

## **Click and cultivate: Internet shows the way**

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Timely advice: Field officers taking a digital picture of a farmer's field to upload on portal and address his query.-Photo : Special Arrangement

One of the important reasons for the low level of agricultural knowledge dissemination from lab to land is lack of availability of appropriate extension technologies currently. Given the problems that extension workers and researchers face in facilitating direct contact with farmers due to physical distances involved and the lack of transportation needed for their mobility, application of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) offers good solutions for the problem.

### **Pilot basis**

An attempt was made to evolve an effective model called 'e-Velanmai' ('Velanmai' is a Tamil word meaning agriculture) for dissemination of agricultural information from a multidisciplinary team of scientists from the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University (TNAU) directly to farmers on a pilot basis in selected areas of the State. The model aimed to provide timely and appropriate technical advice to farmers on a need basis and was conceived and pilot tested by Dr. C. Karthikeyan, Principal Investigator and Associate Professor (Ag. Extension) and it is now being upscaled.

"The project is aimed to facilitate farmers in improving their productivity and standard of living. The overall objective is to provide quality, timely, farm-specific scientific advice with the support of ICT tools and agricultural scientists at the farmer's doorstep," says Dr. Karthikeyan. The pilot project was tested in three areas — Palar and Aliyar sub basins (dominated by resource rich plantation growers) of Coimbatore district, and Varahanadhi sub basin (dominated by resource poor vegetable growers) of Villupuram district.

### **Feasible**

The performance of the extension model in these two different scenarios was field tested and validated for its feasibility and based on the successful results obtained, the World Bank has supported upscaling the model to 26 different areas. "It is a demand driven, participatory extension approach," says Dr. Karthikeyan. It provides appropriate and timely agro advisory services by scientists to registered farmers using the Internet. Interested farmers pay a membership fee (Rs.50-150) based on their farm size to avail the service. The money collected is deposited in a bank account for ensuring self sustainability of the project. Those availing the service are considered as members and each person is provided a membership card containing his farm details and a record of experts' visit to his farm, problems observed, and technical advice given. Giving details as to how the system works, Dr. Karthikeyan explains: "A farmer makes a call on his mobile and registers his query. A field coordinator goes to the farmer's field and examines his crop status. In case the farmer needs advice on suitable crop variety, marketing, planting, spacing etc., advice is given on the spot by referring to the TNAU agri portal.

### **Advice**

If the problem relates to pest and diseases and their management, nutritional deficiency, weeds etc., advice is given based on a digital photo taken by the field coordinator and sent to concerned experts through Internet. The images are coded using the farmer's name and identity number. Experts diagnose the problem looking at the photos and offer solutions. These recommendations are downloaded and recorded in the membership card given to the members.

### **Time taken**

The average time taken for getting queries addressed is 1-3 hours. An overwhelming percentage of members feel that they are able to receive timely advice on the same day they raise the query to the field coordinator. Prior to the introduction of e-Velanmai project, many farmers stated that they had to depend on the shop keepers/dealers in their area for information.

But now they are able to access all information related to agriculture at their farm gate itself.

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