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**Evaluating development communication tools to better guide policy: The case of India’s Soil Health Card**

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**Objectives/aims**

The Indian Government’s Soil Health Card scheme was launched in 2015 to provide 130 million Indian farmers with a ‘soil report card,’ issued once every two years at the budget of 86 billion USD. Soil health cards reflect indicators of soil health, as determined by a lab-based analysis of soil samples from each farmer’s field. The card also recommends corrective measures to improve the soil, if needed. The scheme’s objective is to help farmers improve soil health and productivity through the judicious use of chemical fertilizers, organic manures and bio-fertilizers. Correct application of relevant inputs has a direct implication on cost of cultivation, soil health and the yields that are expected to be higher and fetch higher returns to the farmers. A large amount of success of the program hinges on the soil health card. The program rests under the assumption that the provision of soil health cards will inform the recipients of the status of their soil health and recommendations on future application of key nutrients with respect to crops. The complete reliance on an [A4 size card](http://soilhealth.dac.gov.in/Content/FAQ/SOILHEALTHCARD-English.pdf) to alter behavior necessitates careful assessment of its user-orientation and applicability. This study was aimed to understand whether the current design is sufficient to generate understanding within a diverse group of end-users across the country.

**Methods**

Qualitative assessments using key informant interviews and targeted focus group discussions were the prime methods of this research. Short individual questionnaires were also used to gather details on our respondents. One of the key principles of user-oriented design is the involvement of the key stakeholders, which in this case are the farmers. To solicit feedback from the farmers directly, a series of user tests of soil health cards were conducted by the research team in India in 2017. Feedback was sought with respect to the content, language and presentation of the SHC using critical components of user-testing that address issues of usefulness, attractiveness, comprehension, relevancy, persuasiveness and end-user recommendation.

**Main findings**

Our main results pertain to the design and presentation of information on the card that hinders it unfriendly and less useful for most of the end users. The large amount of text present on the card with small fonts made it difficult even for the literate farmers to read and comprehend. Farmers were often unable to distinguish between the different sections and required support and explanation to read the text and derive inferences. They had issues in understanding the scientific terms used in the card and that posed as a barrier in sustaining user interest. Where terms were used in the local language, they were often too technical for interpretation as well. There was a huge difference in the scientists’ understanding of what was mentioned on the card as compared to the farmer. Since, the farmer is the end-user of this card, our team indulged in a process of iterative design that aims to constantly improvise on the design of a tool, by seeking feedback from the end-user to generate an output that fits their needs and understanding better. Our main efforts were in the direction of reducing text content and inserting more illustrations and infographics in the card so that it reads less as a report card but more as a poster than can attract and sustain user enthusiasm. This product was tested over several rounds and a final card was generated that has been adopted by our partner, the Bihar Agricultural University in India.