BEHAVIOUR CHANGE COMMUNICATIONS FOR IMPROVING SOIL HEALTH AND BUILDING CLIMATE RESILIENCE

Millions of farmers have to change their habits in order to improve soil heath, which is critical for our food security and farmer livelihoods. As we celebrate World Soil Day 2022, Chhaya Bhanti illustrates the potential of behaviour change communication for improving soil health.

CONTEXT

This year, as we mark the 20th anniversary of World Soil Day, the issue of improving soil health in agriculture still remains a critical need—rates of land degradation are still alarmingly high and impacts of climate change on farmers have become painfully clear. We are all aware that tackling India's 'soil emergency', calls for hand-holding of farmers, so that they give up 'harmful' conventional practices in favour of integrated farming practices that put nutrients back into depleted soils. However, we also know that convincing farmers of the merit of such interventions requires a fundamental change in their current behavioural practices, which is a challenge. At Vertiver, our experience in working with communities on behaviour change spans the sectors of forestry, waste, and agriculture in the face of climate change mitigation and adaptation. Over several projects, we've realized that there is a huge gap between the theoretical science of behaviour change and its implementation, especially in the context of massive socio-cultural diversity of rural landscapes in India.

Nukkad Natak performance on Soil Health in MP

Researchers and development practitioners often rely on Social Cognitive Theory, Theory of Planned Behaviour and Stages of Change Transtheoretical Model to target behaviour change outcomes in program design. Based on multi-disciplinary insights across psychology, sociology, economics and anthropology, these frameworks walk us through various stages and methods that help assess current (baseline) knowledge, attitudes, preferences and practices of an individual or a group. Thereafter,

researchers have to design relevant incentives and 'nudges', so that barriers to adoption of proposed interventions are overcome a clear path for long-term behaviour change is created.

Whether we wish to persuade farmers to reduce or eliminate harmful chemical inputs, practice nutrition-sensitive agriculture, add millets and other traditional crop varieties to the sowing mix, lower the water and energy footprint at the farm through techniques and tools, reduce tillage, not burn crop residue, plant trees, restore common pool water and land resources, improve livestock feed, or create women and farmer collectives, shifting farmers from "conventional" practices that run contrary to these interventions entails a massive overhaul of systems and mindsets. But development programs are typically bound by time and resource, and rarely can a project afford to tick all the right boxes proposed under a behaviour change theory.

Based on our experience with supporting implementing partners on behaviour change communications, and in implementing projects on our own, we feel behaviour change communications is foundational to achieving program outcomes. Due to the urgency of action that is needed for improving soil health, we now discuss the key steps that can strengthen behaviour change work.

Training field teams under Unnat Kheti project.

KEY STEPS
Map Farmer Archetypes in Project Landscapes

- Map Farmer Archetypes across socio-economic classes: Identify a handful of farmers in a landscape whose knowledge, attitude or practice may be contrary or aligned with interventions proposed. Develop a list of corresponding factors (through at least two to three interactions with them and field teams) that would make them adopt or disregard proposed interventions. An example of an SRI (System of Rice Intensification) Farmer 'archetype' could be someone who does not believe it is possible to grow rice without flooding and thinks reducing their water use is unnecessary. Digging deeper into the behavioural profile of this farmer 'archetype' may reveal that they associate flooding as key to their yields; and/or may see SRI as more labour-intensive and input-heavy compared to conventional practices. Creating an 'archetype' map of this farmer will allow the 'personification' of deeply held group beliefs, enabling the generation of ideas from field teams on what behavioural incentives may be needed to convince this 'archetype'. This understanding can then be applied to a larger group that is thought to hold similar beliefs This rapid 'archetyping' process should be carried out for each intervention, so that program managers can plan stages of behaviour change for such a farmer;
- Map institutional barriers to adoption of potentially proposed interventions;

- Through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), ensure that one language does not become proxy for the multiple dialects that may exist even within what may seem like a socially homogeneous farmer group so that nuanced insights can be received from large groups;
- Ensure women and men are engaged as separate groups (women's opinions within a mixed gathering can be superficial).

Build Communication Capacity of Field Teams at the Onset

- Once the needs and willingness of a target community has been mapped for the proposed intervention, field team members must be trained to communicate key benefits of interventions in short simple sentences, and very importantly, in local dialects, at the very beginning of the program. A good story that paints a clear picture of benefits can go a long way towards getting buy-in of internal team members on program gains, as well as of early adopters – an essential first step towards enabling behaviour change. We have seen that while this may seem very obvious, the technical language often used to communicate such points creates a barrier that withholds clear understanding between field team member and target farmer beneficiary;
- Train community resource people to capture good pictures, and videos of interventions so as to enable farmer-to-farmer learning and sharing. We regularly conduct storytelling workshops that include behaviour change messaging and smart phone-based documentation for rural field teams;
- Train field teams to perform Nukkad Nataks (street plays): We've written intervention-specific Nukkad Natak scripts, and our team of performance artists and soil scientists have trained field teams to 'perform' these plays. Getting professional Nukkad Natak performers to rural areas on a regular basis can be a challenge; so building the capacity of a local team to enact a play, can engage farmer communities through fun and interactivity, which they always value and enjoy.

Nukkad Natak performance on sustainable harvesting of NTFPs in MP

Design, Visualize, Socialize and keep repeating

- Invest in 'brand positioning' and 'brand recall' and create a visual and oral identity that is simple and easy for farmers to recall. For example, we developed a logo for the the Unnat

Kheti project by CIFF, imbibing various interventions within project branding and developed an introductory visual and song to communicate the importance of integrated natural farming practices;

- Ensure women are represented equally in all communications content, and are prioritized separately in dissemination planning;
- Build visually engaging and culturally relevant content: We wrote a song on soil health in Hindi, and also produced it as a garba, and to make it more relatable for farmers hired performers to 'enact' the garba in order to help socialize it;

Vertiver's performance artists training local 'Rudali' performers in Gujarat on performing a song on soil health

- Create scientifically accurate content geared towards farmers and ensure multi-linguality: This animation we made on soil health in Hindi and Gujarati is being used by MANAGE for wider dissemination;
- Ensure interactive learning: We developed the Kara Bhara Snakes and Ladder game working closely with Unnat Kheti partners, and provided training to help socialize its adoption across landscapes. We have also developed visual illustrations of landscape-specific Bio-input recipes with project partners;
- Co-create process videos with communities where possible: We made this video with our communities on the Government of India's Su-Dhara project on urban waste management, giving them pride and ownership of the narrative and helping socialize it further;
- Finally, ensure testing of tools prior to launch and collect regular feedback from field teams on all communication tools in use, so that these can be modified, changed and re-introduced based on gaps identified.

Investing in creating distinctive visual communications that is both scientific as well as vernacular, can also be a huge asset when trying to establish policy linkages for the program. We have had success at the highest levels of government with our communications work with this approach.

4

Vertiver designed snakes and ladder game 'Kara Bhara' under Unnat Kheti project

Co-create Champion Farmer Stories

- Field teams should work closely with their communications team to co-create a script and storyboard of a potential champion farmer story to ensure that all field details are communicated very clearly and an agency can plan to film accordingly;
- Ideally, document interventions through at least two crop cycles and ensure that the cost and benefit of the interventions are clearly communicated;
- Collect feedback through observation and interaction with farmers after screening, and share these with your communications agency so that subsequent champion farmer stories can incorporate these considerations. Disseminating these stories across available digital and in-person venues should be contextually planned through nuanced understanding of media behaviours of a target community. Some champion farmer stories made under the Unnat Kheti project are provided here;

Engaging with farmers on visual tool on System of Rice Intensification (SRI) with Unnat Kheti project field teams in UP

- Another popular and non-digital way to communicate champion farmer stories is through printed calendars that feature farmers from project landscapes. Offering such 'social rewards' to farmers can motivate them further;
- Long term monitoring is of course vital for ensuring that a farmer does not fall back into the default 'conventional' behaviour mode, if incentives and 'pressures' embedded within a program are no longer available.

Testing Kara Bhara game in UP: It teaches farmers about the links between various integrated interventions to improve soil health

END NOTE

Enabling climate resilience of local ecosystems and communities is a top national priority. In our experience, when behaviour change communications are scientifically rigorous and aligned with socio-cultural dimensions of project landscapes, they provide a strong foundation for communicating with key stakeholders and supporting program goals. We have found that this work requires a versatile multi-disciplinary team. It needs scientists to articulate the complex processes behind proposed interventions, and writers, visual artists, designers, filmmakers and performers to work together to convert scientific and economic arguments into easy to understand messaging and engaging and visually attractive vernacular communication tools that rural stakeholders can relate to.

Training field teams on storytelling on natural farming

Though such a diverse skill set is not typically found under one roof, we have built this multi-disciplinarity within the Vertiver team to support natural resource conservation and climate action in India. As behaviour change takes center-stage in development practice, stakeholders in agriculture extension networks can harness the catalysing potential of holistic behaviour change communications towards creating buy-in at landscape and policy level across all stages of a program.

Chhaya Bhanti is the Founder and CEO, Vertiver Pvt. Ltd., a multi-disciplinary organization that works on research, design, communications and implementation of climate- and nature-based solutions projects. She is also Co-Founder, IORA Ecological Solutions. She can be reached at chhaya@vertiver.com