



Arming the foot soldiers of rice science

The critical role of agriculture professionals in helping poor farmers increase their productivity cannot be overemphasized. They are the foot soldiers that bring rice science to places where it is needed most. In the war against poverty, these men and women carry with them the ultimate weapon against poverty: knowledge. Thus, the Certified Crop Adviser (CCA) program has been set up in India, through the catalytic role of IRRI, to establish the standards for knowledge, experience, and competency in agriculture for efficient and effective work in agricultural development.

South Asia is home to 40% of the world's poor and nearly half a billion people subsist on less than US\$1 a day. But, a nagging question goes with this: How can they be helped to uplift themselves from abject poverty?

To meet this challenge, IRRI, in collaboration with the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT), International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), IRRI Fund Singapore, and numerous public, private, and international partners, in 2009 launched the Cereal Systems Initiative for South Asia (CSISA), an umbrella program supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the United States Agency for International Development.

CSISA comes at a crucial time for key nations in the region to assist in their struggle to boost grain supplies in the wake of growing demand and strained natural resources. Building on past cereal research achievements in the public and private sector, CSISA has a clear target in mind: to produce an additional 5 million tons of grain

per year and increase the income of 6 million poor rural households by at least \$350 per year.

Strengthening the frontline

CSISA recognizes the critical role of frontliners—the agriculture professionals. They interact with farmers in the field, communicate the best technologies and management practices, and guide farmers in decision-making; hence, the birth of the CCA program in India.

CCA is a voluntary professional certification program, which was initially offered by the American Society of Agronomy (ASA) in the U.S. and Canada for field agronomists, extension agents, and crop consultants, among other agricultural practitioners.

India is the first country outside North America where this program is being extended, under the leadership of Dr. J.K. Ladha, IRRI principal scientist and representative for India.

Under CSISA, IRRI partnered with the ASA to establish an international CCA program in India through a memorandum of understanding (MOU) in March 2009.

Prior to this, Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana, had signed an MOU with the ASA and IRRI in February 2009 for technical and academic inputs to the India CCA program.

“IRRI's role was to facilitate and catalyze these innovative changes,” said Dr. Ladha. “The vision has been for the CCA program to be self-sustaining. Thus, a local partner to carry out the program in India was needed.”

After a round of consultations, the Indian Society of Agribusiness Professionals (ISAP) became that local partner. ISAP administers and implements certifications through a formal licensing agreement between the ASA and ISAP, and between IRRI and ISAP during the first quarter of 2010. Currently, IRRI is helping ISAP in its initial years to promote the program.

Eligibility to be a CCA

To become a CCA, a candidate must pass a comprehensive exam based on four core competency areas of agriculture: nutrient management, soil and water management, pest management, and crop management. Preferably, he/she must have a degree in agriculture (bachelor of science in agriculture) with two years' experience working with farmers. However, candidates with 10 years of basic education and 2 years in college can also take the exam as long as they have worked with farmers for at least 4 years.

Performance objectives

The keys to an effective CCA program are appropriate performance objectives (POs), which are composed of four indispensable modules of Indian agriculture: nutrient management, soil and water management, pest management, and crop management. These modules were further divided into different competency areas necessary for agricultural professionals to know in guiding farmers to increase productivity.

The PO document has been developed by a team of 33 experts. The ASA and IRRI provided all the support in finalizing the PO document during a 3-day workshop in New Delhi in May 2009. Each competency area has been validated by 45 professionals from agri-input organizations, academe, and among extension workers to ensure that the CCA exam

truly tackles agricultural practices within the Indian context.

“Moreover, we want the PO document to be always on a par with innovations in crop science,” said Dr. Ladha, who is the current and the first India CCA board chair. “So, it will be updated from time to time as need arises.” The India CCA program is guided by a board, which comprises senior officials of the private and public sector, NGOs, and international organizations.

The first batch of CCAs

The pilot exam for the India CCA took place in August 2010 in New Delhi. Out of 22 candidates, 19 passed and were awarded certificates from the ASA. Then, another exam, in December 2010, was conducted at three locations—New Delhi, Hyderabad, and Chandigarh, where 85 candidates took the exam.

The CCA program is recognized by the public and private sector around the world as a tool to enhance and upgrade one's knowledge in agriculture. The certification not only prepares the extension work force to do its job more efficiently and effectively, but it also provides better job opportunities in multinational organizations.

And, most of all, CCA certification helps guarantee that this new breed of crop advisers has attained a level of knowledge and experience and is most qualified to work in the field with farmers, who are in dire need of the advisers' expertise. It is with great hope that the India CCA program translates into profitable productivity in farmers' fields and uplifts those farmers from abject poverty. 🍌