

Abstract of Poster Presentation:

The Virtual Academy for the Semi Arid Tropics- a case study of a process prototype for fostering drought preparedness among vulnerable communities

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Drought preparedness is recognized as the practical way to cope, and information is the key. There are few efforts to share information and advisory directly between experts and vulnerable communities. VASAT activities are designed to address such gaps using ICT's and take place in Niger and India. The Adarsha Mahila Samaikhya (AMS), an all -women federation of rural microcredit groups in India and the VASAT have jointly developed an ICT-based process prototype which has been tested successfully. This is an ongoing partnership, and we report here on joint studies carried out during July 2006-December 2008.

The AMS is an organization that functions in all the 21 villages of Addakal in south central India (16*2' N and 77*8' E population: 46280). This is a highly drought-prone region with little access to irrigation. Because of large scale outmigration, responsibility for almost all farming and livestock management is with the women.

Partners have jointly developed an information access arrangement in the AMS premises (minor LAN with internet access) 10 villages are provided by the AMS with local access centers (public). Landlines and mobile phones are used for voice and data/internet connectivity. The ISRO has set up a two-way video-conferencing facility here that connects to ICRISAT. The AMS leadership has identified and trained 30 members in the use of these arrangements.

Efforts to provide drought vulnerability assessment using satellite-derived information on seasonal vegetation and water balances did not meet the requirements of the AMS; the members wanted village-wise assessment and advisory which can be adjusted with rainfall through a season. A simpler water balance model adopted required significant volume of local data gathering and monitoring; the AMS provides rainfall data on a near-real time basis in an online page while ICRISAT developed the core baseline data set. The assessment is provided for every village in the form of color-coded maps. Advisory for crop management is provided via the video-conferencing and mobile phones. The model and the advisory system have been tested by the AMS through four seasons of rainfall.

A service such as this would be impractical without an ICT platform. To sustain it satisfactorily, ICRISAT set up a compact group with a clear focus on monitoring

incoming data and queries; it liaised with internal resources to generate advisory. The AMS members developed a small group that acquired basic science literacy and information facilitation skills. These two groups effectively linked the super specialists and the vulnerable farmers using ICT mediation, creating new opportunities for exchanges in the continuum from farmers to experts.

Scaling this up requires virtualization of specialist expertise among the research institutions, while the younger professionals and the lead community members need to engage through voice and data links on mobile telephony. ICRISAT now leads a wider consortium that is building such a model.