Opportunity International Ulangizi farm advice chatbot in Malawi

IMPLEMENTED 2024–2025 · AGRICULTURE AND FOOD · MALAWI · BAND D · CLAIMED ONLY
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A WhatsApp chatbot answers Malawian smallholders' farming questions in Chichewa and English, grounded in the agriculture ministry's manual and used through trained farmer support agents. Results come from the non-profit and its suppliers.

ABOUT THIS SYNOPSIS

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NOTICE WORDING LAST UPDATED 16 NOVEMBER 2026

AT A GLANCE

AI used: Generative AI chatbot with retrieval over the ministry manual, text, voice and photos on WhatsApp.

Implemented: 2024–2025. Grade: band D, Task support, Claimed only.

Headline result, as reported: A farm advice chatbot used through trained support agents in Malawi; results reported by the non-profit and its suppliers only

1 · The case

The facts, as reported by the 4 sources listed at the end. Where a source is silent, the field says "Not reported".

Organisation

Opportunity International, with the Malawi Ministry of Agriculture. Opportunity International is a non-profit that develops financial services, training and agricultural support for people living in extreme poverty, per Microsoft's customer story. In Malawi it runs a network of farmer support agents. Microsoft's story lists its size as 50 to 999 employees. Canvas block: 3. Customers and proposition. Also 5. People and skills.

Business challenge

The challenge. After Cyclone Freddy in 2023, Opportunity says farmers lacked timely, reliable advice. An agency report cites about one government extension agent for 2,500 to 3,000 farming households nationally, against a recommended one per 500 to 700.

How it was addressed. Opportunity built Ulangizi, a WhatsApp chatbot that takes text, voice and photos and answers in Chichewa or English from the Ministry of Agriculture's production manual. Trained farmer support agents act as intermediaries and carry phones for farmers who have none. [1] [2] [3] [4]

Who implemented it

In-house (In-house): Designed and runs Ulangizi with its farmer support agents.
Microsoft (Model or cloud provider): Azure and Azure OpenAI Service platform, per Microsoft.
AIS Partners (Systems integrator): Collaborated on the Azure-based build, per Microsoft.
Artefact (Consultancy): Collaborated on the Azure-based build, per Microsoft.
Gooey.AI (Software vendor): AI workflow platform used to build the chatbot, per Nvidia.
Nvidia is named as hardware and technical-blog source.

Technology (SEAM pillar E)

SEAM types: T3 API integrations, T4 RAG / vector search over your own data. Deployment: Cloud APIs. Vendors and products: Microsoft, Nvidia, OpenAI, Gooey.AI, Azure OpenAI Service, GPT-4o, Whisper, Ulangizi.

Where it was built in: WhatsApp front end; speech-to-text and translation; retrieval over the Ministry of Agriculture production manual; answers with citations; used through farmer support agents.

What changed

Before: answers could take days, with an agent visiting an extension office and returning, by Microsoft's account. After: Ulangizi answers in seconds, by the same account, through agents who help farmers phrase questions. Measured farm results: Not reported. [1] [2] [3] [4]

What it cost

Not reported. An agency report says Opportunity covered the pilot cost and was seeking donor funding for a wider roll-out.

What it saved

Not reported. Opportunity anticipates the chatbot will cut the cost of training new farmer support agents by more than two thirds; this is an expectation, not a result. [1] [2] [3] [4]

Governance and control

Support agents act as intermediaries and are described by Opportunity's country director as the human in the loop. The ministry says the tool is programmed to align with its official advice. Accountable owner, accuracy testing and incident handling: Not reported.

S2 · Accountable owner · Not reported
Not reported.

A1 · Safe use · Claimed
Opportunity's Microsoft story says use through trained agents reduces the risks of a generative AI solution. [1]

A2 · Human in the loop · Evidenced
AP saw a support agent using the app with farmers; Opportunity's country director calls him the human in the loop. [3]

A3 · Monitoring and assurance · Not reported
Not reported.

A4 · Vendor AI · Not reported
Not reported.

A5 · Agent controls · Not reported
Not reported.

A6 · Standards and regulation · Claimed
A ministry official told AP the tool is programmed to align with the ministry's own farming advice. [3]

What worked, what did not, what is unproven

WORKED

– By Nvidia's account, more than 4,000 questions came in during the three-month pilot, in English and Chichewa.

– AP reports a farmer who followed the chatbot's advice to plant potatoes and says he made more than $800 in sales; this is one account.

– The Malawi government is backing the project, and the tool is aligned to ministry advice, per AP.

DID NOT

– Reach is limited: AP quotes a ministry officer saying Malawi faces challenges getting the tool to enough communities, which also need smartphones and affordable data.

– An agency report quotes farmers citing poor mobile coverage and costly data, and one smartphone for 150 villagers in one village.

UNPROVEN

– Accuracy of answers in Chichewa, which the sources do not test independently.

– Effects on yields and incomes beyond individual testimonials.

– The expected two-thirds cut in training cost for new support agents.

Timeline

2023 Cyclone Freddy devastates Malawi; Opportunity says farmers lacked timely advice [1]

Feb 2024 Farmers in Malawi get access to UlangiziAI through WhatsApp; a three-month pilot follows [2]

Jun 2024 Agency report says the pilot has just finished and the non-profit is gathering qualitative data and seeking funding for a wider roll-out [4]

Mar 2025 Microsoft publishes a customer story on the Azure-based build [1]

Sept 2025 Associated Press reports thousands of smallholders using Ulangizi, with the Malawi government backing it and officials noting reach limits [3]

2 · Grade and SEAM assessment

MarLuc's opinion, made on the evidence above. How cases are graded: marluc.co.uk/case-studies/how-we-rate

Level of change and impact

Claimed: Not applicable. Grade: D, Task support. Proof: Claimed only. Route: Tool-led.

Task support (Level 1, band D). Support agents and farmers get answers faster. No source shows changed farm outcomes, or a changed staffing model yet.

Graded D. Farmers and support agents get faster answers; the sources report usage and testimonials but no measured change in yields, incomes or staffing, and the cost claim is an expectation. Claimed only: the results come from the non-profit and its suppliers.

The SEAM view and lessons learnt

The result rests on the non-profit's and suppliers' accounts plus individual testimonials; the AI's part cannot be separated from agent training, ministry content and donor funding. The agent-as-intermediary design is the control that stands out. Before copying it, a leadership team should ask how answer accuracy is tested in the local language, and who pays for data and devices once donor funding ends.

1. Put a trained human between the chatbot and vulnerable users.
2. Ground answers in an authoritative local source and show citations.
3. Test accuracy in the local language before scaling.

Evidence

Score 1 of 4. Self-reported with press quotes: the non-profit's, Microsoft's and Nvidia's accounts, and AP (republished by BNN Bloomberg) and agency reporting with user and official quotes; no independent evaluation.

Evaluation method. Self-reported by the non-profit and suppliers; press reporting quotes users and officials; no independent evaluation found.

Sources disagree. Reporting differs on the build. Microsoft describes an Azure OpenAI back end built with AIS Partners and Artefact; Nvidia describes a build with the Gooey.AI workflow platform on Nvidia GPUs in Azure, with voice transcribed by models such as Meta's MMS Large or a fine-tuned OpenAI Whisper and photos routed to OpenAI's GPT-4o; an agency report says the app uses data from ChatGPT. None of the sources explains the difference.

Status. Ongoing: AP reported in September 2025 that thousands of farmers use it, with expansion limited by access.

3 · Original sources

Read these in full. To challenge a fact or a grade, use the contact form at marluc.co.uk or the link on https://marluc.co.uk/case-studies/opportunity-international-ulangizi-malawi

[1] Microsoft: Opportunity International works to end farmer poverty in Malawi with Azure AI (customer story)
https://www.microsoft.com/en/customers/story/23063-opportunity-international-azure

[2] Nvidia Technical Blog: AI Chatbot Delivers Multilingual Support to African Farmers
https://developer.nvidia.com/blog/ai-chatbot-delivers-multilingual-support-to-african-farmers

[3] BNN Bloomberg (republished Associated Press report): How AI is helping some small-scale farmers weather a changing climate
https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/business/artificial-intelligence/2025/09/12/how-ai-is-helping-some-small-scale-farmers-weather-a-changing-climate/

[4] TechCentral (agency report; agency not named): The AI revolution comes to rural Malawi
https://techcentral.co.za/the-ai-revolution-comes-to-rural-malawi/246403/

Opportunity International, with the Malawi Ministry of Agriculture website: https://opportunity.org

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