

Marketing of Shrimp through e_HUB in West and East Godavari Districts of Andhra Pradesh: An *Aquachoupal* Model

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A study was undertaken in and around West and East Godavari districts of Andhra Pradesh to analyse the ongoing activities of an *aquachoupal* model, to work out the usage patterns of *aquachoupal* services, to analyse the farmers' perception on the model, to observe constraints if any of the implementation of the *aquachoupal* and to analyse the suggestions of the farmers for the improvement of the model. Among the various services offered by the *aquachoupal*, farmers made use of market pricing and customized quality solution facilities frequently. Farmers strongly agreed that the prompt payment and the provision of giving discounted inputs at the farm gate, provide meaningful net economic benefits to farmers. With the information obtained from shrimp farmers, it appears that medium and big farmers are getting more benefits through *aquachoupal* than small farmers. Among the various constraints, ignorance of farmers about technology in progress was ranked as the major constraint followed by lack of awareness about services provided by the *aquachoupal* and lack of interaction with shrimp farmers association. Overall assessment of the *aquachoupal* model in the study area and the improvement of the initiative are also discussed.

Key words: *Aquachoupal*, e_marketing, information and communication technology, Andhra Pradesh

Modern information and communication technologies (ICTs) and electronic marketing (e-marketing) of agricultural produce hold great promise for the socio-economic development of rural India. This has attracted many rural developmental agencies to deploy websites for marketing agricultural and aquacultural produce. One such private initiative has been by Indian Tobacco Company's (ITC) International Business Division in the state of Madhya Pradesh. ITC's e-Choupal has resulted in efficient delivery channel for rural development and conversion of villages into potential markets in Chandigarh, Pune and Hyderabad (Matani, 2007). e-Choupal is a web supported initiative offering information, customized knowledge, products and services to enhance farm productivity and farm-gate price realization on various crops like soyabean, coffee,

wheat, rice, pulses and shrimp (Mahalakshmi *et al.*, 2008).

The first and the largest e-Choupal network, '*Soyachoupal*,' was launched in June 2000 in the state of Madhya Pradesh. It has grown to include 976 kiosks that provide services to 6,00,000 soyabean farmers in 7,000 villages. '*Plantersnet*', launched in the state of Karnataka in December 2000, includes 75 kiosks covering 6,000 coffee farmers in 125 villages. The *aquachoupal* network, launched in February 2001 in the state of Andhra Pradesh, includes 55 kiosks reaching 10,000 shrimp farmers in over 300 villages (Mahalakshmi *et al.*, 2008). *Aquachoupal* model has been established in seven districts in Andhra Pradesh viz., Srikakulam, East and West Godavari, Krishna, Guntur, Prakasam and Nellore (Singh, 2007).

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Asked Questions), transactional services like communication through e-mail and chat, buying and selling of goods (Table 1).

The services provided through *aquachoupal* and utilized by farmer are highlighted in Fig. 2. It is indicated that 36% of the respondents made use of the weather report facility rarely. They are interested to know about the weather reports through the radio and TV. Majority of the respondents (64%) made use of the pricing facility frequently. They also felt that the *aquachoupal* allows farmers, access to prices on a daily basis at their nearby centres. Moreover, through *aquachoupal*, farmers have access to prices and make the critical decision of when and where to sell their crop. About half of the respondents (51%) made use of the customized quality solution facility frequently. The farmers showed keen interest to know the ways to prevent the occurrence of disease, easy ways to detect them and methods of effective disease control. They also believe that they can improve the crop quality and yield with the help of customized quality solution given by the *aquachoupal*. More than 15% of the farmers made use of the best practices and FAQ facilities. More

than 30% of the respondents used information pertaining to activities other than aquaculture related facilities provided by the choupal. In most of the cases, children and youth were using the choupals for eliciting information on computer education, examination results and job information. Women sought child care as well as health oriented information and programmes.

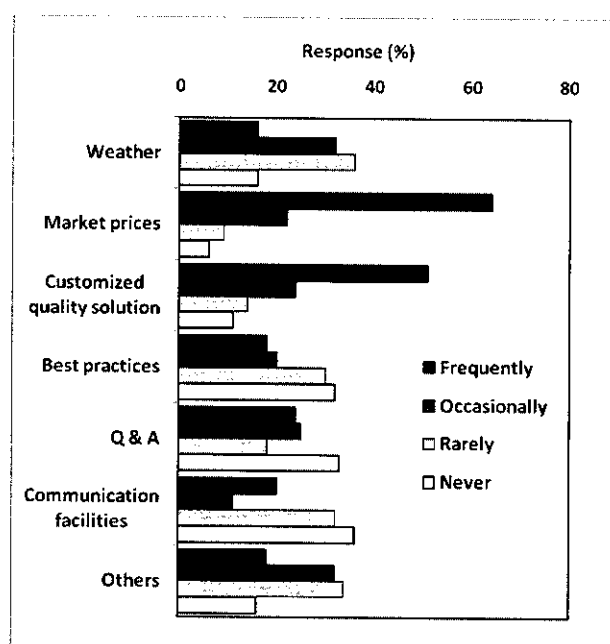


Fig. 2. Usage patterns of services of *aquachoupal*

Table 1. Services provided by *aquachoupal*

Services	Description
Weather forecast	Localized weather information at the district level.
Market pricing	Local, national and international company's rates. ITC's succeeding day rates are published every previous day evening. The prices are displayed prominently on the top of the web page on a scrolling sticker.
Customized quality solution	After completion of the sale of a crop, ITC performs laboratory testing of the sample collected. Based on these results, farmers are given customized feedback on how they can improve crop quality and yield.
Best practices	Scientific practices organized by crop type are available in the web site
FAQs	This feature enables two-way communication. Additional questions are answered through FAQs and access to experts who respond to emails from the village.
Communication	<i>Prathinithi</i> use the Internet to chat extensively among themselves about the status of operations and aquaculture in their villages.
Others	In addition to aquaculture related information, farmers are getting information on government schemes and procedures and educational information. They are benefited through health oriented programmes such as eye camp, blood testing, and blood donation.

Table 3. Constraints for the implementation of *aquachoupal*

Constraints	RBQ Value	Rank
Ignorance of the farmers about internet based information system and online marketing	93.37	1
Lack of awareness about services and <i>aquachoupal</i> activities	87.69	2
Lack of interaction with shrimp farmers association	79.55	3
<i>Aquachoupal</i> at the <i>prathinithi's</i> house	42.42	4
<i>Aquachoupal</i> has limited number of processing plants and soil and water testing facilities	30.49	5
Females do not have access to the computer	22.35	6

Table 4. Suggestions for the improvement of *aquachoupal* model

Suggestions	RBQ Value	Rank
Awareness should be created with regard to the facilities in the <i>aquachoupal</i> for the benefit of the farming community	89.02	1
Extending the <i>choupal</i> facility to small farmers	84.28	2
Establishment of <i>choupal</i> centres at the public access location instead of <i>prathinithi's</i> house	68.56	3
Establishment of more soil and water laboratories and processing plants in coastal areas through <i>aquachoupal</i>	60.80	4
Linkages of <i>aquachoupal</i> with shrimp farmers association	58.71	5
Empower female population through <i>aquachoupal</i>	33.33	6

of the farming community. Extending the *choupal* facility to small farmers and establishment of *choupal* centres in public access location instead of *prathinithi* homes were needs felt. Establishment of more soil and water laboratories and processing plants in coastal areas was also desired. Farmers felt

that these facilities will indirectly support the creation of awareness about activities and services of *aquachoupal* in the coastal areas. Farmers were of the view that linkages with shrimp farmers association were very important and efforts should be made for gender empowerment through *aquachoupal*.

The study shows that the awareness and utilization of *aquachoupal* model among medium and big farmers are high but small farmers rarely visit the centre due to lack of awareness about the services and activities of *choupal*. Generating awareness among small farmers about the availability of *aquachoupal* services is the first step to be considered to increase farmers' participation in *aquachoupal* initiatives. Strong interfaces should be developed with shrimp farmers association so that the information is exchanged among the fellow farmers which will check communication and time lag. It is suggested that the farmers are instructed in getting the best possible use of the services provided. User equity from a gender perspective was found to be very low in this model. Efforts should be made to incorporate information modules targeted specifically towards women farmers.

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