

Resume of stakeholder interaction 8-9 Nov. 2006, New Delhi, India

TeleSupport initiative for documenting and sharing information for sustainable development

The progress of the TeleSupport pilot phase and prospects for the next steps were discussed on 8 and 9 Nov 2006 at the PUSA complex, New Delhi. The stakeholders included major NGOs, national research and extension institutes of ICAR, media specialists and policymakers.

It was concluded that the 1-year pilot phase supported by the EU Economic Cross-Cultural Programme had been successful and that TeleSupport had the potential to significantly enhance the livelihoods of small and marginal farmers and women by providing access to need-based information.

Integrated use of the web-based tools that facilitate communication and make information systematically accessible on-line was seen as a strong underpinning point. The decentralised management of the information platform is innovative and allows rapid on-line availability of resources like videos, experts, and manuals in local language.

The meetings recommended wide exposure of the initiative and seeking synergies with key partners that can reinforce and contribute to future efforts.

The TeleSupport institutional model has 5 main components of stakeholders and activities that are linked in an integrated fashion:

1. Knowledge providers
2. Intermediaries
3. Users, including local level groups
4. Use of strategic web-based tools
5. Capacity development on Information Management and Content Production
6. Content development and adaptation

Lessons learnt during the pilot phase were:

- The various elements did produce the expected outcomes. The Good Practices were accepted as options for use by farmers, interaction between stakeholder groups has increased, web-tools are operational and capacity was developed. Outputs included some 6 videos in English and local language; 80 contact details for experts and x manuals online supporting descriptions of Good Practices. The Good Practice on Azolla, documented on video in Kerala, was adapted in a few weeks by women groups in West Bengal. This happened in an area where Azolla has been promoted for many years, but villagers were not aware of the range of potential uses of the plant.
- Awareness raising on web-based information management takes time. Shared and decentralised web-based tools are new in most parts of the world and time is needed to internalise the possibilities and fully use these, so follow-up workshops are needed.

- The interest of NGOs and individual experts and users to participate was huge; however research institutions tended to be less actively involved.
- The themes selected for the pilot phase (soil fertility, post harvest, integrated pest management, animal production/livestock, and the cross-cutting themes of gender and environment) need to be complemented to address the wide range of local information needs.

Key questions regarding the initiative that came up during the discussions were:

1. How is sustainability of TeleSupport assured?

The hosting of the platform is guaranteed for at least 10 years so the content remains accessible and can be updated by users. Additional funds are sought to strengthen the various components such as capacity development of NGOs and local groups, content development and tool enhancement.

TeleSupport is not directly involved in sustaining telecenters. It is now generally accepted that rural telecenters can only be sustainable if they provide good quality agricultural and non-agricultural information that farmers need and value. Only after some time farmers may be interested to pay for the services. TeleSupport aims to provide relevant content which can reach farmers in various ways. See also point 6.

2. What makes TeleSupport different from other initiatives?

The following points were identified:

- Unique focus on small and marginal farmers and women.
- Use of various modern web-based tools for communication and storing information in a shared platform.
- Decentralised management so organisations and experts can manage the information themselves.
- The tools make the information quickly available: documents and videos can be directly searched and uploaded.
- It provides a filter to information provided by partners. It provides more targeted answers as compared to searching website via engines like Google or basic Question and Answer services. The information is structured according to a basic agreed format. Moreover the Q&A and database together builds up a shared knowledge base.

3. What is a Good Practice? Should we also describe bad practices?

The definition of a Good Practice has been discussed and will be made publicly accessible on the website. Key elements are its environmental sustainability, positive effect on income or food security, and gender-sensitivity for small-scale farmers. TeleSupport will continue to document those practices that score high on these criteria e.g. avoiding harmful pesticides.

Participants at the meetings indicated that several 'bad practices' exist in Indian agriculture. These are not recommended practices by farmers and harm the crop, animal or environment often with indirect negative effects. The bad practices are used to address certain underlying problems; for example, pests or poor milk yield. TeleSupport tries to discourage the use of bad practices by providing Good Practices as solutions to problems. The discussion forum on the TeleSupport website can be used to discuss bad practices and point users to the Good Practices on that topic.

4. How is the quality of the information and Good Practices assured?

Quality assurance takes place in various ways and will evolve over time. At present NGOs take questions to experts in universities and research organisations who validate the content of the message.

Users can comment on the Good Practice so that the description changes following their feedback. In future, panels of experts can comment on Good Practices and this should lead to a reduction in the duplication of information. Underlying differences in approach may become clearer and farmers can be provided with the various options.

5. Problems of local users are wider than the topics now addressed by TeleSupport. What is the vision of TeleSupport?

In the pilot phase TeleSupport concentrated on a limited number of key priorities to set up and test the model. As this has been done successfully TeleSupport will now widen the topics and invites partners to participate.

Suggestions are to include the following topics:

- Horticulture, including details of buyers and retailers as well as market opportunities.
- Link to information on seed to cope with changing demands for new crops.
- Good Practices and other information on micro-credit and inputs.
- Information on non-farm employment possibilities.
- Water Management
- Marketing

6. How can local users access TeleSupport information since they don't all have internet?

A centre with internet access serves various villages. Information is downloaded in the telecenters and distributed to the villages using a laptop (Mobile telecenters).

Sustainability of the telecenters needs to be assured. Some women groups in Kerala already pay a monthly fee for connectivity.

Mobile phones are widely used and linkages with TeleSupport are recommended. Market information and rather simple information can be requested. Most information of Good Practices however requires interaction. TeleSupport pays attention to the institutional aspects since that seems crucial for success.

7. How is the institutional setting and what linkages are envisaged?

Already TeleSupport has signed MOUs for data sharing with 30 NGOs. Other NGOs and knowledge providers have expressed interest to join especially in using the platform for uploading their own Good Practices and videos as well as using the TeleSupport platform for their activities across India.

Existing linkages with KVKs are strong and these will be formalised in the next phase. Similarly, the present involvement of experts from research organisations and universities will be translated into more solid institutional collaboration. It is important to link up with local governments Gram Panchayats and this will be a priority for the future..

8. Who are the knowledge providers?

The knowledge captured can be good practices from communities, that have developed a GPs over time, as well as GPs from research institutes and universities who have specialised in this aspect. Especially district agric research groups have key info.

9. How does TeleSupport position itself towards other initiatives of e.g. ICAR?
ICAR wants to reorient activities so it addresses even more the problems of local farmers. Experience shows that this is difficult to achieve and new models are being looked for. TeleSupport hopes to provide a model for interaction that steers problem oriented research. It hopes to be able to link with, and add value to, initiatives by ICAR and others.

10. Media exposure

Participants recommended to focus on the production and marketing of the short videos for use on the internet and on television.

10. Next steps 2007-2010

With interested key partners an outline of joint activities in particular states/ regions and activities was made (see annex 2)

Some partners specialise in content development and can join directly. Other NGOs operate India-wide and selection of target areas to start interacting is required. Linkages with strategic partners for dissemination like IFFCO for reaching local communities can be explored.

It was suggested at the meetings that efforts should focus on marginal areas where several partners are already active and are interested to work together and share information. Targeted regions were Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, W.Bengal, Orissa, An overview of the content such as videos that partners have generated and can be shared as well as ongoing activities in the regions is proposed in order to build synergies.

Generally the proposed components for the follow-up phase include the following:

1. Development of content especially Good Practices in English and local languages.
2. Capacity development of 1) intermediary organisations, 2) knowledge providers and 3) local user groups.
3. Support for intermediary organisations and local users to access and use information and tools
4. Optimise web-tools for information storing and communication as well as adapt these to new user needs in intermediary organisations and local communities.

With interested partners proposals for implementation of the follow-up steps will be prepared. The TeleSupport Partnership Form for sharing information for development will be sent to all parties.

Annex:

1. Lists of participants 8 and 8 November 2006

Annex: 1 Lists of participants 8 Nov 2006

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