

Kisan Call Centres: Bridging the Gap between the Farmers and Technology Assessment

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ICT connects people, generates more trade of goods and services across the globe, and increases access to information and knowledge. In the developed world, the ICT revolution has affected every sphere of life and has been of immense benefit to the people. In India for example, information exchange by electronic means has revitalized the role of extension services in providing information, education and decision-making assistance to agricultural producers. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) refers to systems for producing, storing, sending and retrieving digital files (Bartlett, 2002).

These files can contain text, sounds and images, both still and moving. Information and communication technologies, and particularly the Internet, are transforming all human activities dependent on information, including those in rural areas. Though information technology and communication technology were developed independently, they are greatly fused together to produce a new information environment commonly referred to as Information and Communication Technology (I.C.T). Information and communication technology (ICT) (e.g., mobile phone, fixed-line tele-phone, home computer, and Internet) have become an integral part of modern life in all societies.

To harness the potential of ICT in Agriculture, Ministry of Agriculture took a new initiative by launching the scheme "Kisan Call Centres (KCCs)" on January 21, 2004 aimed at answering farmers queries on a telephone call in farmers own dialect.

These call Centres are working in 14 different locations covering all the States and UTs. This Scheme provides agriculture related information to the farming community through toll free telephone lines.

A countrywide common eleven digit number 1800-180-1551 has been allotted for Kisan Call Centre. The number is accessible through all mobile phones and landlines of all telecom networks including private service providers. Replies to the farmers' queries are given in 22 local languages. Calls are attended from 6.00 am to 10.00 pm on all seven days of the week at each KCC location.

It uses a backend data support system, which is inbuilt into the overall MIS (Management Information System). KCC enables farmers to have direct discussions with the subject matter experts who are able to analyze the problem effectively and provide the solution directly. The MIS software captures callers' details and specifications of the query which helps in analysing area-wise and crop-wise details within a time space framework and provides preventive, advance action solutions. It also identifies pest attacks in any particular geographical area and the information collected is provided to the State Agriculture Department for taking timely action by broadcasting on television, radio and other mediums. With the increase in choices of farm inputs, pesticides, herbicides, high yielding varieties of seeds, a farmer today requires guidance of expert agriculturists more than anything else. Someone with whom they can share their crop related issues and learn preventive easures.

The Kisan Call Center established in the state functions from 7am to 7pm every day. It comprises a 15-seater computerized answering system working in two shifts, i.e., 7am to 1pm and 1pm to 7pm. The major topics handled by KCC experts are as follows:- Disease and pest control for different crops grown in the region, Good agricultural practices, livestock management, fishery, etc. Best practices in agriculture

in the state as well as of other states, Crop related information in agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry aromatic plants, spices, plantation crops, cash crops, etc. Vermi-compost, organic farming, including organic plant protection, etc. Information on HYV seeds and nutrient management for different crops, Market related information for different crops in the state. Farmer support programmes which are being implemented by the government of Madhya Pradesh and Agriculture related information that impacts farmers, farming practices, etc.

Recently KCCs have been further revamped by consolidation and appointing a new service provider for KCC namely IFFCO Kisan Sanchar Limited (IKSL) through competitive bidding process to set up state of the art KCCs at 14 identified locations. The restructured KCCs are now more professional with the following technological innovations (Annexure VI): (a) Voice/Media Gateways (IPPBX based decentralized system). (b) Dedicated MPLS leased line network with dedicated bandwidth. (c) Call barging. (d) SMS to caller farmers providing a gist of advisories given to them on phone. (e)

Voice mail system for recording farmer's queries during idle time of KCC or during call lines busy, with provision for call back to the caller. (f) Soft phones in every personal computer with caller ID facility. (g) Up scaling the knowledge of CCAs by way of providing latest versions of guide books and booklets issued by the State Agricultural Department or the Agricultural Universities. Facility of video conferencing of each KCC for interaction of KCC agents with the Divisional/Zonal Level Officers of the State Agriculture and allied departments as well as on line monitoring for the working of KCCs. h) Provision for registering the farmers for receiving SMS messages on agri-advisories and mandi prices of different commodities as per their priority.

The Kisan Call Centre works on two levels. At the first level, replies/solutions are provided to farmers' queries instantaneously by experts. At the next level, the queries are analysed so that area- specific analysis can be done based on which timely information could be disseminated to farmers through TV, radio etc., to caution or overcome possible damage to agricultural crops or livestock.