

Addressing Barriers to Rice Seeds Trade between India and Bangladesh (RISTE Project)

Report of the First Meeting of the Project Advisory Committee Meeting 20th April, 2013, Hotel Floatel, Kolkata

1. Introduction

1.1 The first meeting of the Project Advisory Committee (PAC) under the RISTE project took place in the second half of 20th April, 2013 at Floatel, Kolkata. It was preceded by the Project Launch Meeting held on the 19th and 20th of April, 2013. There were five major objectives of the first PAC meeting:

- Debriefing on the major points discussed in the project launch meeting;
- Deciding on major issues to be covered in the project, such as what issues are to be addressed, why and how? The issues were to flow from the two-day discussion during the project launch meeting;
- Validation of Results Framework and Work Plan for the partners for effective monitoring and evaluation;
- Assessing need for policy advocacy; and
- Deciding on Media Outreach Strategy.

1.2 Out of the 12-member PAC, the following were present this meeting :

1. Dr Sushil Pandey, Consultant, formerly with IRRI, Manila
2. Mr Hari Menon, Consultant, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
3. Mr Sushir Chandra Nath, Head, Agriculture and Food Security Program, BRAC, Dhaka, Bangladesh
4. Syed Al Muti, Program Director, Economic Development, The Asia Foundation, Dhaka
5. Mr Raju Kapoor, Executive Director, National Seed Association of India, New Delhi
6. Prof (Dr) Debdutt Behura, Rice Seed Expert, Orissa University of Agriculture and Technology, Orissa
7. Prof (Dr) Bhanudeb Bagchi, Rice Seeds Expert, West Bengal
8. Mr Bipul Chatterjee, Deputy Executive Director, CUTS International
9. Mr Suresh P Singh, Policy Analyst, CUTS International

2. Opening Remarks

2.1 In his opening remarks, Mr Chatterjee welcomed all the members present at the first PAC meeting of the RISTE project. He, however, mentioned that the meeting will miss the presence of the three other members: Syed A.K.M Asadul Amin, General Secretary of Bangladesh Seed Association, Mr Alope Marodia, CEO, PAN Seeds, Kolkata, and Mr Mumukshu Patel of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Their presence could have added significant value to the meeting, he noted.

2.2 He further informed the meeting regarding the assurance given by the above-mentioned members in extending full cooperation in implementation of the RISTE project. In relation to the role of the PAC in implementing the project, he emphasized on several roles that PAC is expected to play in the following months of the project span. Some of these include:

- Commenting and reviewing the documents to be prepared under the project
- Guiding the project team in effective implementation of the project
- Reviewing of activities, outputs and outcomes

3. Discussion

3.1 Several remarks and observations were made during this session. It was noted and emphasized by some members that the discussion and the issues raised during the launch meeting have focused the scope of the project. Thus, there is a need for keeping the broader picture of long term cooperation between the two countries in mind while planning for revising activities and outputs of the project. This requires clear understanding of what needs to change to achieve the desired objectives. For that it was felt necessary that the project team should collect and churn out all materials that emerged from the two-day project launch meeting to prepare a revised Results Framework, which will form a tangible output under the project.

3.2 Mr Al Muti, brought to the fore the issue and the need for empowering the committee and suggested for devising a programme implementation protocol. This could emerge after giving PAC a formal structure, and he further emphasized that the implementation protocol can help the donor not only in monitoring the progress of the project in a more focused manner, but can also help in expanding the scope of the project. It was discussed that the revised Results Framework should act as the basis for monitoring and evaluating the activities to be undertaken in the project.

3.3 To measure and understand progress under the project, there is need for creating some baseline, keeping in mind project purpose and relevant indicators. These could be considered as a set of intermediate outcomes. It was suggested to do the following to prepare this baseline:

- assess and estimate the level of informal trade in rice seeds between India and Bangladesh;
- status paper on the respective government's policy on seeds, especially rice seeds; and
- assessing current level of cooperation between the two countries in the seed sector in general and rice seeds in particular.

3.4 Mr Sudhir Chandra Nath, in his brief speech, agreed that there are presently barriers to rice seeds trade between the two countries. He noted that these barriers need to be overcome by mutual efforts from both the countries for realising mutual benefits. He further argued that for clearer understanding and for overcoming these barriers there needs to be a proper documentation of the same. One major issue identified by Mr Nath is the comparative costing and pricing of rice seeds between India and Bangladesh. He argued that if rice seeds could be produced at a lower cost in India, then why should Bangladesh produce it domestically, instead of importing it from India? This calls for harmonisation of seeds system with multi-locational infrastructure, including quality assurance and data exchange, for accessing each other's system. Such harmonisation could take care of several issues (for example standards and quality related issues) that hinder rice seeds trade.

3.5 With respect to understanding seed flow within India, especially in selected four states (Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, and West Bengal), members raised the issue of the need for close cooperation among all the states partners. Members were of the opinion that understanding the demand and supply of rice seeds in the four states should not be confined to the existing state of affairs. It should, rather, also account for emerging dynamics, and the Indian government programme to usher in an era of green revolution in eastern part of India. This initiative significantly relies on improved seeds. The assessment of rice seeds markets in each of the state, therefore, needs to be premised on the new and emerging facts.

3.6 On the issue of monitoring and evaluation strategy, and realising that there is need for continuous monitoring of partners' activities in both India and Bangladesh, members were of the opinion that, once the work plan is in place (this will emerge from the finalised Results Framework), the format for monitoring and evaluation strategy should be prepared. This should be premised on the understanding of critical activities and also how to improve coordination among partners. In addition, there is also need for revising the timeframe for conducting activities, producing outputs and achieving outcomes. This, as indicated above, should be done after finalisation of Results Framework, which among others will also clearly show critical milestones in terms of activities and outputs.

3.7 Before embarking on policy advocacy, it was felt that there is a need for preparing a background note, identifying enablers and disablers, which could both positively or negatively impact activities and achievement of outputs and outcomes. For this to happen, it is an imperative to talk to and discuss major issues and concerns of relevant stakeholders in India and Bangladesh. Mr Al Muti, brought into focus that Bangladesh government sees its relation with India not on a case-to-case basis, rather in a holistic manner. This implies that to improve trade in one area, there might be a need to keep in mind several actions/activities which are happening and could in fact create a more enabling environment for policy intake. He also made it clear that there should be a win-win situation for both the countries.

3.8 On the issue of media outreach, members were of the opinion that there is a need for understanding the role of media in furthering the cause of a project like this. On this issue, Mr Menon argued that media should be used as and when required, and not on a regular basis. He also made it clear that media should be used in both the countries for creating an enabling environment.

3.9 On way forward, the members were of the view that the work plan and partnership with local partners including the one in Bangladesh should be finalised by mid-June based on the final version of the Results Framework. State level activities and those in Bangladesh should begin by end of June, 2013. In the meanwhile, CUTS Project Team should finalise the initial literature review and other initial activities as per the revised Results Framework including the preparation of a baseline document.

3.10 Bipul Chatterjee concluded the meeting by thanking the members of the Project Advisory Committee. He, once again, underlined the need for guidance from the PAC members in implementing the project activities and for that purpose CUTS Project Team will be in regular touch with them. Members of the Project Advisory Committee assured full cooperation and guidance in the implementation of the project activities including in taking forward key advocacy messages from the project to the relevant policy-makers and other important stakeholders. It was agreed that the next meeting of the PAC will be held sometime during the January-March 2014 period in Dhaka, Bangladesh.