

Government needs to harness IT for innovative agriculture

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There appears to be a general consensus that the country's agriculture sector can do better with some encouragement, motivation to youngsters who are driven with a passion, and a dream to do something for the rural poor. "Ironically the government which keeps talking about encouraging youth to take up agriculture, does nothing to help us chip in," says Mr. R.M. Thiruchelvam an IT professional from Alampattu, Sivaganga district Tamil Nadu.

Several problems

Mr. Thiruchelvam left a lucrative job as well as business plans nine years ago to take up the cause of rural development. With the support of like-minded friends he and his team did four years of intensive study of the social, economic, and administrative problems that are wrecking rural India. The team designed a comprehensive web system, it-rural.com to provide information and communication to increase the "per capita earning" of villagers.

Specific knowledge

"The model disseminates site specific knowledge at the village level at no cost to farmers. It is an employer-employee model. So a local person is not going to own the knowledge centre." "It is designed to overcome typical constraints such as social, geographical, and commercial barriers that are prevalent across the world in taking technology to the grassroots," explains Mr. Thiruchelvam. It comprehensively addresses the key components of agricultural sector such as good quality and yield, better price realization to farmers, balanced production and strengthening institutional credit systems.

Lack of input

"There is no effective input validation available at the grassroots in the present system for rural activities, particularly farming. Information on demand forecast, cultivation procedures, input supply management, disease control, marketing, glut in production, desperate selling, impact of drought and flood are absent,"

he says. The team wanted to showcase the model on a large scale to prove its efficiency. Their hard work yielded results. The Andhra Pradesh Government provided an opportunity for them to carry out a pilot project in Pulivendala, Kadapa District, Andhra Pradesh. About 30 villages, 12 Panchayats, 40,000 people and 20,000 acres of agricultural land benefited. But the success lasted only for a short while. Sudden developments in the state political scene saw these youngsters grounded due to lack of financial support. In fact, for the past two years Mr. Thiruchelvan is running from one state to another to meet different officials and experts to explain and showcase his findings. He believes that this concept can definitely provide a key to unlock different problems in the rural sector. But sadly, he has been ignored or refused an appointment.

Ideal tool

“IT is an ideal tool today for addressing several glitches a farmer faces. We are very eager to get the Government interested in this.” But sadly we are not able to get any opening in the government circles. Recently I had to keep calling for an appointment with a Secretary to Government and literally begged his secretary to get me an appointment,” he says in a voice choked with emotion. The secretary initially granted him 20 minutes but shortened it to 10 minutes and rushed through his concept. “He asked me to contact the officials in his department but till date they have not responded,” he says with frustration and sadness. Can't he try to take this concept further with private funding agencies rather than depend on the Government?

Seems daunting

“In India, a major part of agriculture activities is still under Government control. To reach out to hundreds of farmers we need the Government's support and funding. Even at the state level we require the local University and the state agriculture departments' support. But getting it seems daunting. “If any Government is prepared to encourage us we are ready to join hands on a PPP model (public private partnership) as we are sure that this concept will benefit small farmers,” says Mr. Thiruchelvam hopefully. Despite several attempts by The Hindu, the Agriculture Secretary was not available for his comments on this proposal.

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