

## **The International Farmers Conference: Using mobile phones to tell stories and share knowledge**

[www.icarda.org/farmersconference](http://www.icarda.org/farmersconference)

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The International Farmers' Conference organized by the International Centre for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) brought together over fifty farmers and researchers from nine countries in Syria in May 2008. This event was one of six pilot projects of the CGIAR's ICT-KM program Knowledge Sharing in Research. It aimed to share and document farmers' knowledge and to bring to the attention of the wider scientific community the potential value of this knowledge for plant breeding. Setting demand-driven research priorities is key to increasing adoption and means making research a social process.

Participatory plant breeding is a way of working that strongly hinges on collaboration in research between scientists and farmers; a way of blending knowledge, experience, ideas, and practices of both groups to achieve something good and useful for improving agricultural productivity and the lives of people. But there is often a reluctance to work with farmers amidst doubts of the knowledge and experience that farmers may have which can be useful to research programs. There is also little opportunity for wider farmer-to-farmer sharing of knowledge and ideas. The Farmers' Conference addressed these issues by providing a platform for farmers to share their knowledge with scientists and other farmers.

Storytelling was chosen as the overall framework and proved to be an effective method to facilitate the sharing of knowledge both in terms of format and content. It reflects a format very close to the way farmers usually share their knowledge, at the same time allowing discussion of topics that might otherwise be considered too trivial for a conference.

To document the knowledge shared at the conference we produced one-minute video stories for 'viral' dissemination via participants' mobile phones. Together with traditional printed materials, the video stories were circulated at the conference and made available for easy download from the conference website in a format suitable for most cell phones. Viral dissemination, a term borrowed from marketing, here refers to the notion of giving users control over the distribution of the stories. These stories are now travelling throughout the region.

The conference was a single event that is concluded. An evaluation of its outcomes in terms of enhanced collaboration between farmers and researchers and among farmers, and the effectiveness of the tools used was performed in April 2009.

Three key lessons are:

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1. The limited internet access and broad band connections of the farmers turned out to be the weak link in the distribution strategy. A different approach for jump-starting the circulation of the cell phone videos should have been adopted to fully exploit the potential of already existing cell phone usage.
2. ICTs potentially facilitate communication and collaboration across distance between farmers and researchers. However, farmers' lack of access to ICTs remains a barrier to effective participation. Gender and age need to be given particular attention, when using ICTs to involve farmers in the research process.

As a solution we tried to use the conference as an opportunity to improve access to these technologies by supporting the sharing, at household and community level, of those technologies already available. As a follow-up project we are exploring funding possibilities for bringing 20 farming communities online, further increasing the stability of the network created at the conference.

3. Monitoring the spread of stories shared via cell phones remains a challenge. Beyond asking immediate clients for feedback, there is little evidence that these stories are actually travelling.

Additionally to graphically narrating the above, the poster also displays results from an access to technology survey conducted at the conference, visual social network analysis documenting the process of forming relationships before, during and after the conference, and stills from a how-to video explaining the process of virally distributing cell-phone videos.