Redefining ICRISAT’s culture and values to serve the poor in the dryland tropics

We have an obligation and a moral imperative to contribute to the improvement of the lives of 800 million poorest of the poor in the dryland tropics of the world. We cannot be in a better place at a better time to serve them than now,” said Dr Chandra Madramootoo, ICRISAT Governing Board Chair.

At ICRISAT’s Global Planning Meeting held on 27-31 January at the global headquarters, Dr Madramootoo stressed the importance of redefining the organization’s culture – core beliefs, shared feelings, and values – and empowering all staff to embrace and make it front and center of everything they do.

In his message, the Board Chair emphasized “the need to use all our might, all our imagination to be able to contribute to the task of improving the quality of lives of the poor. The magnitude of the task calls for everyone to collectively think of how to contribute in making a difference in the lives of smallholder farmers in the drylands.”

“The Board is committed to stand behind you in this journey to put your collective vision and work together to give smallholder farmers a reason to be optimistic about their future,” added Dr Madramootoo.

Over 220 scientists, managers and administrative staff from all of ICRISAT’s nine locations in India (headquarters), Eastern and Southern Africa, and West and Central Africa attended the 2015 Global Planning Meeting to tackle the complexity of challenges in the dryland tropics vis-à-vis the objective “to confirm our strategy, re-affirm our culture and values, celebrate
Redefining ICRISAT’s culture and values …from page 1

our achievements, endorse our research plans, and discover opportunities.”

“Our vision is a prosperous, food-secure and resilient dryland tropics and I can’t think of a more compelling mission to have. But what we need is clarity around our culture and values that will allow us to deliver on that vision,” said Dr David Bergvinson, ICRISAT Director General.

“We have a mission to serve the poorest of the poor, and through demand-driven innovation and strategic partnerships, we shall increase the pace at which we see the impacts of our science in the farmers’ fields to enable inclusive market-oriented development.”

“We need to redefine ICRISAT’s culture as key to achieving our mission, and for all of us to have a clear and shared understanding on the ‘why’ of our work at ICRISAT. This is what will shape our behavior and determine the manner in which we interpret and respond to challenges as an organization to better serve the poor in the dryland tropics,” highlighted Dr Bergvinson.

Ms Ann Bradford, facilitator, assisted by 15 staff facilitators, walked the management and staff through the power of understanding the ‘why’ of ICRISAT’s work, bringing out what resonates with the organization’s emotional connection to ICRISAT’s mission (see box). Through the course of the week, the team identified values that were widely held, and discussed how these translate into day-to-day work with colleagues, partner organizations and smallholder farmers.

During the meeting, staff presented program outputs and work plans for 2015 focused on an inclusive value-chain framework to deliver science-based and demand-driven innovation consistent with country strategies, and to build stronger strategic partnerships. Discussions were also done to review and map out the work plans more effectively into the CGIAR Research Programs and bilateral projects.

According to Board Chair, Dr Madramootoo, “We must build our 2015 work plans to be able to deliver on the strategy of inclusive market-oriented development. We must move from being project-driven to having a broader, value-chain framework based on country strategies. Our programs and initiatives should not be built independently, but must all fit into a market-oriented development approach, create value chains, and deliver innovation and services beneficial to smallholder farmers.”

“Mapping out country strategies as a vehicle for implementing market-oriented development was highlighted in the meeting, underscoring the power of market opportunities to offer more prosperous lives for smallholder farmers and their families in the dryland tropics,” said Dr Peter Carberry, ICRISAT Deputy Director General – Research and overall coordinator of the meeting.

Discovering new opportunities was facilitated in part by a challenge to staff to develop a one-page proposal pitch on Digital Agriculture – innovative solutions to agricultural challenges through information and communications/digital tools and technologies – which generated 18 excellent proposals from teams across country offices – two of which were selected for further proposal development.

ICRISAT’s Global Planning Meeting is held every two years, and convenes the institute’s senior scientists and managers/officers primarily to discuss and prioritize research-for-development work plans and critical focus areas, and promote and internalize team development and cultural change.

This year’s five-day meeting was capped with staff from various ICRISAT locations signifying their renewed commitment by signing on banners with a redefined, shared culture statement and set of values to better serve the poor in the drylands.
Local community involvement vital in managing watersheds

Sustainable watershed management requires collective efforts by the local community who have a direct stake in the healthy functioning of the watershed. “Local communities are the primary stakeholders of watersheds in most parts of the world and their involvement helps to reduce transaction costs and ensures sustainability,” explains Dr Birhanu Zemadim Birhanu, Scientist - Land and Water Management, ICRISAT-Mali.

Over the last year, Dr Birhanu worked with local communities and partner organizations in Mali to establish a community-managed small watershed in the village of Kani in southern Mali.

“This watershed management learning site will bring different actors on a common platform to discuss existing problems and come out with solutions in a collective manner,” said Dr Birhanu. “The local community helped us to understand the critical issues they are facing in their farming systems and natural resources management,” he added.

While establishing the Kani watershed, several issues that needed immediate collective attention by researchers and other stakeholders were identified. These include water scarcity, soil erosion, low soil fertility and poor soil health. Moreover, local communities revealed that forest products have been reduced and the lack of fodder created a problem of keeping livestock in the area.

Several activities had to be accomplished to realize the establishment of the watershed, which included (1) stakeholders’ consultation; (2) watershed area definition including identification of stream networks and available water harvesting structures; (3) biophysical characterization; (4) establishment of monitoring networks and identification of experimental plots for land and water management; and (5) capacity building.

Kani watershed with a drainage area of 57 sq km was established for effective natural resources management and integration of various research components of the CGIAR Research Programs on Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE), Dryland Systems (DS), Dryland Cereals (DC) and Grain Legumes (GL). The watershed lies in the North Sudanian zone, 450 km from Bamako (capital of Mali). The watershed has 58 households in dispersed locations with scattered farmlands and woodlands.

Kani village was chosen as a model site from the existing six Dryland Systems program action villages. “In the next five years, we expect to reach more than 15 villages in a watershed approach, reaching 90 households and about 10,000 smallholder farmers,” said Dr Birhanu.

Dr Birhanu was speaking at one of the sessions at the Global Planning Meeting 2015 at ICRISAT-India.

Partners: Institut d’Economie Rurale du Mali (IER), Association Malienne d’Eveil au Développement Durable (AMEDD), the local community and ICRISAT.

Project: Watershed Approach to Improve Natural Resources Management in the Sahel.

This work is being undertaken under the CGIAR Research Program on Dryland Systems and CGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystems.
Global Planning Meeting, 27-31 January
Two of our staff, Simone Verkat and Sabine Homann, were awarded first and second place respectively in the women’s division of the 5 km fun run.
First massive open online course in agriculture launched

Access to high-quality education in agriculture

In a step to significantly open up opportunities for agricultural professionals in India to access high-quality and low-cost agricultural education, the first of a series of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in agriculture was launched.

This first course was inaugurated in Chennai, India, by Dr MS Swaminathan, Father of India’s Green Revolution and Emeritus Chair of the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF).

“The course could significantly raise the bar for quality online education to meet the requirements specifically of India’s agricultural education system, where available resources are scarce, relative to the extremely large audience – in a country where more than 70% of the population is involved in agriculture directly or indirectly,” said Dr MS Swaminathan.

A team of ICT and agriculture experts and educators from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Mumbai, ICRISAT and partners have created the structure and content of the courses. These courses will be offered through the National Virtual Academy for Indian Agriculture.

“Global educational institutions are increasingly adopting MOOCs, and given India’s need for reaching out to the largest possible number of learners, MOOCs are seen as the best way forward to ensure quality agricultural education,” said Dr David Bergvinson, Director General - Research, ICRISAT.

“I am excited about this new opportunity to modernize the way we educate agriculture students, young scientists, extension professionals and farmers to stimulate innovation and motivate them about agriculture as a science and an enterprise,” Dr Bergvinson added.

“There is an increased interest across the globe in recent years to strengthen agriculture education, bringing together all ideas and innovation in agriculture to tackle the problem of feeding the world’s poorest of the poor,” said Dr Peter Carberry, Deputy Director General - Research, ICRISAT.

“MOOCs are part of an exciting journey to broaden global partnerships in offering various high-quality agriculture courses aimed at creating hunger fighters to tackle the zero-hunger challenge for a food-secure future,” added Dr Dileepkumar Guntuku, Global Leader, Knowledge Sharing and Innovation and Director for Center of Excellence in ICT Innovations for Agriculture, ICRISAT.

The launch of the National Virtual Academy for Indian Agriculture to promote MOOCs in agriculture is a regional initiative of a new global education consortium, One Agriculture – One Science (http://www.oneagriculture.org). This consortium is a partnership between top agricultural universities, research organizations and other related agencies from India, Africa and the USA including ICRISAT working towards revitalizing global agricultural education, capacity building and technology transfer to address the challenges of global food and nutritional security.

The course runs from 9 February to 6 April 2015. The course materials for the first course on “Diseases of Horticultural Crops and their Management” are available on https://www.iitbombayx.in/courses/NVAforIA/PATH372.1x/2015-16/about

The announcement was made on 2 Feb at the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation, Chennai, India.
She reads the rainfall recording, she’s important to her community

With a rain gauge installed in her compound and having undergone training to read the rain gauge, Ms Samassa now has access to vital weather information that she shares with neighbors. The information she disseminates plays a crucial role in planning farming activities in her local community.

Earlier, her family along with their community were dependent on radio or television bulletins to know about rainfall and then plan their agricultural operations. But now they get reliable information right in their backyard after the Samassas volunteered to have the equipment installed in their compound. Their village Madina-Kouroulamini is one of the action villages for the Africa RISING program in Mali.

In August 2014, two local NGOs, Mouvement Biologique Malien (MOBIOM) and Association Malienne d’Eveil au Développement Durable (AMEDD), along with scientists from ICRISAT installed 50 manual rain gauges in 10 villages of Bougouoni and Koutiala under the ICRISAT-led Africa RISING program in Mali.

Dr Birhanu Zemadim Birhanu, project leader for the program in Mali, who was interviewed about his work at the Global Planning Meeting 2015 at ICRISAT-India, says that his experience of working with the local communities proved that if appropriate training is provided then the people are able to monitor and communicate their water resources effectively, a practice usually overlooked by many researchers in developing countries. The advantage of this approach, he says, is that farmers become more aware of their water resources, communicate the information to researchers and their neighbors in a better way, and thus adjust their farming practices accordingly. The approach also helps procure long-term data while reducing research transaction costs.

**Partners:** Mouvement Biologique Malien (MOBIOM), Association Malienne d’Eveil au Développement Durable (AMEDD), the local community and ICRISAT.

**Investor:** Africa RISING (Africa Research in Sustainable Intensification for the Next Generation) is supported by the United States Agency for International Development as part of the US government’s Feed the Future initiative.

This work is being undertaken under the CGIAR Research Program on Dryland Systems.

---

**Congratulations**

Dr Manish Roorkee, Special Project Scientist-Grain Legumes, has been selected for the Innovation in Science Pursuit for Inspired Research (INSPIRE) Faculty Award by the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India. The INSPIRE Faculty Scheme opens up an ‘Assured Opportunity for Research Career’ for researchers in the 27-32 age group.
BioAsia 2015

BioAsia 2015, that had ICRISAT playing an active role in driving the agri-biotech component, had delegates from more than 50 countries in attendance. The 12th edition of the event was held from 2 to 4 February at the Hyderabad International Convention Centre. The theme was ‘New Era of Life Sciences - Opportunities in Transition’.

At the event, Dr David Bergvinson, Director General, ICRISAT, met Mr Somchai Tiamboonprasert, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Science and Technology, Thailand; His Excellency Mr Andrew McAllister, British Deputy High Commissioner Hyderabad; Mr Thabang Bambo, Department of Science & Technology, Republic of South Africa; Dr Ajit Shetty, Chairman Emeritus, Janssen Pharma, Belgium; and Dr Robert Naismith, Chairman, Roosevelt Capital Partners Inc.

Mr Jupally Krishna Rao, Minister for Industries, Handlooms & Textiles, Sugar, Telangana, India, met Dr Bergvinson and sought the support of ICRISAT in making the state the seed bowl of the country.

Reader’s comment

For sorghum we think the crop has a good potential specially to prove that it can give a solution for the climate change, let alone the development you made in the nutritional qualities added for Fe and lately the work going for high lysine. Moreover sorghum can also be developed for good quality food industry.

However, the crop certainly requires support and backup to demonstrate its qualities and the technologies required to attain the economical yield that would support the expansion of the crop.

We also feel more work is required to support the crop, all over, in terms of the current low yields due to the poor quality cultivars planted.

I wish every success to ICRISAT and the CRPs, and we from private sector are ready to support.

– Mr Zubeir Ibrahim, ICRISAT partner and managing director, Nile Sun Seed Company, Sudan

New project

Project title: Study to Assess the Feasibility of Upscaling the Weather-based Agro-Advisories Model Developed under SOC Supported CCA project

Principal Investigator: SP Wani

Investor: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), New Delhi, India

Background: The SDC-WOTR (Watershed Organization Trust) partnership on Climate Change Adaptation in semi-arid regions of Maharashtra, MP and AP was designed to develop widely replicable and up-scalable knowledge, strategies, approaches, measures and processes that will enable vulnerable communities to adapt to the existing variability/impending change, while at the same time contribute to policy development processes.

Aims: Assessment of the feasibility of upscaling the weather-based agro-advisories model to enhance its outreach.

The outcome of this component will be two-fold: (1) an understanding of whether and how this agro-advisory model will be scaled up sustainably involving national actors including the private sector and (2) WOTR’s agro-met model develops into a technically sound and robust system that efficiently manages meteorological data and generates effective crop advisories.