



SUMMARY of VCBN- WEBINAR 3: “The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on agricultural value chains - What we can do to mitigate the impact! – *the impact on service delivery to different actors along the value chain*”

Date: 15 May 2020

Moderated by:

- Mr. Md. Rubaiyath Sarwar, Managing Director Innovision Consulting Private Limited and Chairperson VCB-N

Resource persons sharing different perspectives:

- Ms. Marie-Aude Even, Senior Regional Technical Specialist, Agronomy, IFAD, Asia Pacific
- Dr. Rasheed Sulaiman V., Director of the Centre for Research on Innovation and Science Policy, India
- Mr. Augustus Shemphang Suting, General Manager, Meghalaya Basin Management Agency (MBMA), OSD SCSTE and BRDC
- Mr. Phouthasinh Phimmachanh, Manager of CLICK KM4Dev and the Secretariat of Lao Farmer Network
- Mr. STUART MORRIS, Director, East-West Seed Knowledge Transfer
- Mr. Carl Larsen, Executive Secretary of GFRAS

(Biographies at the end of this document))

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LEARNINGS & INSIGHTS

Mr. Stuart Morris Director East West Seeds Knowledge Transfer

- Generally the intake of fruits and vegetables is far below recommended daily amounts (50% of recommended intake only). The COVID19 (C-19) crisis has re-enforced the importance of vegetables in human consumption, yet disrupted supply chains have cut off many people from fresh vegetables and fruits.
- In many countries agricultural extension services are exempted from lock-down measures and allowed to go to the field yet social distancing does not allow group gatherings like group or peer learning activities. The same is true for East West Seeds, extension officers have to approach family by family thus the overall outreach is very limited.
- Particularly perishables like fresh vegetables do fetch much lower prices as retail markets are closed or operations limited, hotels/restaurants closed and in general people are spending less of their daily expenses on food. Exception is Cambodia where due to closure of the border with Vietnam the import of Vietnamese vegetables has stopped and local vegetables fetch higher prices than before the crisis.
- The real test will be the coming production season; farmers have less investment capital due to decreased sales thus income. Moreover, the uncertainties about the future market re-enforces reluctance to invest in the future crop. In which case, when farmers are not able or not wanting to take the risk to invest in the next season's crop, the current health crisis can potentially turn into a food crisis.
- East West Seeds works with key farmers, and having model or demonstration farms complemented by extension agents which are merely trained community volunteers. The latter are very often women, who despite limited rewards or remuneration work efficiently, as they are self-motivated through finding fulfilment and respect from the community in taking up an extension role.
- As a specific response to the crisis East West Seeds has stepped up efforts to use social media that were lingering for a while already.
 - Some promising digital communication and/or extension approaches that are being piloted include:
 1. Facebook, particularly in case Farmer-to-farmer based as peer to peer communication enhances trust. In Nigeria and India the number of Facebook users for these channels has doubled in very short period.
 2. Following a "real pilot" farm on Facebook, showing the full cropping cycle and showing regular updates of the pilot farm, not only showing successes but also the challenges and mishaps fostering evidence based learning and enhancing trust levels.
 3. 4-5 minutes webinars focussing on specific technical subjects (Philippines) and
 4. Digital training offering a platform where uploaded training materials can be downloaded data free (an agreement with telecom providers) and guiding sessions by experts are organized parallel to the self-learning.

Although this is the digital era, one should not forget or neglect the effectiveness of good old printed materials like technical leaflets or radio broadcasting and other tried and tested methods that are still preferred by many farmers! Also radio broadcasting like East-West does for example in Nigeria (in local language) can be a powerful communication / extension tool that farmers often take further by using recorded programmes in further peer-to-peer group sessions.

Mr. Phouthasinh Phimmachanh, secretary to the Lao Farmers Network – LFN, affiliate to the Asian Farmers Association – AFA,

- Laos is experiencing a complete lockdown and there are no exceptional measures for food related business, farmers have in many cases lost complete harvests, with substantial financial losses.
 - The closure of the complete tourism sector (hotels/restaurants), traditionally a dominant market for fruits, vegetables, meat, fish, eggs etc. has lowered demand for food substantially. In addition local retail and wet markets have seen a sharp reduction in clients and thus sales.
 - Some farmers ended up in such bad conditions that food aid is necessary for survival of their families.
 - The current situation is unprecedented and farmers never experienced such situation before, the need for support and guidance is urgent. As past value chain linkages and arrangements completely collapsed, farmers are desperate in finding new buyers and transportation means to bring their produce to markets. This is an immediate need particularly in the case of perishables as many farmers lose money on a daily basis.
 - Farmer Groups/ organisations (FO) know their members and know how to reach them and know what their members' needs are for information and services. They therefore are very effective partners in decentralizing service provision as they can channel demand and customize service offers effectively.
 - FOs have shown to be very fast and efficient in dissemination information, for example regarding prevention measures during the COVID-19 crisis.
 - FOs and their Federations also a role to play in advocating for the situation of farmers and their needs particularly in these times when their situation requires special attention and action.
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Dr Rasheed Sulaiman from the Agricultural Extension South Asia (AESAs) member of GFRAS,

- The lack of clarity around the precise rules and restrictions on movements of goods, as well as the fear for the disease itself, has hampered input supply to producers and transportation of food from producers to consumers, despite the government endorsed exemptions from the lockdown for the agricultural sector.
 - The larger challenge evolving is the reduction in food intake as surveys (10 States in India) show a sharp reduction in food consumption (up to 68% less food intake). This again will particularly hit the poor that have already a weak nutritional status.
 - Some FOs that had access to digital means have benefitted from the crisis and they were better equipped to cope with the consequences and could continue business, link to external parties and/or request for external support through social media.
 - ICT has not to be seen as a Panacea for solving extension challenges; ICT solutions are at best a supporting tool and cannot be used in isolation.
 - ICT is only effective in extension if paralleled or complemented by social capital in the form of collaboration with FOs and aligned with government structures.
 - An excellent example can be found in Maharashtra where 265,000 farmers being members of farmers-clubs use WhatsApp for exchange and learning purposes.
 - Also platforms that offer brokering services, providing an inter-face where organized farmers, consumers and regulators meet and can do business are piloted successfully for example in Kerala. The app has an online payment function allowing for actual on-line trade. Due to the coordination by the government and the registration of users, the agreed upon arrangements and deals are legitimized through this platform.
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Ms. Marie-Aude Even, Senior Regional Technical Specialist, Agronomy for Asia and the Pacific at IFAD

- The COVID-19 crisis has forced the agricultural extension world to reflect on past practices and respond quickly to new needs coming from the field. This has sometimes played a role in extension services who had to quickly identify field needs, help resolve logistic issues, get engaged in adoption of COVID-19-safety measures in agriculture and support farmers adapt to new constraints and uncertainty. This has put also more urgency on the adaptation of approaches in service delivery for some core principles, in particular when addressing two core challenges in agricultural extension i) nobody should be left out and ii) bridging the last mile.
 - Most IFAD projects have extensively expanded the use of various ICT based or supported approaches such as SMS services, hotlines, GIS, ICT platforms, E commerce platforms etc. IFAD has also recently adopted an 'ICT for development' strategy and is stepping up investments in last generations ICT tools for marketing, finance and extension, also in response to COVID-19.
 - However, as IFAD does prioritize poor farming households that live and farm in remote areas, with sometimes no internet or phone. The inclusiveness of ICT based solutions is a serious point for attention. To address such issues, two major strategies are being taken: i) use of other media such as radio and public media; ii) crucial role of community resource persons, lead farmers and decentralized extension agents who can have access to such tools and reach out to last mile farmers.
 - As this crisis is an unprecedented event also the agricultural advisory and extension world was taken by surprise and did not have a readymade response available. Information and alert system and Networks and linkages to the field are essential to formulate / develop adequate responses building on up-to date data and voices of farmers.
 - The crisis has accelerated the evolvement of customized and inter-active ICT tools to support extension efforts.
 - ICT will play an increasingly important role, to apply ICT tools digital literacy is becoming more and more vital and needs to be promoted.
 - ICT solutions cannot be isolated solutions, but should be paralleled with enhancing social capital and physical decentralization of extension services through partnering with mentioned FOs and/or employing village level extension workers and para-professionals.
 - Rural Advisory services cannot be developed and delivered in a vacuum, but should be aligned and embedded in government efforts and policies. Government should lead, coordinate and endorse. Such coordination efforts (COVID-19 task force etc..) has played a key role to quickly collate needs, identify best practices and encourage collective actions from various actors, including farmers organizations and private sector but also civil society at large. This is even more important in times of crisis and urgency. At the level of Development Partners, coordination needs to be prioritised, like for example the UN Task Force and Coordination between the 3-Rome based UN agencies: IFAD, FAO and WFP.
 - In responding to the crisis and developing mitigation measures, but also to develop a more resilient agricultural sector, engagement of the broader community and public is essential. The pineapple challenge, which engaged the public in the channelling of left-over pineapple stock to consumers, is a great example.
 - Farmers' organizations have played a key role in delivering critical services on the field and raising the voices of the farmers and advocating for further support.
 - There is still a huge need for institutional development and capacity building to prepare for agile and inclusive response to a next crisis. In rural advisory services, efficient business models using Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) are required to go to scale and to cover the last mile.
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**Mr. Augustus Suting, General Manager Inclusive supply chain and enterprise development
Meghalaya Basin Management Agency (MBMA)**

- Since 2017 the Meghalaya Directorate of Agriculture has established *Agri-Response -Centres* which during the COVID-19 crisis showed to be instrumental in linking food (over) supply to food shortages / demand. The Centres offer brokering services in a situation where there is food over-supply at rural level, while there are food shortages at urban levels. The Centre coordinates and brokers linkages and supply arrangements and as all parties are registered with the Directorate, deals are legitimate and safeguarded by the legislator.
 - WhatsApp groups are operating around typical services like rural finance, market linkages or advisory services, effectively linking demand to supply.
 - As government extension officers are limited in their outreach the services of village based para-professionals like village vets become more crucial.
 - Because of the limited access to external inputs the village para-professionals encourage the production of inputs from local sources like feed stock, organic fertilizer or insecticides. They also encourage improved post-harvest technologies like improved packaging and transportation that avoids quality loss or damage is promoted.
 - Further capacitating and professionalizing the para-professionals is an on-going effort, yet in the crisis the model has proven its value and has shown to enhance the resilience of local production systems.
 - The strong and efficient line linkages between government offices from State level down to community and self-help group level have become of utmost importance during the COVID-19 crisis, especially their involvement in arranging the movement of goods and services from places of over-supply to places of shortage. In the COVID-19 situation, during which movement from District to District and Block to Block is heavily restricted oversight and coordination at State level is crucial.
 - At the lowest level, for example through Self-Help Groups; needs are channelled upwards to the District level and from there to the control room of the Task Force at State level. At the State level, needs are matched with supply (or offers) and they communicate down the line about the arrival of goods or services at their destinations. The system assures brokering of demand and supply, arranges logistics and at the same time legitimizes movements of goods and services.
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Mr. Carl Larsen, Executive Secretary GFRAS

- Not the fear for the disease itself but the measures like lock downs or other restrictions that are installed to contain the pandemic, cause major problems for the agricultural sector.
 - All governments juggle between the level of restrictions and closing down society and the need to safeguard food security. The different approaches per country should be duly assessed and compared on effectiveness and lessons should be captured for future crises. On the basis of the lessons learned from this crisis, future strategies and tool boxes to support governments in future crises could be distracted.
 - The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the development and application of digital tools for the delivery of extension services. At field level numerous pilots are on-going, applying ICT in extension efforts. It is crucial to capture lessons and analyse efficiency of piloted tools and approaches. GFRAS has a role to play in this.
 - Organized farmers have proven to be better able to respond to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis than farmers that are not organized.
 - The core challenge to rural advisory services is to cover the last mile in a cost-efficient manner, especially in areas that are not digitally connected.
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- The rural extension sector should search for new partners that can assist in scaling and bridging the last mile: telecom providers and / or financial service providers (like MPesa in Kenya) could be valuable partners in scaling extension efforts to allow for national coverage.
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POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

The third VCB-N Webinar on the impact of the COVID-19 crises on extension services along the supply chain revealed some thought provoking and strategic insights and lessons;

- Farmers have less investment capital due to decreased sales and thus income. Moreover, the uncertainties about the future market re-enforces the reluctance to invest in the future crop. In the above case when farmers are not able or not wanting to take the risk to invest in the next season's crop the current health crisis can potentially turn into a food crisis. This is a particularly dangerous development for the access to and availability of essential foods like vegetables and fruits that bolster the human immune system, notably for the poor.
- In cases where complete lockdowns appeared and no exception measures were announced for food related business, farmers have in many cases dumped complete harvests while withholding the rural population of necessary food supplies.
- The COVID-19 crisis and its impacts are unprecedented also for farmers, who also do not have prior experiences in how to deal or cope with a situation such as COVID-19. External guidance and support is necessary.
- Due to the worsening economic situation and future outlook the poor are minimizing their expenses and will particularly economize on daily food intake, risking a worsening nutritional intake and increasing numbers of malnutrition.
- ICT should not be seen as a Panacea for solving extension challenges; ICT solutions are a supporting tool and cannot be used in isolation.
- ICT is only effective in extension if paralleled or complemented by social capital in the form of collaboration with FOs and aligned with government structures.
- ICT platforms offer the possibility for Farmer Groups and Private Sector to connect and do deals while involvement of the government as coordinator and legislator can at the same time legitimize the digital deal making. Such service brokering is successfully piloted in India (Maharashtra, Kerala).
- Peer-to-peer learning is effective due to the high trust levels amongst peers as compared to expert-farmer relationships.
- Rural extension services have to adopt decentralized outreach systems that combine ICT supporting techniques with building social capital through strengthening the organization of producers and producers – buyers – regulator linkages.
- Engaging community level actors that are duly capacitated to deliver extension messages and facilitate (peer-) learning like village extension workers, village vets or other para-professionals, is seen as pivotal in bridging the last mile in extension service delivery.
- In scaling rural advisory services, from projects with limited geographical coverage to national programmes with nation-wide coverage, business models using effective Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) are required, as they are able to cover the last mile.
- The current learning and developed models for more resilient rural advisory mechanisms and systems, should not only take into account the current crisis but also future crises including the impact of climate change.

- The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the development and application of digital tools for the delivery of extension services. At field level numerous pilots are on-going that are applying ICT in extension efforts. It is crucial to capture lessons and analyse efficiency of piloted tools and approaches.
- The COVID-19 crisis has proven that organized farmers are much more resilient and able to respond to and cope with the crisis than farmers that are not organized. This evidence is hoped to be a stimulus for farmers that are not yet organized to get organized.
- Innovative partnerships with for example telecom providers are essential to bring rural advisory services to scale and bridge the last mile at national levels. Business-based models, involving government and private sector stakeholders, should be leading such partnerships

THANK YOU

NEXT WEBINAR

VCB-N WEBINAR 3: “ The impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on (trans-boundary) agro-commodity chains and the role of leading agro-corporates in mitigating impacts and shaping path-ways for a more resilient agro business sector”

DATE: 28th of May 2020 @ 14.00 PM Dhaka time

Don't miss it!

BIOGRAPHIES RESOURCE PERSONS



Mr. Md. Rubaiyath Sarwar, Managing Director Innovision Consulting Private Limited and Chairperson VCB-N

Md. Rubaiyath Sarwar is a specialist in design, management and evaluation of market driven solutions to poverty challenges. His works builds on the premise that the multidimensional challenges of poverty can be tackled more sustainably through collaborative and mutually reinforcing commercial and social benefits among the private sector, NGOs and the government agencies. He is the co-founder and Managing Director of Innovision Consulting, an international consultancy with its bases in Dhaka, Bangladesh and London, United Kingdom.

Over the last 16 years, Rubaiyath has worked for major DFID, USAID, SDC, EU, GIZ, IFAD projects in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, Philippines, Somalia, SriLanka and

Yemen on solving growth, employment, and inclusiveness challenges in agriculture, health, industries, finance, water, sanitation, hygiene and nutrition sectors.

Rubaiyath is serving as the Chairman of the Value Chain Capacity Building Network (VCB-N) for The Asia and the Pacific Region. VCB-N is founded with grant from International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) to build a regional resource pool of experts for value chains and market systems development projects. Rubaiyath founded Desperately Seeking Development Expert (DSDE) which is

the largest platform of development professionals in Bangladesh. With over 13,000 members, DSDE plays an influential role in ideation, research, placement, discussion, dialogue and advocacy on development agenda in Bangladesh. Rubaiyath also founded D2, a data analytics company for development research and Baggitude, an online retail channel for trendy bags that are primarily made of sustainable materials. Rubaiyath is completed his BBA and MBA from the Institute of Business Administration (IBA), University of Dhaka. Rubaiyath is an Acumen fellow from Bangladesh.



Ms. Marie-Aude Even, Senior Regional Technical Specialist, Agronomy, IFAD, Asia Pacific

Marie-Aude Even works for the International Fund for Agricultural Development as a senior regional technical specialist for Agronomy, covering Asia Pacific. She is based in New Delhi. She is an agronomist specialized in agro-economy and international agricultural development and policy. Prior joining IFAD, she managed projects and initiatives on agricultural development for FAO and the French cooperation in various countries. She also worked as a policy analyst for FAO, preparing outlook report and strategy on gender in agriculture in Africa and for the Center for studies and foresight of the French Ministry of Agriculture on international food security issues.



Dr. Rasheed Sulaiman V., Director of the Centre for Research on Innovation and Science Policy, India

Dr. Rasheed Sulaiman V. is Director of the Centre for Research on Innovation and Science Policy (www.crispindia.org) in India (since 2006). He leads AESA He leads the AESA (Agricultural Extension in South Asia) Network (www.aesanetwork.org) and is a member of the Board of the Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS).

Previously he worked as a Senior Scientist at the National Centre for Agricultural Economics and Policy Research at the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR). He has expertise in agricultural extension systems and policy and has worked on applications of agricultural innovation systems. His research also covers the role of the private sector in extension, developing new approaches to reaching rural women and

evaluation of ICTs in agriculture. Dr. Sulaiman holds a Ph.D. in Agricultural Extension from the Indian Agricultural Research Institute, New Delhi



Mr. Augustus Shemphang Suting, General Manager, Meghalaya Basin Management Agency (MBMA), OSD SCSTE and BRDC

Mr. Augustus Shemphang Suting works for the Meghalaya Basin Management Agency (MBMA) which is the Implementing Agency for the IFAD Funded Project “ Megha Lamp – Meghalaya Livelihood and Access to Markets Project “ as the General Manager looking after the Inclusive Supply Chain and Enterprise Development Component of the Project. He is based in Shillong, Meghalaya. A mechanical engineer by profession is being deputed by Government of Meghalaya for this Project. In addition to this Project he is also holding the post of Officer on Special Duty (OSD) looking after two

government agency namely the State Council of Science Technology and Environment (SCSTE) which deals with Popularisation of Science and Technology in the State and the Bio Resource Development Centre (BRDC) which looks after bio conservation efforts in the state and also assist the Meghalaya State Rural Livelihood Society (MSRLS) for linking the SHGs product to the market. Prior to this assignment he had worked as a Project Manager, Manager Technical Services and Project Director of the erstwhile Meghalaya Rural Development Society (MRDS) which was an IFAD assisted Livelihood Improvement Project for the Himalayas (MLIPH). Prior to joining the government services he had also worked in the North Eastern Hills University (NEHU) as Senior Technical Assistant and in the Meghalaya Industrial Development Corporation (MIDC) as Project Manager looking after the Meghalaya Bamboo Chips Factory.



Mr. Phouththasinh Phimmachanh, Manager of CLICK KM4Dev and the Secretariat of Lao Farmer Network

Mr. Phouththasinh Phimmachanh is the manager of CLICK KM4Dev and manages the Secretariat of Lao Farmer Network since beginning of the network in 2014 and Manager of CLICK KM4Dev, a social enterprise on knowledge management for development since 2013. Phouththasinh worked with Helvetas on knowledge management for an agriculture extension project 2005-2012. He holds a bachelor of agriculture and a master in development studies. Since the COVID19 pandemic, Phouththasinh has been gathering impact of the virus and needs from small holder farmers relevant actors in values chains in responding to the impact. Thus he would like to share the information and encouraging relevant stakeholders in help the farmers in responding to the crisis in short, medium and longer term.



Mr. STUART MORRIS, Director, East-West Seed Knowledge Transfer

STUART studied horticulture in Merrist Wood College and earned an MSc in International Development from the Royal Agricultural University in the UK. Having worked in agricultural development for more than 20 years Stuart has solid knowledge and expertise in project management, strategy development, and technical expertise in developing inclusive, market driven agricultural value chains. Stuart has worked with East-West Seed for 8 years; starting in Myanmar where he established the company's pre-commercial knowledge transfer activities. Since 2016 Stuart has served as the Director of East-West Seed Knowledge Transfer since 2016. Based in Chiang Mai, Thailand he supports precompetitive knowledge transfer in Cambodia, India, Myanmar, Philippines, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda and Bangladesh.

East-West Seed (EWS) has 35 years of experience in market-oriented plant breeding for vegetable seeds in the tropical lowlands. Working in emerging economies, EWS has a unique focus on smallholder farmers, who are the main clients of the company. The

company has played an important role in catalysing the development of vibrant vegetable sectors through the introduction of improved varieties better adapted to local markets and agronomic conditions. The privately owned company produces a wide portfolio of hybrid and open pollinated seeds. With lead positions in Asia and rapid expansion in Africa and Latin America, East-West Seed is now the 10th largest vegetable seed company in the world. Recognizing that farmers need access to quality seeds and knowledge on how to grow crops, EWS has supported intensive farmer training programs since 2000 - as an essential core to its business model. The company's sustainable solution to market development has been recognized through the Access to Seed Index. In addition, Simon Groot, the founder of the company, was awarded the 2019 World Food Prize. This recognized his transformative role which empowered millions of smallholder farmers to earn greater incomes through enhanced vegetable production; benefitting hundreds of millions of consumers with greater access to nutritious vegetables for healthier diets. To ensure that the company's pre-commercial activities are most effectively geared towards benefiting smallholder farmers the company created a non-profit foundation ('East-West Seed Knowledge Transfer') dedicated to improving on-farm skills and innovation.



Mr. Carl Larsen, Executive Secretary of GFRAS

Carl Larsen is the Executive Secretary of GFRAS he has 30 years experience in the field of international development. Carl has been working with different trades of agriculture innovation systems from research over education to extension. As a project manager and consultant he has extensive field experience from Africa and Asia with several longterm postings and numerous short-term assignments. Carl has been working for FAO, World Bank, EU, USAID, CGIAR and Danida. He holds a PhD and an MSC in tropical animal husbandry from Copenhagen University as well as an MPA from Copenhagen Business School.