

IFA INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP on Effective Last-Mile Delivery

10-12 February 2010, New Delhi, India

OPENING REMARKS

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Opening Remarks by Rajiv Sinha
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IFA President, IFA Regional VP for South Asia and DG. The distinguished invited speakers, participants and the Task Force members and Patrick.

We are privileged to have such extensive and varied presence. Farmers organizations, international bodies Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, IRRI, CIMMYT, IFPRI, IPNI, IPI, IFDC, AGRA, ASA, WRENmedia and companies such as Agrium, Syngenta, Nokia, TCS, IFFCO, Tatachem and DSCL from across Africa and Asia.

I especially welcome and thank the representative of farmers' organization for joining us today.

This diverse audience gives us a unique opportunity to hear and explore new innovative approaches to improving last-mile delivery.

I would like say some words on the background for setting up the IFA Task Force on Effective Last-Mile Delivery:

A Task Force on Fertilizer Best Management Practices (FBMPs) was set up in 2006 and it completed its mandate in May 2009 after widespread discussions and consultations, including a two-day workshop in Brussels in March 2007. There were excellent contributions from organizations like IPNI and IPI, among others.

The outcome of this project was the development of the 'Global 4Rs Nutrients Stewardship Framework'. In brief, FBMPs can be described as the application of the right source (or product) at the right rate, right time and right place. Under this framework, the 4Rs convey how fertilizer application can be managed to achieve economic, social and environmental objectives.

The economic or the sustainable profit improvement dimension becomes critical for the small and marginal farmers.

The FBMPs are based on scientific principles. The application of these principles will vary widely depending on the specific cropping systems and the socio-economic context under consideration.

The Task Force summarized the guiding scientific principles for development of FBMPs for specific crops/regions.

These were published and widely circulated and made available to agencies including government, industries and industry associations for wider dissemination and utilization.

The Task Force recognizes that the key constraint remains the effective delivery of FBMPs, particularly in the developing regions such as South Asia, South-east Asia and Africa.

In this context it was decided that knowledge and technology transfer for wide adoption of FBMPs was a very challenging phase, particularly for the small-scale farming sector, and a new Task Force was established.

This workshop has now been organized to commence the discussions for suggestions, ideas and action plans for improving the knowledge transfer content and methodologies in developing countries. We will hear about new initiatives and models.

It is widely acknowledged that the current extension systems prevalent in the developing countries such as India, countries in Africa etc. have not lived up to the needs and requirements of the farming community.

This is evident from the declining crop productivity gains despite increase in the use of fertilizer, environmental problems and continuation of many traditional methods, ignoring nutrient balance as per requirement of the soil and adequate use of organic matter. Not only does this cast a shadow over the ability of these regions to meet the growing food needs of their population but it also traps the farmers in a cycle of poverty.

For example, there are an estimated 127 million cultivators in India with an average land holding of less than 5 acres. The agricultural growth in India declined in the recent years and the profitability growth decelerated since early 1990. There is huge weakness in the infrastructure and availability of quality inputs, including information. A national survey of farmers in India found that less than 40% of farmer households have access to information about modern techniques and inputs. In India, food inflation is running at 17.5%. Elsewhere also, the food prices are rising again after the dip in 2008.

The extension systems in Africa face major technical and logistics challenges as well.

Should there be a change of direction, of methodologies as we go forward?

Meanwhile there are some clear success factors established by examples from limited area practices:

- Engagement with the farmers requires dialogue and not one way communication.
- Location-specific technology/recommendations are essential, including crop-wise fertilizer recommendations, i.e. customization is vital for farmers to find information relevant. Interactive mode is the best.
- Peer farmer behaviour continues to be a major driver for change in practices in absence of sustained demonstrated performance through extension systems.
- Bundling of related weather and market information increases receptivity.
- Availability of proper agri inputs, including credit, is a crucial driver.

Keeping the limitations of the current methodology, one of the directions that could be considered by the Task Force is to examine how the rapid spread of communication technology could become the new fulcrum for the last-mile delivery of the real-time knowledge to the farmers and in meeting many of the success factors just described.

This is to, of course, supplement and not supplant physical contact with the farmer.

The extensive growth of mobile telephony in most of the developing countries, combined with low cost tariff now offers a unique and new platform for making the information widely and timely available. There has been some amount of focus using this medium for market information to the farmer, but not enough on the inputs side.

It provides a unique opportunity to deliver customized information and that too on an interactive basis.

Some limited initiatives have been undertaken by organizations such as IFFCO Kisaan Sanchar Limited, ITC, ISAP, etc. In our own company DSCL, we have also initiated a few call centres to provide information to the farmer.

However, these are still baby steps. We should be looking for a major transformation after decades in the manner in which real-time information and knowledge can be made available to the farmers.

There are plans by the government to bring millions of people on the banking net and thereby increase their financial inclusion using mobile telephony. Why not also agri knowledge transfer?

During this workshop, we have tried to include speakers who have done pioneering work in this direction. As an outcome of this workshop and of the Task Force proceedings, we at IFA can develop a blueprint for last-mile delivery of FBMPs through a combination of mobile telephony platform and some new physical delivery models. That could be a great step forward.

The blue print could cover how to create user-friendly knowledge content platforms. Can there be pooling of site- and crop-specific knowledge by input companies, governments, etc., including public/private partnerships? How to involve telecom operators in developing easy-to-use platforms? How to integrate with physical extension services, etc.? The key considerations should be: customized information, interactive mode and real-time responses.

One learning from interactions with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has been that we must simultaneously design success indicators and their measurement.

The role of fertilizer companies, national associations and IFA will need to be spelt out.

The next big challenge is how to make available properly trained and motivated manpower that can provide educated inputs whether through call centres or physically? In this context the initiative taken under the Cereal Systems Initiative for South Asia (CSISA) for initiating a Certified Crop Advisor programme in India deserves mention. Can this be repeated elsewhere? In fact the seeds for this were sown in the Brussels workshop during my interactions and it is great to see it coming on the ground with efforts of Achim Dobermann, J.K. Ladha, Luther Smith and, of course, David Bergvinson.

I earnestly request your free and frank thoughts and full participation to help us evolve a meaningful direction for benefiting millions of farmers across the Asian and African continents.