

VIRTUAL HUB FOR RURAL TRANSFORMATION

1 Guiding Principles

Functioning in Indian and Australian rural environments the Hub is a virtual network of activists, practitioners, academics, researchers and students. It will provide a platform to explore ways to be meaningful to farmers, collectives including Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and members of the wider communities. It will provide a platform for all contributors to discuss, evaluate and challenge wider socio-political discourses to build new knowledge and understanding. Using a co-learning approach the Hub is based on the need for all involved to transform themselves.

The boundaries and nature of the Hub will not be rigid, but will have the flexibility to evolve. It is important to ensure hierarchies are not created in the Hub with the Hub working to bridge the gaps between various participants. For example, it will bridge the gaps between rural women and urban elites. It will ensure the exchange of ideas and stories is lateral and respectful.

The Hub will work to enable broad conversations between members, with one goal being to enable a rural woman of a block in Jharkhand to discuss issues with another rural woman of a block in Chhattisgarh or Australia, along with other stakeholders including activists, practitioners and academics.

2 Approach (Idea of the Hub)

The Hub will be composed of multiple spaces linked through the virtual space. It will still enable groups such as farmers to control their own space and maintain their independence with the role of the Hub being to connect the various spaces.

The Hub will focus on enabling the growth and development of its members who challenge the wider socio-political discourse to re-imagine development in order to transform ourselves and our lives. It will enable its members' growth and development through:

- Sharing people's narratives and experiences
- Scholarly discourse
- Conceptualising and re-conceptualising practice
- Enhancing operational efficiency of members' activities
- Encouraging and recording interdisciplinary dialogues
- Conceptualising action from previous efforts
- Exploring questions together
- Providing feedback, raising concerns and sharing experiences with each other.

In enabling its members' expression and growth, the Hub will provide a facilitative space for development and exchange of ideas to bridge divides between various ways of knowing and viewing the world, including:

- Forms of knowledge (spoken and written)
- Theory and practice

- Disciplines
- Rural and urban
- Social constructions of people, resources and institutions
- Local and global.

An important element of the learning will involve sharing failures, concerns, experiences, challenges and questions coming from engagement, linking with service providers and others. The information shared in the Hub will become data for analysis if allowed by the originators of the data.

The Hub will facilitate collaborative and action research through improved communication, project design and execution. It will enable contacts with other agencies including playing a role in influencing and advocacy with governments and universities through inclusive communication.

The virtual Hub should not to be considered as a ‘service’ space but rather an ‘engagement’ space. The space developed will allow sharing of stories and consideration that listening is valuable. Many farmers have never been listened to.

3 Membership

Membership will initially be drawn from participants of the April 2015 workshop held in Delhi, India. It will expand to include a wider membership composed of:

- Individual farmers (initially members of) SHGs, clusters, federations, cooperatives
- Universities, Civil Society Organisations, Research organisations.

Initially members will be from India and Australia with membership expanded as appropriate.

The role of the Hub will vary with participants. It is important to take care that expectations are not raised beyond capacity to deliver, as has occurred in other situations.

Membership from Australia is currently limited. However, in addition to the founding members, the focus for membership expansion will be around the following groups; rural women, indigenous communities, Landcare, Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), and individual NGOs.

4 Outcomes

Outcomes from the Hub will relate to transformation, including, personal development, development of new relationships and influencing public policy.

5 Activities

The activities of the Hub will be based around the virtual platform and will involve virtual and face-to-face activities. Activities will operate as a collection of integrated projects, with some projects focusing on virtual activities, and others operating as a combination of virtual and face to face activities. In all cases, projects will focus on transformation, with an overarching project exploring transformation being developed.

Initial projects could be built around the following topics:

1. **Exploring transformation:** an overarching project that may involve participants from across the Hub's membership.
2. **Crossing boundaries:** approaches to sharing experiences in a virtual space through communication and learning.
 - Building conversations and dialogue between farmers in India and Australia using the example of developing communication between women farmers from Eka Nari Sanghathan in India and Central West Farming Systems in Australia
 - Providing an on-line platform for members to share and interpret experiences (successes and failures) and ideas
 - Annual Hub communication activities such as symposia and workshops
 - Learning; approaches and processes – incorporating capacity building activities for members.
3. **Development and testing of a virtual approach to project design, management and reporting:**
 - Using development of the new ACIAR project (involving various Australian and Indian institutions) as an example.
4. **Public policy and transformation:** this project can be developed using the material developed in the 2015 workshop and provided below as a starting point.
5. **Second symposium and workshop for the Hub:** to be held in April 2016.
6. **Hub development and management to support other activities:**
 - Provision of a focal point for development of the Hub
 - Developing a concept of membership including roles and responsibilities
 - Organising a second symposium and workshop for Hub platform development and maintenance.

While the operation of the Hub will be based around a virtual platform there will still be a need for face to face contact. Initially the main face to face contact will be through an annual symposium that demonstrates the work being carried out, and a workshop to deal with issues and planning for the future.

The processes to raise funds to support the Hub and how the Hub's activities can be managed will also be explored.

PART 2 OPERATIONAL ISSUES

An initial step will be to produce a virtual Hub website to act as the portal to Hub activities and information. The portal will be developed to support the various projects outlined in the previous section. A focus of the portal will be to integrate various software tools into an integrated platform.

As part of this, the platform will establish and trial processes for dialogue on important topics as well as develop and trial approaches and techniques for publishing and sharing stories on-line with those stories in various formats including voice, video and written.

The Hub will focus on technology appropriate to the audience making use of various modes of communication. Farmers currently access the following technology:

- Mobile phones: Mobile phones work well for Gram Vaani but are limited for wider application
- Local radio: is popular in rural areas but is more effective for one-way communication rather than establishing dialogue
- Digital Green (farmer stories video): not accessed directly by farmers but through an agent
- Internet: when available through for example, Federation offices.

Farmers are slowly getting access to various sources and forms of digital information, including:

- Weather information services: research activity, PRADAN involved
- Market price: not currently accessed in research villages
- Health services
- Gram Vaani operates as a social media platform. Ashok & Bapi, two Hub members, are communicating with 10,000 farmers each week through Gram Vaani
- Jharkhand Rights Platform
- Government services including Right to Food and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural employment Guarantee Act 2005 (MGNREGA)
- Various organisations interested in the potential to ‘hear the (?) voice of villagers’.

However, the Hub is aware that farmers’ engagement with technology and communication systems is not static and is rapidly developing.

Each activity will involve a bottom up process where participants will determine the processes to be carried out, and will in consultation with IT research team members, determine the tools that are already available to enable those activities. The aim will be to make use of the tools and systems that members currently use. However, participants may need to change the way in which they engage with technology and co-workers to make effective use of the systems, and this change in behavior will need to be captured as research.

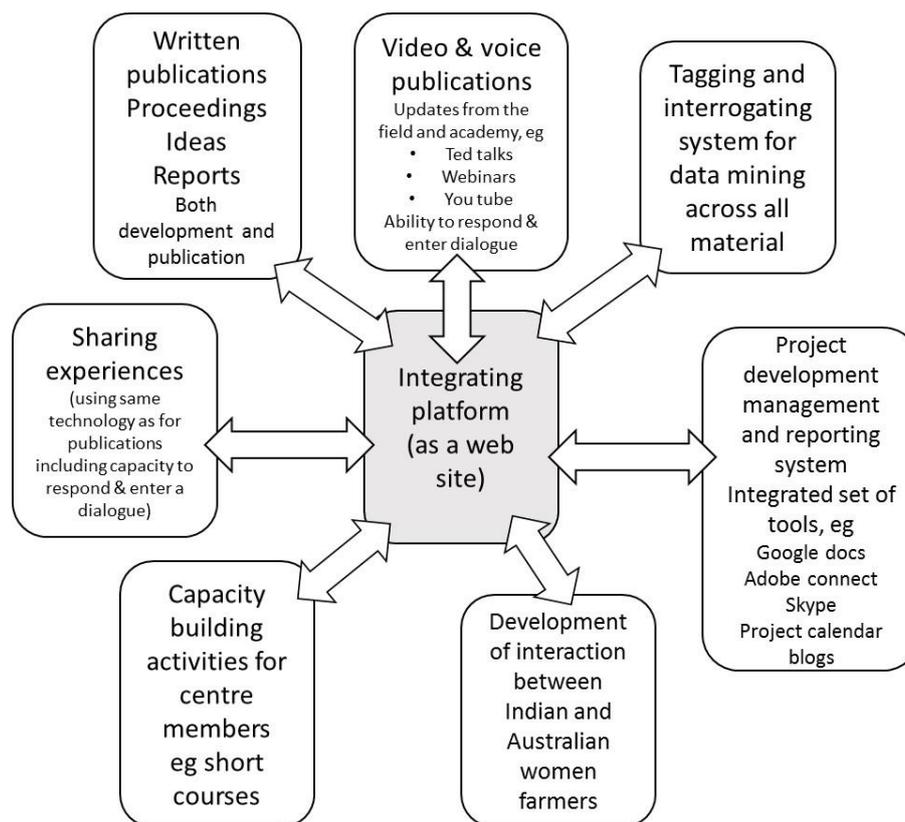


Figure 1. Representation of some of the ideas around a platform.

The platform will be based around a series of links to material stored at other sites. Therefore, initially limited amounts of material will be stored centrally, rather the material will be based on the various members' computers and mirrored on the 'Cloud'. In this way, issues around data storage and robustness will be minimised.