

Research  
Paper

## Preliminary findings on the use of cell phone mediated audio conferencing among livestock rearing Women Self Help Groups (WSHGs) in Kerala

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### ABSTRACT

Cell phone mediated audio communication and conferencing system (COMBACCS) is an ICT tool developed in November 2008, by the College of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Kerala, India, under a research project Development Partnership in Higher Education (DeIPHE) a scheme of the British Council. This tool was designed to be used among the WSHG members in their normal meetings to improve their knowledge in livestock rearing. Since COMBACCS was new and had to be tested among WSHGs, a pilot study was conducted to study the use of this cell phone based audio conferencing among livestock rearing women self help groups. This study helped in identifying the conditions for the use of COMBACCS and in laying down the sequence of activities to be followed for the testing of this ICT. The role COMBACCS played in disseminating knowledge to remotely placed WSHGs and its role in clearing doubts were studied by working with selected WSHGs. It was also seen that COMBACCS plays a role in disseminating knowledge at doorstep wherein often the women are committed to household works and thus cannot attend formal trainings.

Elizabeth, A. and Ramkumar, S. (2011). Preliminary findings on the use of cell phone mediated audio conferencing among livestock rearing Women Self Help Groups (WSHGs) in Kerala, *Vet. Sci. Res. J.*, 2 (1 & 2) : 10-15.

**Key words :** Cell phone, Women self help groups, Livestock rearing ICT

### INTRODUCTION

In India, livestock sector plays a vital role in socio-economic development of rural households. The contribution of livestock and fisheries to the total gross domestic product (GDP) in India, during 2006-07 was 5.26 per cent (GOI, 2008). Livestock rearing supplements family income and generates gainful employment in the rural sector, particularly among the landless labourers, small and marginal farmers and women. Several studies have supported the claim, that livestock rearing has significant positive impact on equity in terms of income, employment and poverty reduction in rural areas (Singh and Hazell, 1993; Thornton *et al.*, 2002; Birthal and Ali, 2005). The estimate of employment in this sector was 11.44 million in principal status and 11.01 million in subsidiary status, which is 5.5 per cent of the total working population of India (NSSO, 2005), and over 70 per cent of the rural households depend on livestock for income (Chawla *et al.*, 2005).

The rural women play a significant role in livestock rearing and are involved in operations like feeding, breeding, management and health care. The average contribution of women in farm production is estimated to be 55-65 per cent with higher percentage in certain regions and farming systems (GOI, 2008). Out of the 22.45 million people engaged in animal husbandry sector, 16.84 million are females (NSSO, 2005). A study conducted by Kacker (2006) in India, also indicated that about 85 per cent of persons engaged in dairy production were women. In the state of Kerala, where 94 per cent of the livestock population were concentrated in rural areas, and 80 per cent of livestock farmers were marginal farmers and agricultural labourers, women constituted 60 per cent of the workforce in livestock sector (Government of Kerala, 2003).

After the Ninth Five Year Plan, women have been organized into small homogenous Self Help Groups as a powerful instrument for the socio-economic transformation of rural women. The concept of women self help groups (WSHGs) in addressing empowerment