Driving **digital inclusion** in agriculture

The game-changing Govi Mithuru initiative

Business focus story

Dialog Axiata is Sri Lanka's leading telecommunications provider, with over 20 million active subscriptions. In October 2014, Dialog leveraged its technological expertise and extensive network to launch Govi Mithuru (Farmer's Friend in English and Uzhavar Thozhan in Tamil), a mobile-based agricultural advisory service for smallholder farmers. MDF identified Govi Mithuru as a relevant, scalable service that could address some of the challenges in sharing information with farmers. In 2020, MDF and Dialog teamed up to refine the service offer for farmers, demonstrate its value-add to subscribers and improve adoption of the service.

*MDF discussed the success of the Govi Mithuru service with **Tharusha Wanigasekara**, **Dialog's Manager - Digital innovation and Inclusion**.*

Can you tell us the story behind introducing Govi Mithuru?

The idea for Govi Mithuru was born when we began exploring the agritech space. Smartphone penetration in Sri Lanka is only around 35 per cent among farmers. We saw a big information gap in how farmers accessed crucial agricultural knowledge and, with government resources stretched thin, farmers weren't getting the timely and reliable information they needed.

Dialog developed a digital solution to provide technical advice for food crop cultivation in Sri Lanka, in partnership with [mobile consortium] GSMA, the Department of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Health. This work was initiated under GSMA's mAgri Challenge Fund.

At its core, the vision for Govi Mithuru is accessibility. The service provides actionable information in local languages, making it easier for farmers to adopt technology and doesn't always need the use of a smart phone. By working closely with the Department of Agriculture, we receive accurate data and digitise the information to share with farmers. It is tailored to the specific challenges farmers face, like pests and diseases, which lead to sub-optimal yields and post-harvest losses. Govi Mithuru is a mass-customised platform, which means the information received is based on the farmer's climate zone (wet or dry), location, stage of cultivation, irrigation type, seed variety and specific crop cycle.

Farmers can choose between two subscription models: an IVR Service (Interactive voice responses and messages) or a mobile application (app). The IVR Service is activated by farmers dialing a code and selecting their specific requirements. After that, Dialog customises the advisory calls/messages aligned with their farming practices. This is the most popular option, used by 90 per cent of subscribers, as it's accessible, user-friendly and does not require a smartphone. Similarly, with the app, we aim to drive the availability of curated multimedia content and access to information on all available crops.

The MDF team engaging in discussions with farmers using the Govi Mithuru service.

How has the service evolved since its inception?

Over time, we've expanded key features, such as emergency alerts on the weather, pest outbreaks, and disease risks, giving farmers early warnings so that they can take timely action. Our biggest success have been shifting farmers' perception on the use of mobile technology to access agriculture information. Over the past decade, we've seen a surge in smartphone adoption among farmers. When we first launched, Govi Mithuru covered just five crops. Today, we provide advisory for 36 crops and have over 1.1 million users. We are happy to say that Govi Mithuru remains one of the most effective mobile-based agricultural platforms in Sri Lanka.

Tell us about Govi Mithuru's growth trajectory and what challenges Dialog faced when seeking to expand the service?

We identified that 56 per cent of Govi Mithuru app users depend on agriculture as their primary source of income, and 17.2 per cent of them lived below the poverty line. A big hurdle was building a long-lasting relationship based on trust with farmers. Govi Mithuru gained credibility because farmers saw that the information came directly from the Department of Agriculture.

Another challenge was that prior to 2020, services were also limited to a few crops and geographic regions, which restricted our reach. To overcome this, we introduced the service through our Village Agents, who were deployed to onboard new farmers. Initially, we faced reluctance among farmers due to a lack of awareness of the service. They reported that older farmers preferred traditional [in-person] advisory methods. The pandemic and economic crisis further strained our financial resources, limiting our ability to provide on-ground support.

As farmers struggled to access extension services, and agents were not specifically targeting farmers, this led to increased churn among farmers who were already using the service. It was at this critical juncture that we partnered with MDF.

Farmers engaging with Govi Mithuru's instructional videos for effective crop management.

How did MDF support Govi Mithuru?

MDF supported us with revamping the village agent model, ensuring that agents were targeting the right target consumers and that only farmers were specifically onboarded in new regions. The agents underwent specialised training in farmer identification, onboarding farmers, approaching more women farmers and app familiarisation practices, leading to stronger farmer retention. To further motivate agents and maintain sustained engagement, we implemented registration and retention incentives, ensuring farmers remained active on the platform for over 30 days.

> *Before MDF's involvement, a single village agent could reach only 3,000–4,000 farmers. **With MDF's support, we scaled up the model to eight agents across three districts—Jaffna, Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa—significantly boosting adoption.** As a result, our churn rate dropped from 40 per cent [of farmers using the service] to 10 per cent in 2024, with 95 per cent of onboarded farmers remaining active users.*

MDF further strengthened the model by conducting quality surveys and developing new content to sustain engagement. Targeted campaigns, including direct advisory sessions led by the village agents and promotional campaigns on Govi Mithuru, further reinforced adoption.

To improve the services value proposition to farmers, MDF also supported with hiring a consultant who identified the information gaps in the service. This helped overcome challenges related to content development, multimedia integration and social media outreach. Our partnership focused on helping farmers better understand the real value of our digital advisory service.

By following our step-by-step advice, they could boost their incomes, cut down on post-harvest losses by optimising pest control, and introducing more profitable crops. We redeveloped content for five existing crops and integrated three new crops. We quickly realised that adding new, high-value crops significantly increased engagement and helped reduce the churn rate. With MDF's support, we successfully onboarded 100,000 new farmers by February 2024.

Can you share any insights on women's use of the service?

Our research showed that 32 per cent of Govi Mithuru users were women. Recognising that women play a crucial role in Sri Lanka's agriculture sector, to support their work - life balance we curated crop-specific weather advisory on home gardening to provide women farmers with better knowledge, enabling them to plan their workload more efficiently. Our research confirmed that women subscribe to the service independently, without relying on spousal consultation, reinforcing the need for more curated advisory content. With MDF support we launched 'Govi Mithuru Koratuwa', a short infomercial campaign and video series designed to increase awareness and adoption among women on home gardening. We also worked on a strategic social media campaign that gained significant traction.

According to the village agents, the service has increased women farmers' access to inputs, and ability to contribute to household income or run their own agricultural activities. In certain rural areas, cultural norms discourage women from directly purchasing pesticides, forcing them to rely on intermediaries. With Govi Mithuru, they now have access to verified agricultural advice.

> *Our collaborative efforts with MDF have **increased the incomes of over 8,000 female farmers.***

How has the service been a value-add to the farmers?

Farmers appreciate the convenience and reliability they receive from an investment that has a nominal monthly fee of LKR30 (AUD0.14). Many have found it a more accessible alternative to waiting for government extension officers, allowing them to make informed decisions in real time.

> *An interesting behavioural trend we observed is that **some farmers subscribe only during the cultivation and harvesting period and switch to different crops throughout the year**.*

The app's crop-specific guidance, pest control recommendations and home gardening tips are among the most popular features. Paddy advisory has been particularly in demand, and we have opted to make it a free service, as it addresses critical knowledge gaps. Emergency pest control alerts due to erratic weather patterns have proven invaluable, the service has helped our subscribers mitigate crop loss from pests and save income. The Village Agent model has further strengthened engagement with farmers as direct interactions offer tailored support, and we are hoping to invest more in it.

By ensuring that the right information reaches farmers at the right time, we have built trust and long-term loyalty within Sri Lanka's farming community. As of 2024, Govi Mithuru has achieved remarkable milestones—delivering 4.2 million calls per year, sending 3.5 million SMSs annually and reaching over 700,000 farmers daily.

MDF and Dialog team members examining quality of produce.

What are the next steps for Govi Mithuru?

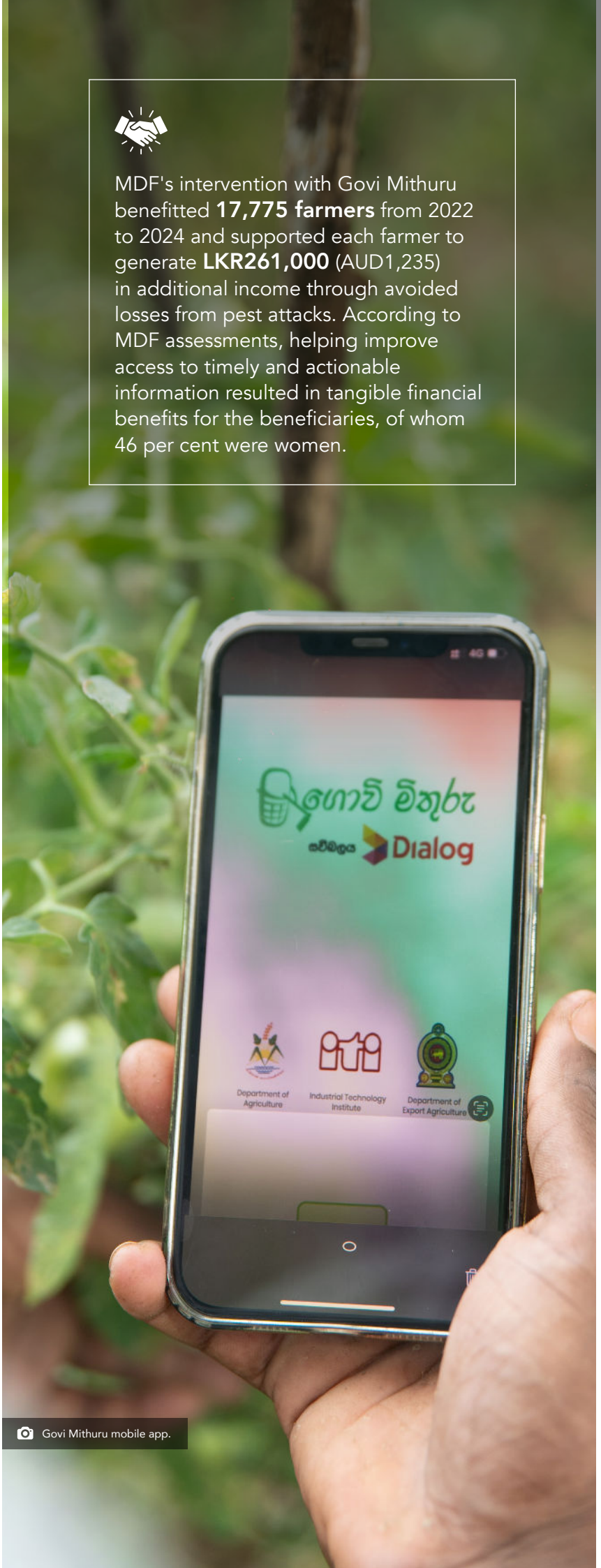
Our goal is to strengthen Govi Mithuru to become one of Sri Lanka's most effective digital agriculture tools, inspiring other telecom companies and agribusinesses to adopt similar innovative approaches. With MDF's support, we hope to collaborate with key players in the agriculture sector, such as agricultural input providers and specialists in protected agriculture, to leverage their expertise and market reach to enhance the service.

Young farmers are increasingly turning to digital agri-advisory for real-time, accurate farming insights. To address this, we plan to add features on fertiliser cost saving practices and integrate key microfinancing and insurance services, making Govi Mithuru a multi-purpose platform., With MDF's support we are currently working on improved advanced pest and disease management capabilities.

Accurate climate advisory is another crucial area of development. We are actively working with MDF to introduce localised weather forecasts, allowing farmers to plan ahead and reduce climate-related risks. Disability inclusion remains a priority as well, and our vision includes tailored support to farmers with disabilities by addressing their specific farming challenges.

Looking further, we aim to introduce automated protected agriculture advisory services (AI) like AI-powered custom crop advisory tools, including speech-to-text features in local languages, to help farmers overcome language barriers. By continuously innovating and expanding our services, we want to make Govi Mithuru an essential digital companion for every farmer in Sri Lanka.

MDF's intervention with Govi Mithuru benefitted **17,775 farmers** from 2022 to 2024 and supported each farmer to generate **LKR261,000** (AUD1,235) in additional income through avoided losses from pest attacks. According to MDF assessments, helping improve access to timely and actionable information resulted in tangible financial benefits for the beneficiaries, of whom 46 per cent were women.



Govi Mithuru mobile app.