

Promoting Innovations & Entrepreneurship in Fisheries through Business Incubation

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Introduction

In this era of globalization, where scientific knowledge and research findings have proved to be key elements of economic development of a country, the role of Business Incubators assumes an important position in the new business paradigm. Business incubator is a broad umbrella term referring to any organization that provides physical workspace, management and technical assistance, access to financing and other supporting services to young firms and helps them survive and grow during the startup stage. The Business Incubators acts as catalysts for economic growth by combining the features of technology commercialization, entrepreneurship and business facilitation. With the increasing acceptability of business incubators, they are being widely used as a policy instrument in the process of industrialization through innovations, product development, and improvement in productivity. In the changing scenario, wherein technology is changing at a faster rate and product lifetime cycle is shrinking, technical entrepreneurship has assumed a central place for economic growth of a nation. A successful business incubator can create a good entrepreneurial environment and greatly improve a new enterprise's chance for success.

The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) started the business incubation drive, designed for the Indian agricultural sector to promote agribusiness in 2009, by utilizing the vast research and development facilities and knowledge available with its research institutions. As part of translating the research results arising from the field of fisheries and, ICAR set up a unique Agri-Business Incubation (ABI) Centre at ICAR-Central Institute of Fisheries Technology, Cochin. The ABI Centre helps prospective entrepreneurs, by providing pro-active and value-added support in terms of technical consultancy, infrastructure facility, business support services, expert's guidance and training to develop technology based business enterprises. It provides a platform for the speedy commercialization of the technologies developed by the ICAR Institutes, by creating an interfacing and networking mechanism between R&D institutions, industries and financial institutions.

Scope of business incubation in India

In a country like India, where entrepreneurs and small scale companies contribute to industrial growth, business incubators have become an important source of help for start-up entrepreneurs. Nowadays, government has been playing a key role in defining policies, programs and instruments which support the development of micro, small and medium enterprises. The Government has been encouraging and supporting the small scale sector through policies for infrastructural support, technology up gradation, preferential access to credit, reservation of products, preferential purchase policy etc. However the Indian SSI sector, despite its importance in industrialization strategy and immense potential for employment generation, confronts several problems in business development and management. In this context, business incubators which can help entrepreneurs turn their ideas into viable businesses and promote innovation, by providing business support services and resources have great scope and significance.

Prospects of fisheries sector

In Indian agriculture, fisheries sector occupies a very important place in the socio-economic development of the country. It has been recognized as a powerful income and employment generator as it stimulates growth of a number of subsidiary industries and is a source of cheap and nutritious food besides being a foreign exchange earner. Most importantly, it is the source of livelihood for a large section of economically backward population of the country. India's inland water resources including rivers, canals, ponds, lakes, and marine resources comprising the east and west coasts of the Indian ocean provide employment to nearly six million people in the fisheries sector. The fisheries technologies available with ICAR includes harvest and post harvest technologies, new and improved aquaculture methods, seed production technologies of finfish and shrimp, cost-effective and nutritious feed formulations for fish farming, test kits / diagnostic methods, ready-to-cook and ready-to-serve value added products, waste minimization/utilization technologies, byproduct utilization, pharmaceutical and biotechnological products, food packaging techniques etc.

Business incubation at ICAR-CIFT

The business incubation initiative of ICAR is directed to facilitate innovative involvement of all the players and stakeholders in the production and distribution of its goods and services for attaining sustainable food and livelihoods security as well as for global competitiveness of Indian agriculture. The ABI Centre at ICAR-CIFT aims at establishment of Agribusiness enterprises through IPR enabled ICAR technologies. It targets creation of national wealth, employment generation and enhancement of stakeholder income by linking R&D system and prospective entrepreneurs

through guidance, infrastructure facility, support services and training. The business incubation unit supports operations on business projects as a measure of enhancing the foundation for new technology based industries and establishing a knowledge-based economy. It focuses on finding new ways of doing business in agriculture and allied fields by providing access to unexplored markets for achieving the objectives of increased productivity, poverty alleviation, nutritional, livelihood and income security. The objectives of the ABI Centre are:

- Commercializing technologies developed by ICAR-ICAR-CIFT
- Helping entrepreneurs to commercialize business ideas utilizing the R&D back up of the institutes
- Providing pilot level production facilities in fisheries to entrepreneurs
- Imparting training for creating prospective entrepreneurs and value added manpower

Process of Incubation

The ABI Centre targets entrepreneurs, from fledgling startups in need of basic small scale processing capacity to sophisticated businesses in need of R&D back up, office infrastructure and pilot/test market processing facility for the development of new products. It possesses good infrastructure facilities suitable for providing direct incubation of about 9 entrepreneurs in a corporate environment within the premises of ICAR-CIFT, at a time. The purpose of direct incubation is to support emerging companies through their infancy. It also provides virtual incubation to budding entrepreneurs who want to start new enterprises as well as to established entrepreneurs who need to increase the efficiency of existing ventures. The Unit regularly conducts awareness and technology promotional programmes for sensitization of entrepreneurs and to identify interested potential candidates for physical and virtual incubation. The residency period for direct incubatees will be normally for two years, extendable by another year in special cases, depending on the progress of incubation. As the business venture becomes mature enough, the concessions and the facilities provided to the incubatee companies will be gradually withdrawn.

Enterprise and entrepreneurship development

The Business Incubation unit at ICAR-CIFT is going to be a “One Stop Shop”, where entrepreneurs can receive pro-active, value-added support in terms of technical consultancy, and access to critical tools such as entrepreneur ready technologies, vast infrastructure and other resources that may otherwise be unaffordable, inaccessible or unknown. With the aim of transforming the business incubator into a symbol of entrepreneurship and innovation, the ABI Centre explores the various structures and strategies to help small enterprises to grow and ensure a promising future in

the global market. It provides an environment for accessing timely assistance and support required for establishment of technology based business ventures. The Unit has already provided training to the incubatees on thermal validation, retort operations development of value added products, shelf life study of canned fish products and hygienic handling & preparation of ready-to-cook chilled fishery products. It uses the right expertise in relevant fields to identify and analyze the constraints and barriers hindering the growth of a business, and devise appropriate strategies. The Unit has envisaged several capacity building programmes to help the incubatees build their competence in the areas of business practices, technology up scaling, networking and financing strategies.

Incubation facilities under one roof

- Furnished office suites within the premises of ICAR-CIFT, with shared facilities like secretarial assistance, computing, copying, conferencing, video conferencing, broadband internet and communication services.
- Pilot level product formulation facilities
- Access to modern laboratory facilities for product testing and quality control
- Access to well equipped physical and digital libraries

Pilot level production facility in fisheries

A state-of-the-art generic semi-commercial production facility is made available to incubating entrepreneurs for developing value added products from fish. The ABI Centre provides facilities and staff support on a fee for use basis to assist companies and individuals, with production and testing of product formulations provided by the client. The user can experiment with new equipment and processing steps on old products or to link old equipment in new ways. For incubatees, the pilot plant is an ideal testing arena to determine commercial run viability of new products. The pilot plant also serves as a process lab, a place to see how processing equipment impacts food products under varying conditions. The pilot plant facility at ICAR-CIFT includes production lines for

- pre-processing
- cooking
- retort pouch processing
- canning
- sausage production
- extruded products
- chitin & chitosan
- smoking
- curing & drying
- breading & battering

- product packing.

Conclusion

The article provides an outline of the initiative taken by ICAR, in establishing the first fisheries business incubator in India. It gives an overview of the activities of the ABI Centre at ICAR-CIFT, Cochin and the wide variety of technical, managerial, and administrative supports offered to the incubating entrepreneurs. The incubation unit is expanding its activities at a rapid pace and trying to build a foundation for new technology based industries, establish a knowledge-based economy and create new jobs in the agricultural sector by bridging the gap between private and public sectors, and finding suitable mechanisms for ensuring good entrepreneurial climate.