



ICT connects farmers

SOHEL PARVEZ

GOLAP Barman sprayed thousands of taka worth of pesticide but saw the condition of his green chilli plants continued to deteriorate.

The rattled farmer sought advice from his experienced peers and the extension workers. But it was all useless.

However, Barman did not give in.

As a last resort, he plucked out a diseased green chilli plant and set off for the Agriculture Information and Communication Centre (AICC) at his village market to visit an agriculturist, via video conferencing.

At AICC, a young man named Masudur Rahman adjusted the webcam, helping Barman to show the diseased plant to the agriculturist who was sitting at the Dhaka head office of Agriculture Information Service (AIS).

Upon inspection, the agriculturist prescribed Barman to use sulphur on the field. Barman did so accordingly. Within four days, his green chilli plants started recovering.

"It was great respite for me. I had invested Tk 50,000 on these green chilli plants and was worrying about counting losses due to crop failure," said Barman, sitting at his backyard in the village of Purbadebu, Pirgachha, Rangpur, more than 300 kilometres north of Dhaka.

Barman is one of the few lucky farmers among millions in Bangladesh who benefitted from information technology in crop cultivation.

Many of his neighbours are also now aware of the services at AICC in Nek Mamud bazaar of the village, a place where very few people had the skills to operate a computer.

But some enthusiastic farmers, especially young and middle-aged literates, have learnt the techniques to running computers, browsing websites, downloading farm production technology content and video conferencing.

It has been more than three years that many farmers at AICC, run by a farmers' group named Purbadebu Maddhapara IPM Club, get information suggestions on modern production technology from experts.

AICC was established under a government initiative to provide information quickly to farmers in rural areas, where the internet penetration rate is much lower than the national average of 7 percent.

Under the initiative, the government with support from donors has established 20 AICCs by providing computers, webcams, printers and other devices for free.

The aim of the AICCs, AIS Director Mohammad Nazrul Islam says, is to reach out to the 'unreachable' farmers and reduce the information gap to boost crop production.

Tens of thousands of the 14.72 millions of farm households remain out of extension services due to inadequate agricultural extension workers.

Now, 12,000 agriculture extension officials work at field levels to give advice to farmers on crop production, and to motivate them to adopt new



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Ruhul Amin wears headphones to watch a documentary on optimal farming practices at AICC, Pirgachha, Rangpur.

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A farmer harvests strawberries at his field in Saidpur.

and advanced technologies to boost production. But it is difficult for a single extension worker to tend to 1,500-2,000 families.

A lack of knowledge of the extension workers on modern and continuously advancing agriculture is becoming an impediment to transferring information to farmers, analysts say.

Farmers say the advice they get through ICT on crop production and management is good help.

"We are getting good advice without any cost. It saves our time as we don't have to travel miles to get suggestions from agriculture experts or wait for the agriculture extension officials to come," says Mohammad Marfat Ullah, a 65-year old farmer at Purbadebu, Pirgachha.

"The services allowed me to cut crops losses. At the same time, I am also guided on how to grow various crops."

To support farmers running the AICCs, AIS has opened a website, www.ais.gov.bd, in Bangla, where farmers can get the latest weather forecasts and information on ensuring better harvests.

The website contains materials on production and pest management methods for cereals, vegetables and fruits.

The website also includes a section where queries can be placed.

AIS officials say they provide pre-

liminary training to farmers at AICCs before rendering services to other farmers.

Not only the government, but also some private sector organisations, including non-government organisations, have also taken steps to disseminate information to farmers through ICT.

The mobile phone is emerging as an aid for growers. The AIS, with support from Banglalink, has taken up an initiative to send text message alerts to inform farmers and field level agriculture workers on relevant information, like adverse weather conditions.

Another government initiative is the digital Purjee, a purchase order and sugarcane crushing date issued by local mills. Farmers are to bring their produce within three days of the issuance of Purjee.

Already, farmers who supply sugarcane to state-owned mills are receiving 'purjee' through text messages on their mobile phones. It has replaced the over 200-year tradition of sending Purjee to growers by paper.

Banlalink, the second biggest telecoms operator, also provides suggestions and answers to farmers' queries through a call centre based helpline that runs round the clock. Banglalink users can dial 7676 for services.

But Refayet Ullah, another farmer at Purbadebu, says the service is com-

plex and time consuming.

"I tried but it takes a lot of time. You have to press one button after another to reach the desired person. It is also difficult to clearly discuss the problems over phone," says Refayet. "And call charges are also high."

For Refayet and others farmers such as Barman, video conferencing is the most effective tool.

Mohammad Ataur Rahman, a 30-year-old strawberry farmer at Saidpur, said the online materials on production technology helped him to know the methods to strawberry farming.

"I learnt about how to prepare land, apply appropriate doses of fertilisers and prevent diseases by going through the website," says Rahman, who sold strawberries worth Tk 130,000 last year by investing Tk 35,000 on 30 decimals of land.

But Rahman, who went to the AICC at Saidpur, Nilphamari, wants more information on marketing and packaging of farm produces.

Today, both Rahman and Barman are more confident than before. This is because of the support from expert advice and guidance from the AICCs in their localities.

"The internet services and scope for expert advice is a great relief. In case of any problem, I have support now," says Barman.

sohel@thedailystar.net

Help centres financially jittery

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A lack of an income generating scope threatens the long-term financial sustainability of Agriculture Information and Communication Centres, established by the government to quickly disseminate farm related information to farmers in remote areas.

People operating the AICCs say they do not charge farmers anything to print electronic production technology materials or to videoconference with agriculturists, although there are costs involved.

Instead, they charge others, who come to compose print materials, print documents, such as examination results, take photographs and rent out multimedia projectors.

But demand for these services in rural areas is inadequate to make the AICCs economically viable, although these ICT based centres have the potential to emerge as good help for farmers in reducing crop losses.

"We have to bear more than Tk 2,000 in monthly expenses to run the centre. But we do not earn enough by providing other services, like overseas phone calls through the internet," said Refayet Ullah, secretary of Purbadebu Maddhapara IPM (Integrated Pest Management Club) Club.

The IPM Club runs the AICC at Pirgacha, Rangpur to provide information to farmers for free by using IT.

To attain economic sustainability, some AICCs have also shifted their stations to busy marketplaces so that their income from providing other services increases. The AICC at Saidpur, Nilphamari is one such example.

Akter Hossain, president of South Niamatpur IPM Club that runs the AICC at Saidpur, said they shifted the centre close to the bus stop to tap more business.

He said the shift helped the AICC to increase income.

The AICC operators shared their

experiences at a time when the Agriculture Information Service is set to open 75 more AICCs at different parts of the country, mainly rural areas, to reduce the information gap.

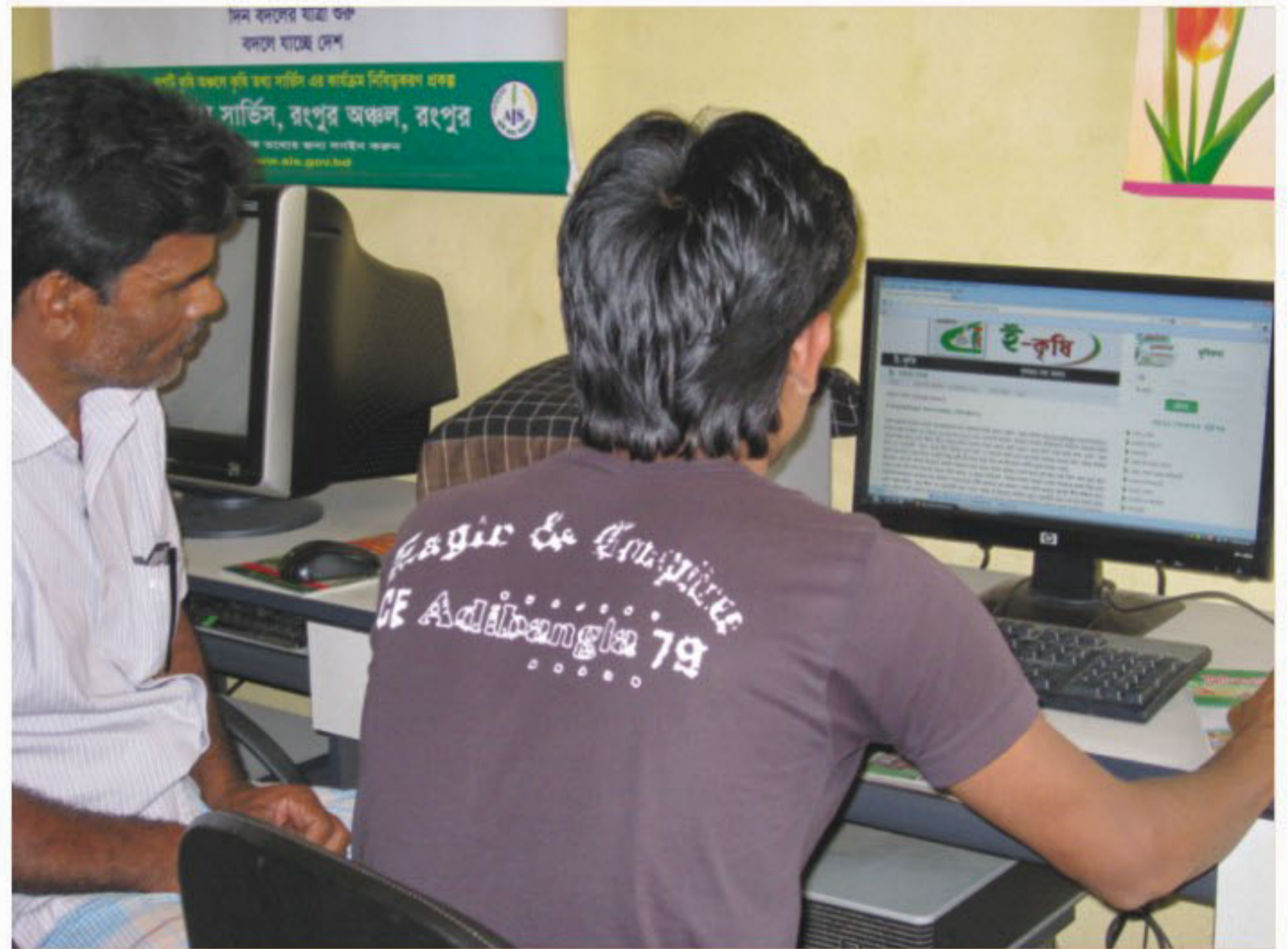
The move to establish AICCs comes at a time when traditional extension systems can not live up to the farmers' need for on-time advice mainly due to a lack of extension workers.

AIS Director Mohammad Nazrul Islam agreed the economic viability of the AICCs was worrisome. But he said they are looking for scopes to help AICCs become financially sustainable.

AICC operators also pointed to inadequate training for the farmers to make them better at operating computers and browsing the internet.

However, people operating the AICCs say that the centres would perform financially well if the government would provide subsidies or employ someone else to run operations.

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A farmer looks on as a computer operator browses through farming technology content on the web.

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