Coping with drought, the e-way

By K. Venkateshwarlu

MOOSAPET (MAHBUBNAGAR DT), MARCH 7. Coping with drought using hi-tech Information and Communication Technology (ICT) gizmos? Sceptics may dismiss it as a yet another truant played on dryland farmers, much like the erratic rain they are so used to.

But the local Aadarsha Welfare Society — a federation of women's micro-credit societies of the backward Adakkal mandal, ICRISAT and AP Rural Livelihood Programme (APRLP), have come together to prove the sceptics wrong and to show that the twain of drought and IT after all, shall meet. It may not induce rain but provide fairly accurate information of when it is going to come, a critical input for the farmer.

They have launched an Information Hub on the sprawling campus of the Society off the Hyderabad-Bangalore highway, that promises to empower the dryland farmer with advance weather information and drought mitigation strategies ranging from cropping pattern to better management of soil and scarce water resource. At the click of a button, the farmer can now know the duration of rain, the weather changes and the crops he can raise in adverse conditions. In a way the Hub lends a hi-tech touch to the model campus where the women groups (5000 members with a Rs. 3.5-crore corpus) successfully run a highway restaurant and a super bazar.

The Hub comprises a VSAT set, two computers with Internet connectivity, all provided by International Crop Research Institute for Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT). The APRLP is expected to install two more computers. At present, besides information on weather, a compact disc is being played on the drought coping strategies prepared by ICRISAT and translated into Telugu by B R Ambedkar Open University (BRAOU).

Impressed by this ICT project, the eminent agriculture scientist, M. S. Swaminathan, had suggested to the ICRISAT launch of a virtual university. The ICRISAT and the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation are now collaborating on setting up the country's first, Semi Arid Tropics - Virtual University (SAT-VU) with Central Hub at ICRISAT.

"In another two months time, the hub at Moosapet will become a full-fledged one equipping the dryland farmer with all necessary information on drought and ways of coping with it," said V. Balaji, Head, Information Systems Unit.

According to William Dar, Director-General of ICRISAT, the main aim of the Hub was to provide the resource-poor farmers with, "information that can help them to reduce or overcome the effects of droughts."

True to the expectations, the women members of self-help groups that formed the federation (Samakhya) choused that the hub, "will help us a lot." "With advance information, we will be in a better position, minimising crop failures," said Chousta, secretary of the Aadarsha Mahila Samakhya. But a preliminary report of a survey done by the Society, on the kind of information the farmers and their families required to be put on the Net, health, education and market for farm produce took precedence over farming/cropping in drought.

"They wanted information on health. Specifically women wanted to know more about gynaecological problems and diseases affecting children. In the area of education, they were keen on career opportunities for children", said Ravi Kumar, CEO of the Society. Mr. Balaji said scepticism about information on farming and drought would be there initially. With increasing use, the hub will become a credible source.

Even otherwise, anticipating the demand, efforts are on to get the telemedicine linkup between CARE Hospital in Hyderabad and the Government Headquarters Hospital at Mahabubnagar extended to the Hub here. As for education, a tie-up is on the way with the BRAOU, to set up a study centre.

ICRISAT's involvement with the Hub here is a continuation of its work with the watershed projects taken up under APRLP, to improve livelihood of the farmers. "We will scale up such hubs and locate them for groups of watersheds and use them for imparting training to the farmers."