring, equipment access	Mobile booking + GPS	Increased access to mechanization; reduced labor constraints; improved timeliness of operations
Esoko	Ghana	Price data, market info, advisory	Mobile (SMS/app)	Better price discovery; improved bargaining power; higher price realization
Farmerline	Ghana	Advisory, weather, input, market info	Voice (IVR), SMS	Improved access to extension for low-literacy farmers; better farm decision-making
Zowasel	Nigeria	Inputs, logistics, finance, market access	Web/ mobile	Enhanced coordination; reduced transaction costs; improved market access and price realization
AgriPredict	Zambia	Weather services, Early warning systems, agro-dealers connectivity, market access, crop disease diagnosis, extension services	Mobile app + AI analytics	Improved localized weather forecasts, early warnings of pests and diseases, market information linkages, digital agricultural extensions, and support for agricultural input distribution networks.
RiceAdvice	Selected locations in Sub-Saharan Africa	Farm-specific advice on rice management practices.	Mobile app	Personalized and profitable recommendations for rice management practices. The use of this tool increases paddy yield by 0.5-1 t/ha and profits by US\$100-200 per ha per growing season.

*Source:* Compiled from FAO (2022c) and GSMA (2023). Information on AgriPredict and RiceAdvice sourced from: AgriPredict and RiceAdvice website.

advisories and undermines farmers' trust in the information provided.

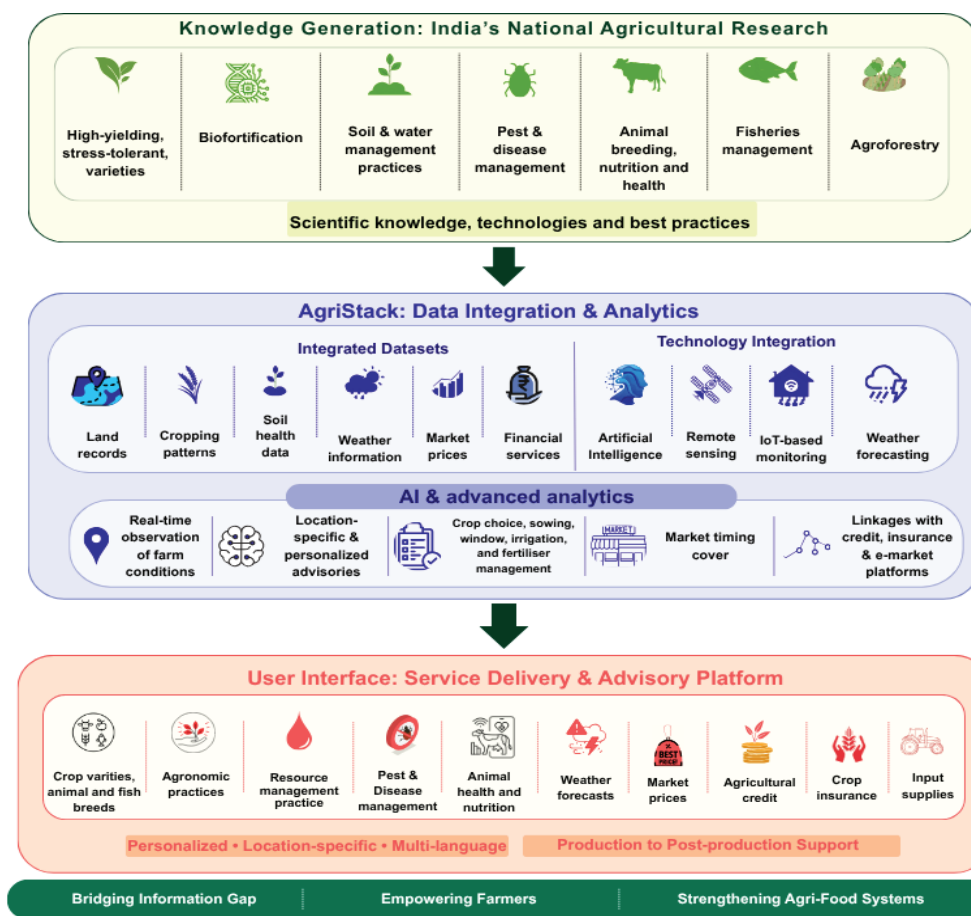
Nevertheless, in recent years, several digital platforms have emerged across Sub-Saharan Africa that deliver information on one or another aspect of agriculture, ranging from production to marketing. Table 2 lists some notable examples. DigiFarm, a mobile-based platform in Kenya, offers farmers access to inputs, credit, insurance, and markets, thereby reducing the transaction costs associated with their acquisition. Hello Tractor in Kenya and Nigeria is a mobile-based platform that allows smallholder farmers to book tractor services, helping them overcome the financial constraints associated with purchasing expensive machinery. In Ghana, Esoko enables farmers to access information on commodity prices through mobile phones, allowing them to decide the optimal time to sell their produce and secure better prices. Farmerline in Ghana delivers voice- and SMS-based weather, input, and market information, targeting low-literacy farmers. Zowasel in Nigeria links smallholders with input suppliers, logistics, financial institutions and buyers, reducing transaction costs. AgriPredict in Zambia offers a range of services to farmers, including weather forecasts, connectivity with agro-dealers, market access, crop disease diagnosis, and extension services, with a particular focus on smallholder farmers. RiceAdvice, in collaboration with AfricaRice, provides tailored advice on rice management practices in Nigeria, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Mali.

Nevertheless, most digital platforms are function- and location-specific. They provide information on a few specific aspects of the agricultural value chain rather than fulfilling all types of information needs of farmers. This is because of the lack of interoperability of datasets across different platforms. This lack of integration leads to fragmented advisories, compelling farmers to rely on different sources for information. This process is costly and cumbersome for smallholder farmers. Furthermore, a structural disconnect exists between digital platforms and agricultural research systems, the absence of which undermines the contextual relevance of farm advisories.

#### **4 Bharat VISTAAR: An AI-driven Integrated Digital Platform**

In February 2026, the Government of India launched Bharat VISTAAR, an AI-driven multilingual digital platform to bridge the information gap. This platform operates on a three-tiered system that offers farmers a variety of information through a digital public infrastructure (Figure 1). Knowledge generation is the first tier, which provides technologies generated by India's national agricultural research system, including generic and commodity-specific research entities under the aegis of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) and the State Agricultural Universities (SAUs). Information on technologies and other farm practices is fed into AgriStack, which serves as the second tier of Bharat VISTAAR.

Figure 1. Architecture of *Bharat VISTAAR*



AgriStack is the core framework for integrating and analyzing diverse datasets using artificial intelligence and big data analytics. It transforms raw data into location-specific and personalized advisories for farmers on crop choice, optimal sowing windows, irrigation schedules, fertilizer application, pest management practices and appropriate market timing. In addition, it provides information on credit, insurance, inputs, and markets.

The third tier of Bharat VISTAAR functions as a user interface, allowing farmers to access a comprehensive array of agricultural advisories in multiple languages. In essence, Bharat VISTAAR is a comprehensive and cost-effective support system for farmers,

delivering end-to-end, authentic, and context-specific information. By bridging the information gap, it has the potential to revolutionize the agricultural extension system, paving the way for an efficient, inclusive, and sustainable transformation of food systems.

## Lessons for Sub-Saharan Africa

Bharat VISTAAR is a significant step toward revolutionizing the agricultural research and extension ecosystem not only in India but also in several other developing countries, which confront persistent information and institutional gaps in addressing agricultural challenges. The

key conditions for its implementation in Africa are as follows:

- **Strengthening government-to-government collaboration:** Partnerships with the Government of India are crucial for fostering learning and accelerating the integration of cutting-edge digital technologies. Through these partnerships, policymakers and technology experts can gain insights into effective models, identify challenges in implementation, and adapt strategies to meet local requirements.
- **Leverage existing institutional and data systems:** Governments should leverage existing public digital and research infrastructure to reduce implementation costs. However, they need to gather and integrate dispersed datasets to provide reliable, scalable, and evidence-based advisory services. Where data gaps exist, investment in data collection and management is essential for building digital advisory platforms.
- **Strengthen research – extension – farmer linkages:** To enhance the productivity and resilience of agriculture, it is essential to leverage the transformative power of agricultural research, which can be achieved by integrating technologies and agronomic practices into a unified digital platform. Furthermore, establishing a dynamic feedback loop is important to ensure that agricultural research and extension systems remain responsive to farmers' needs.
- **Strengthen capacity building and digital literacy:** Investments in training farmers, extension workers, and grassroots institutions are essential to improve digital literacy and enable the effective use of digital advisories. Integrating digital agriculture into education and vocational training systems, especially in rural areas, can support the wider adoption of digital technologies in agriculture.
- **Establish public – private partnerships (PPPs):** Strong public-private partnerships are crucial for the successful implementation and scaling of digital innovations. These collaborations combine the strengths of both the public and private sectors.
- **Establish data governance frameworks:** Establishing a clear data governance framework is crucial for formulating guidelines that address data ownership and protection issues, thereby fostering trust among farmers and stakeholders.
- **Monitor, evaluate, and scale:** Governments should establish monitoring and evaluation frameworks to evaluate how effectively digital services are utilized. This will help policymakers identify gaps, inefficiencies, or barriers in service delivery, enabling them to address them. In addition, the framework should assess productivity gains and socioeconomic impacts resulting from digital service adoption. This evaluation will help scale up digital services.

## Conclusion

Bridging agricultural information gaps is crucial for improving the productivity and resilience of agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa. Although several digital agricultural platforms exist in the region, their effectiveness depends on interoperability and last-mile service delivery. In this context, India's AI-enabled Bharat VISTAAR offers important lessons by demonstrating how integrated, multilingual, and interoperable digital systems can deliver timely, reliable, and precise advisories to farmers based on local conditions. The integration of datasets across multiple platforms and departments with interconnected services for credit, market access, and technical support highlights the potential of digital technologies to strengthen agricultural extension systems, support informed decision-making, and improve farm outcomes. Adapting such interoperable and farmer-centric digital approaches can play an important role in supporting agricultural transformation and food security across Sub-Saharan Africa.

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AIC at RIS has been working to strengthen India’s strategic partnership with ASEAN in its realisation of the ASEAN Community. AIC at RIS undertakes research, policy advocacy and regular networking activities with relevant organisations and think-tanks in India and ASEAN countries, with the aim of providing policy inputs, up-to-date information, data resources and sustained interaction, for strengthening ASEAN-India partnership.



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FIDC, has been engaged in exploring nuances of India’s development cooperation programme, keeping in view the wider perspective of South-South Cooperation in the backdrop of international development cooperation scenario. It is a tripartite initiative of the Development Partnership Administration (DPA) of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, academia and civil society organisations.



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Knowledge generated endogenously among the Southern partners can help in consolidation of stronger common issues at different global policy fora. The purpose of NeST is to provide a global platform for Southern Think-Tanks for collaboratively generating, systematising, consolidating and sharing knowledge on South South Cooperation approaches for international development.



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