

# GOOD PRACTICES 43: NOVEMBER 2020



## ZIZIRA AND 1917iTEAMS – A PPP MODEL IN MARKET-LED AGRICULTURE EXTENSION IN MEGHALAYA



*1917iTEAMS, an initiative of the Government of Meghalaya, provides agri advisory, agri transport and market connect services to the farmers of Meghalaya through a four-digit Toll Free telephone number – 1917. It partnered with Zizira, a local start up company which provides online sales and marketing linkage to farmer producers and farmers’ collectives by leveraging Amazon online in order to access national and global markets. Canning S Shabong illustrates the features of this model in this good practice note.*

### BACKGROUND

The journey of Zizira (a natural food company) and 1917iTEAMS (an agro service provider) of Meghalaya State started from August 2018, when Zizira approached the iTEAMS ‘Market Connect Service’ using their toll free number ‘1917’, to enquire about the availability of black cardamom in Meghalaya. 1917iTEAMS facilitated Zizira by connecting them to a black cardamom producer for the purchase. Then Zizira connected with the producer for the procurement of black cardamom, which went on to lay the foundation for the partnership between Zizira and 1917iTEAMS – to source several producers for various agricultural produce as required by Zizira’s business demands.



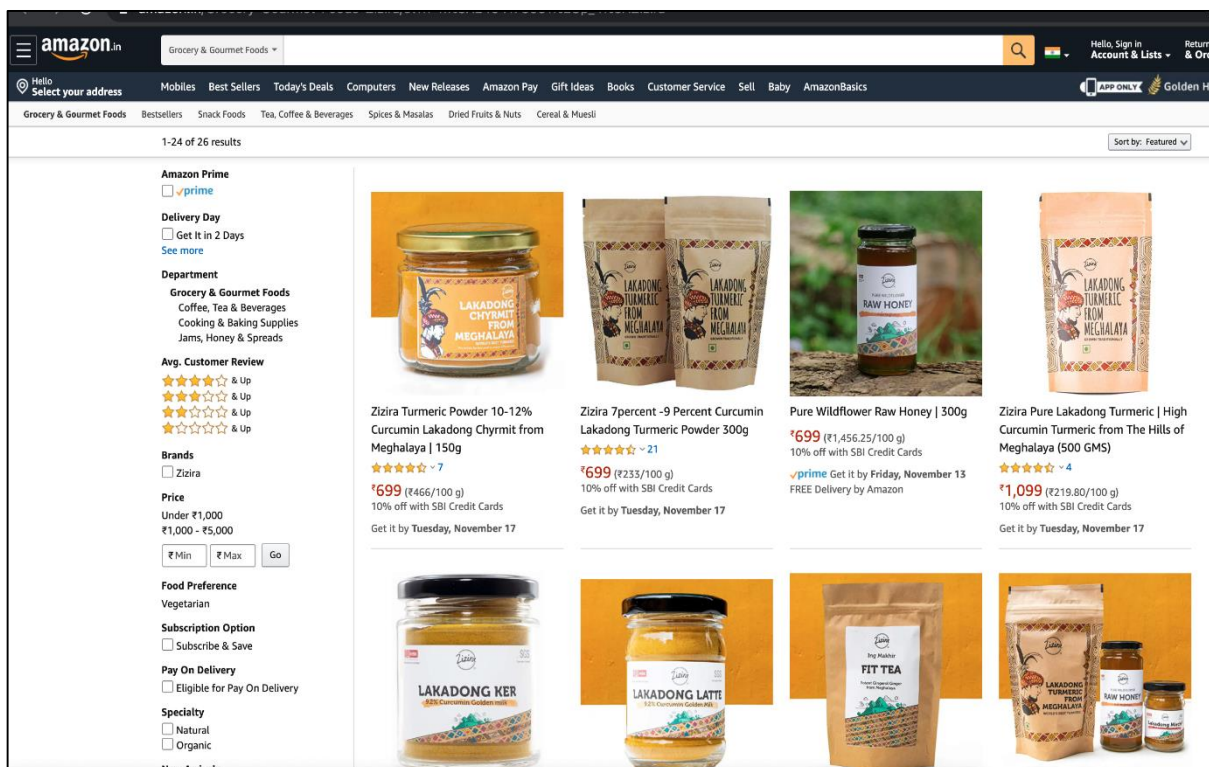
**Photo 1.** ZIZIRA employees are marked by youthful enthusiasm and passion.

### Box 1: Zizira ([www.zizira.com](http://www.zizira.com))

Zizira is a start-up company in Shillong that promotes healthy living, and it is a unit of Chilli breeze Solutions Pvt. Ltd, founded in 2015. Its headquarter is located in Golflink, Shillong, Meghalaya. It currently employs more than 40 employees across the state. It specializes in natural processing and marketing of spices from Northeast India and focusses on Lakadong Turmeric, which it markets through its online shopping portal as well as through Amazon India and Amazon US. The company also deals in aggregation, branding, and marketing of raw honey, specialized tea blends, and special herbs.

It's CEO and founder, Ralph Budelman observed that Meghalaya has so much abundant rainfall, rich soil, high altitude, hilly terrain, fresh air and clean water. These natural conditions combined with traditional farming methods produce unusual plants and crops that are only found in a few places in the world. Seeing this potential, he dreamt of starting a company, which can employ local youth, embed local values and culture, nurture, harness and release their entrepreneurial ambition to create food products that they can sell on Amazon-India and on their own website. Inspired by the story of Zizira's raison d'être, in June 2017, Amazon featured the story on how Zizira is making a difference to farmers in Meghalaya.

(<https://blog.aboutamazon.in/supporting-small-business/taking-farmers-from-local-haats-to-global-marketplaces>)



Zizira Page in Amazon

Zizira says that their teams work to create opportunities and open markets where it is needed the most. It mentioned that “We strive to help farmers grow crops traditionally without pesticides. We meet and encourage farmers to use best practices. Each region is different, so we work to figure out the best opportunity so they can thrive. After understanding the unique potential of a village, we work to do what is best in order to thrive together.”

**Box 2: 1971iTEAMS ([www.1917iteams.in](http://www.1917iteams.in))**

The 1917iTEAMS programme can be considered as India's first-ever farmer centric, market-oriented, cloud-based facilitation service that connects farmers to markets through real time agro advisories, affordable logistics, and market information. The programme was established by the Department of Agriculture in collaboration with the Department of Animal Husbandry, Meghalaya Small Farmers AgriBusiness Consortium (MgSFAC), Department of IT, Meghalaya Institute of Entrepreneurship (MIE), Central Agriculture University (CAU), and Digital India Corporation (DIC). To utilise the 1917 iTEAMS' ([www.1917iteams.in](http://www.1917iteams.in)) service, any citizen, farmer, or a buyer of agriculture, horticulture, livestock products, etc., can call the Agriculture Response Centre's (ARC) Toll Free Number 1917, from 7am to 7pm, Monday to Saturday, which is manned by Incoming Call Officers (ICO Level 1) and Vehicle Despatch Officers (VDO).

**MANDATE**

1. Agro Advisory: Providing farmers with timely and accurate information for proper decision making. Farmers can call the toll free number of 1917 for any queries on Agriculture, Horticulture, Fisheries, Animal Husbandry, Apiculture, and Sericulture. Farmers can call and request for a package of practices, pest/disease management in crops, health management in livestock, or any other information pertaining to departmental schemes and training.
2. Logistics Solutions: Providing evacuation and transportation logistics solutions to farmers and buyers who wish to transport their goods to any farms or markets of their choice through a network of pickup trucks, which are known as Agri-Response Vehicles (ARVs) at a highly competitive rate of INR 0.02 per kg/km.
3. Market Connect: Providing information about potential markets and sellers, and making farmers and buyers aware of the different selling/buying options available to them. 1917iTEAMS connects the Registered Farmers having commodities to sell with the Registered Buyers looking to buy the same commodities – but does not by itself participate in the buying or selling negotiations.

**ZIZIRA and iTEAMS partnerships**

As discussed earlier, the Zizira-iTEAMS relationship took off from the market connect service that began with the black cardamom incident. But, for further partnership, there was a trust factor as the expectation of a private company and the functioning of government organisations are often mismatched due to differences in the work culture, flexibility, organisational culture, bureaucratic structure and so on. But, when the CEO of Zizira made a personal visit to iTEAMS to know its functionality this developed into a conviction and the relationship bloomed between iTEAM and Zizira. Later on, the CEO sought expert advice from iTEAMS on setting up a new company in the agriculture horticulture space in Meghalaya and Northeast India. The iTEAMS experts advised the CEO to intervene in the 'online marketing space' as that is the core strength of the company – if they want an extensive experience with Zizira. They were also advised to make Zizira a market player in the exploding online market, for sourcing, branding, packaging and marketing of Meghalaya's produce to a national and international market, leveraging its connections and reach.

Valuing the advice of iTEAMS, the CEO launched Zizira as an online marketing platform with selected spice crops. After the initial soft launch, Zizira embarked on a journey of field research, and information gathering on Meghalaya's produce, online publication of its findings and promotion of Meghalaya as a rich source of spices, fruits, vegetables, indigenous plants, along with value addition, test marketing and launching of unique blends such as tea blends, spices blends, etc. in the marketplace. The partnership between 1917iTEAMS and Zizira gained traction once Zizira came on board and used iTEAMS services as given in Table 1.



**Table 1: Value added to the partnership by 1917iTEAM and Zizira**

1917iTEAM	Zizira
Agro advisory service from experts	Procure, process, brand the farm produce; Promote the branded products of Meghalaya in national and international markets under the name 'Zizira' ( <a href="https://www.zizira.com/collections/all">https://www.zizira.com/collections/all</a> )
Market connect service	Sell the produce and products of Zizira on the e-commerce platform of company and Amazon
Logistic solutions (Hire ARV (Agri Response Vehicles) for transporting farmers' produce from the field to its office)	Develop innovative equipment, products, and introduce best practices in processing products through Zizira's trained and highly qualified food experts (e.g., Innovative solar drier for spices to prevent curcumin and volatile oils loss).

To be more specific, during 2019, the leads/connections provided by 1917iTEAMS helped Zizira to procure black pepper, long pepper, cashewnut, lemon grass, bird's eye chilli, honey, bayleaf (tezpatta), perilla seeds, sohiong (prunus nepalensis), jaiur (szechuan pepper), and turmeric. Through 1917iTEAMS, they purchased more than two tons of agricultural produce from farmers (e.g., 40 kg of cashewnut, 70 kg of bayleaf, and 1900 kg of turmeric).

During 2020, Zizira enquired about the availability of Gotu Kola, Bhoot Jolokia chillies, sticky rice, honey, jatung, pineapple, banana, papaya, ginger, black pepper, long pepper, cinnamon, and bayleaf, and it procured more than 24 tons of agricultural products from farmers (e.g., 8 t of turmeric, 15 t of ginger, 500 kg of pineapple, 800 kg of banana and 400 kg of papaya).

### Operations during COVID-19

On a special note, the service of iTEAMS must be commended especially during the critical COVID-19 pandemic situation. 1917iTEAMS continued its advisory service, market connect service and ARV transportation service, which strengthened the partnership of iTEAMS with their clients, particularly when private transportation services were stopped. This provided an excellent handholding support for Zizira that enabled it to take up marketing operations uninterruptedly.



**Photo 2. Pineapples being procured from farmers using 1917iTEAMS' small ARV.**

## 1917iTEAMS' Working Model

As described above, 1917iTEAMS performs mainly three functions: Advisory service, Market connect service, and Logistic solutions. These services are provided following the common telephone procedure:

- Farmers are advised to call the toll free no 1917;
- A first time caller will be asked to select Language. Depending on the language selected, the caller will either be directed to ARC Shillong or ARC Tura;
- The caller will then be registered for the 1917 services by the Incoming Communication Officer (ICO). Once registration is done, he will be send back to the main IVR menu to select the option that he wants, and from there the call will be routed to the desired domain specialist or ICO;
- A registered caller will be asked to select the domain required and the call will be transferred to either the Domain Specialist in Agri, Horti, AH&V or Fisheries or to the Dispatch Officer (DO) for ARV Booking, or to the Business Development Executive (BDE) for the market connect;
- Details of the functioning of 1917iTEAMS of Meghalaya State is depicted in Figure 1.

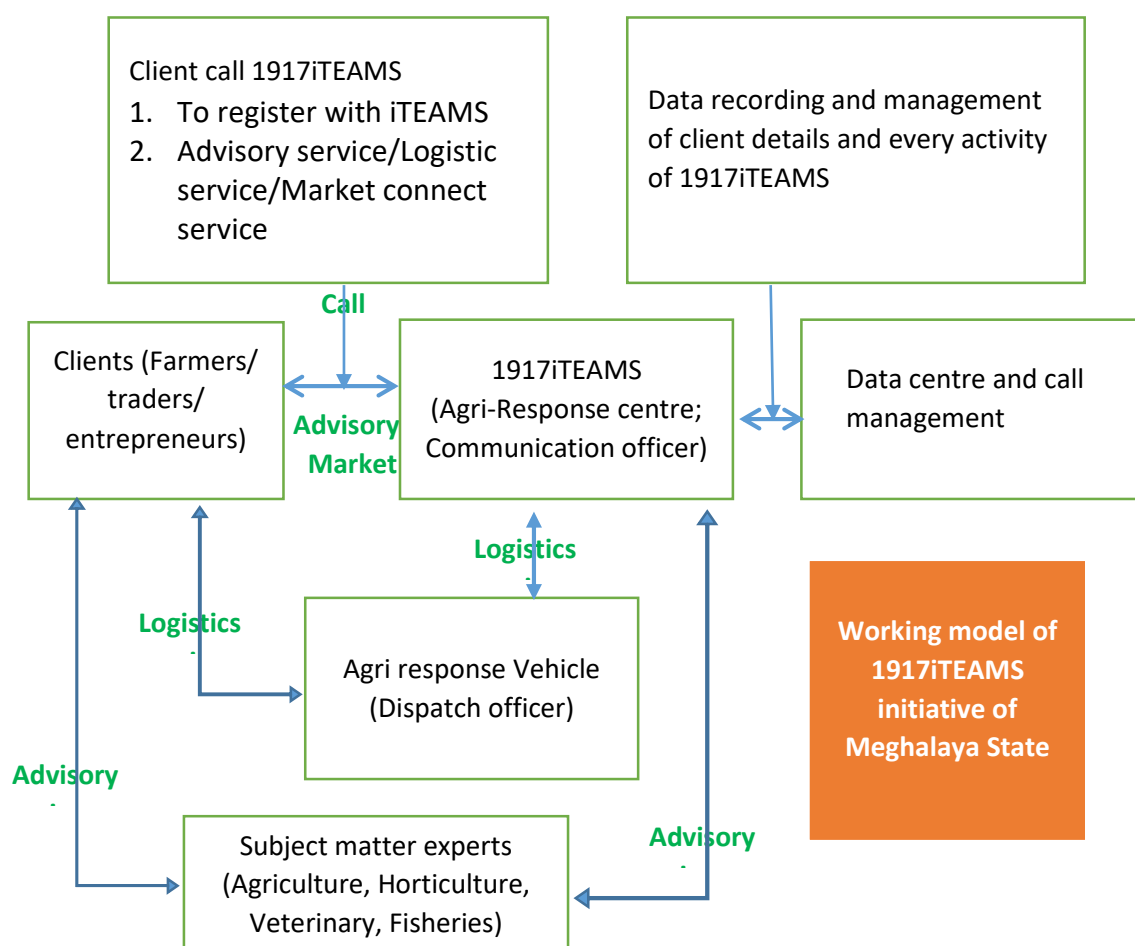


Figure 1: Working model of 1917iTEAMS initiative of Meghalaya State

Benefits provided by 1917iTEAMS to its clients (major ones: farmers, traders, agro business enterprises) are as follows:

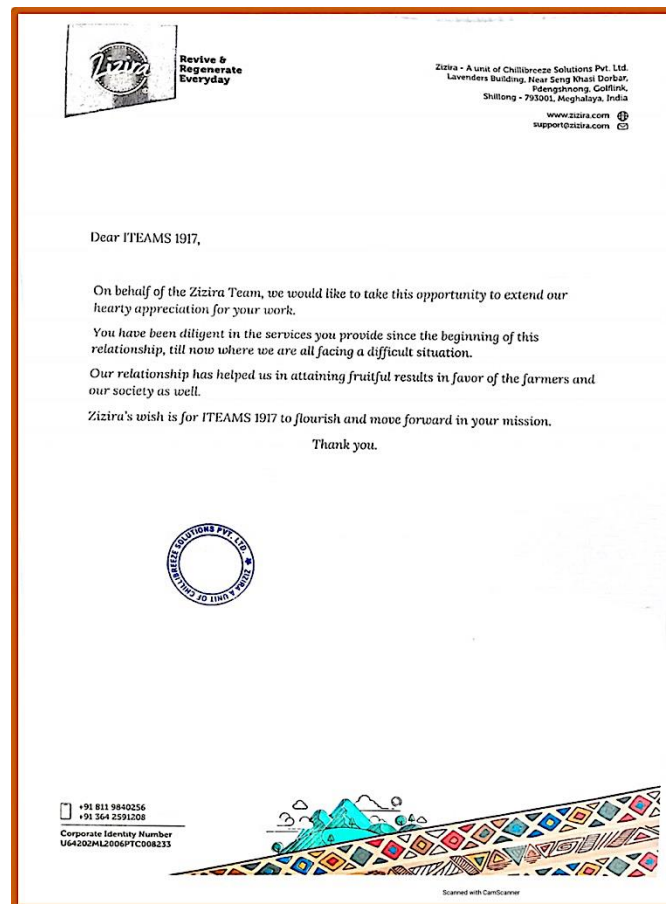
- It enables and facilitates small and marginal farmers of the state to connect, communicate, and negotiate directly with local and national buyers and among other farmers through the 1917iTEAMS platform;
- It enables and empowers clients to make informed choices with regard to markets and buyers through advisories;
- Provides them with an affordable evacuation and transportation logistics solution to buy and sell the produce;
- Farmers are helped to know the best buyers and vice versa;
- The platform facilitates the linkage of buyers and consumers who further connect based on their personal contact and business relations;
- The platform helps with the traceability of produce, get better prices, attitudinal change towards the system, and promotes healthy and competitive buyer-seller interactions and activities.

On 8th October 2020, a team of Zizira employees visited the 1917iTEAMS operations centre (Agri Response Centre) located at District Agriculture Complex to thank all the employees of 1917iTEAMS for helping them during the difficult times especially during COVID-19 lockdown and its accompanying disruptions. They handed over a Letter of Appreciation to the 1917iTEAMS for the valuable services provided by them (letter enclosed).



***Photo 3. Group photo taken during the visit by ZIZIRA teams to 1917iTEAMS' operations centre –'Expressing Gratitude through Action'.***





***Photo 4. Letter of Appreciation from Zizira to iTEAMS for their service during the pandemic.***

In public service, such small but thoughtful gestures are a morale booster to all the young team members of 1917iTEAMS who work almost 15 hours daily during the COVID-19 situation (7 AM to 10 PM daily). They respond to an average of 250-300 calls per day received at the toll free number 1917, which is a cloud-based telephone line which is connected to a 32 PRI line circuit.



***Hon'ble Chief Minister of Meghalaya, Conrad Kongkal Sangma visiting the 1917iTeams***

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE

Meghalaya lacks well-established professionally-qualified processing and marketing companies, which together with the disinclination of big companies to set up base in Northeast India, has proven unfavourable for this state. So these types of initiatives will help farmers to get better market facilities and exposure to advanced techno-interventions along with marketing opportunities for their produce. This kind of initiative that adopts a bottom-up approach to build a professional company from scratch through the support and empowerment of locally-trained youths from the state and the region, serve as the best model for creating economic opportunities for local people. The Slogan of 'Be Vocal for Local' is very relevant and this model of partnership is an example of this.

## LESSONS LEARNT

Public Private Partnership in Agri and Market Led Extension is the most contentious and most difficult to achieve. This is due, primarily, to the fact that there is lack of trust between farmers, government, and buyers (traders).

In the new marketing scenario, marketing would shift to the online space and home delivery model will be the new normal. Driving this change is Digital India and the rapid inroads made by Telecom companies and the Government on providing broadband connectivity to all the six lakh villages in the country. This is going to be a game changer and will forever change the rural landscape of the country. In such a scenario, the model of PPP in Market Led Extension will drive growth, productivity, and consumption, which will be totally propelled by what the CONSUMER NEEDS and not by what the FARMER GROWS.

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