

GOOD PRACTICES 64: MAY 2024



INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT) INITIATIVES BY TRISL



In this Good Practice Note, WB Kahandawa narrates the experiences of the Tea Research Institute of Sri Lanka with cyber extension interventions.

BACKGROUND

Advisory and extension services have been recognized as a prerequisite for the development of tea industry in Sri Lanka since the colonial period. The Tea Research Institute of Sri Lanka (TRISL) shoulders the main responsibility for generating knowledge and disseminating information to tea growers. Among the various advisory and extension approaches initiated by TRISL, cyber extension interventions play a vital role in knowledge dissemination while improving accessibility, ease of use, user-friendliness, accuracy, and speed of delivery. The main objective of ICT initiatives of TRISL is to ensure cost-effective and efficient dissemination of TRISL recommendations and information to tea growers, extension officers, and other relevant stakeholders, thus improving the level of adoption. The main ICT initiatives of TRISL are discussed below.



Tea Research Institute of Sri Lanka (TRISL) Talawakelle, Sri Lanka

SMS Gateway and Technical Text Message Service

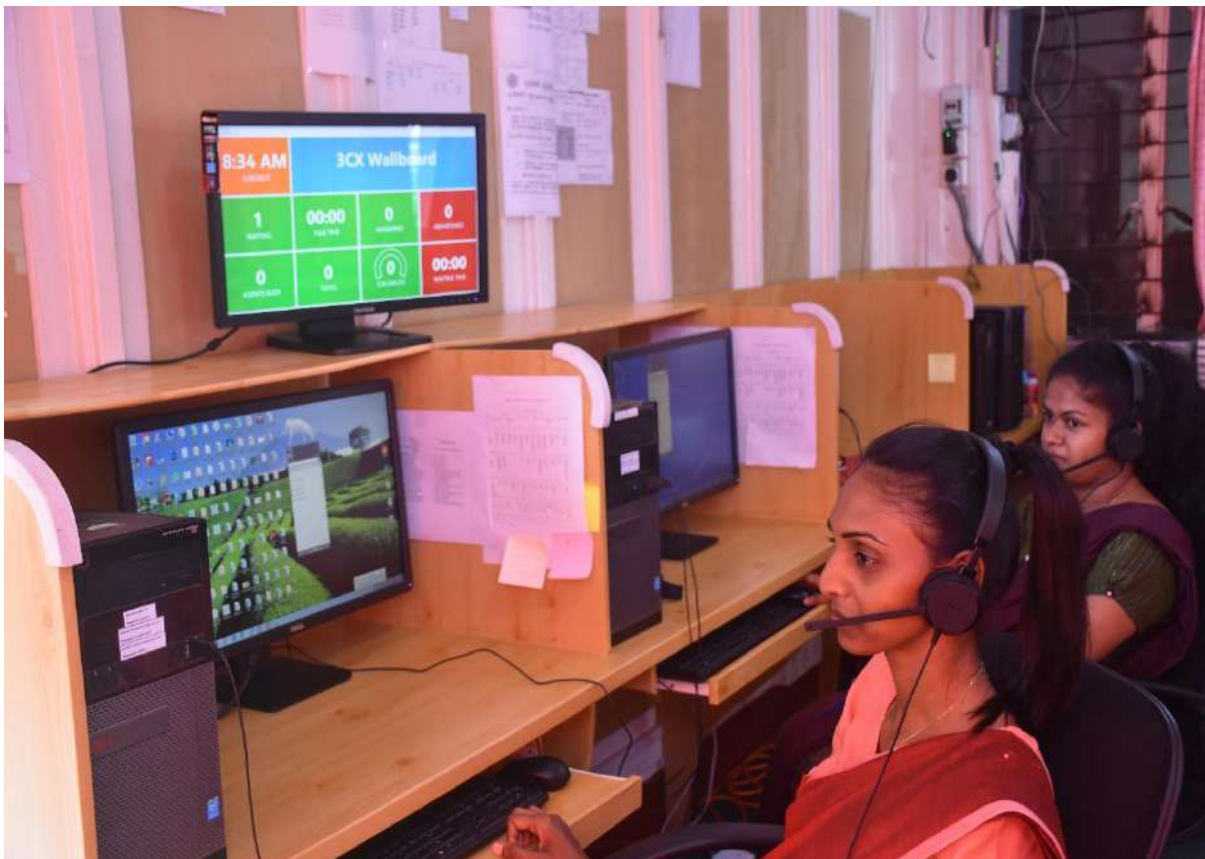
Short Message Service (SMS) can be considered as one of the most effective and efficient ways of sending extension messages to tea growers, due to the higher mobile phone usage among tea growers in Sri Lanka. Also, it has greater potential for use among tea growers who have plantations in remote locations with poor telecommunication infrastructure facilities. The TRI SMS Gateway and its regular monthly technical text message service was started in early 2018.

Currently, this service sends two timely and important messages per month as well as special messages in Sinhalese. More than 600 extension agents benefit from this service including tea smallholders, medium-scale tea growers, executives and field staff of Regional Plantation Companies (RPC), Tea Small Holdings Development Authority (TSHDA), and other tea-related organizations in the country. A study conducted by TRI in 2022 (unpublished) revealed that the vast majority of recipients was satisfied with the clarity and timeliness of the messages. Also, the implementation rate of these messages was at a very satisfactory level.



Technical Information and Advisory Service (TRI Call Centre)

The poor linkages among extension, research, and marketing networks limit the effectiveness of research and extension in the tea sector. During the COVID-19 pandemic, in February 2021, TRI started the Technical Information & Advisory Service, specifically to meet the day-to-day information needs of stakeholders with two-way interaction. This service contributes towards enriching the present information dissemination process in the tea sector while strengthening the research-extension-farmer linkage by providing immediate responses to day-to-day queries.



Tea growers can contact the service by dialing 081 2244777 via any fixed or mobile phone from any location during office hours (8.00 am – 4.00 pm), except on public holidays. A trained group of advisory and extension staff is available as Call Centre agents to provide answers and facilitate extended assistance to the queries of tea growers and other stakeholders. Furthermore, the service has the facility to share photos, and videos related to their problems via e-mail and WhatsApp. Advice for these types of queries is given to farmers as an outgoing call from the Call Centre within 24 hours. Moreover, there is a digital database that records the information history of queries from repeat clients including basic information, and the queries as well as responses.



Maintaining these records as data is vital in order to identify and prioritize issues pertinent to the tea sector and to make decisions on further improvements to the knowledge dissemination process.

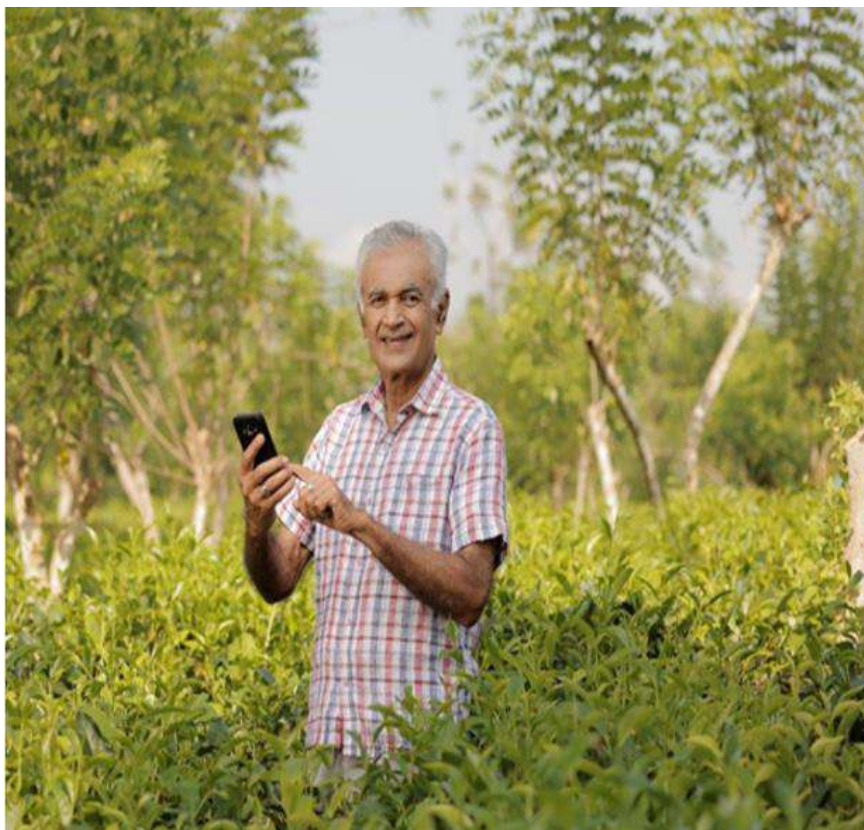
Tea Advisor Android Mobile Application

The *Tea Advisor* android mobile application was developed based on the Design and Development Research (DDR) approach and launched in the Google Play Store in June 2023. Its primary objective is to provide stakeholders with updated technical information and TRI recommendations in their native language, accessible at their fingertips.

This app provides information in the preferred local language, offers seasonal updates, and provides updated information, technical recommendations, access to TRI Call Center, and other tea-related important institutional websites links. Currently more than 2500 total installations of the Tea Advisor android mobile application were recorded with a 4.93% (28 days rolling average) audience growth rate.

Dialog Govimithuru Tea Voice Message Channel

This initiative under the Cyber extension interventions was initiated in 2017. Later, in 2021, TRISL signed an MoU with Dialog Axiata PLC to facilitate tea growers by providing advisory services for the benefit of the entire tea industry in Sri Lanka. Through this partnership, TRI provides technical and advisory content to enable dialog to stylize and disseminate among their registered subscribers. The



application allows users to access this interactive voice record (IVR) service as recorded voice messages daily in the morning time. This service is provided with relevant charges, and there are about 33715 subscribers on the channel. TRISL updates the set of messages providing technical information to the channel according to their timely importance. This voice message channel is popular among planters with a growing number of subscribers; it also provides guidance on how to access further information through the TRI Call Centre.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

TRISL plans to expand the number of beneficiaries of SMS Gateway up to 20,000 and improve the service by sending region-specific messages based on the language preference of receivers. Also, there is a plan to expand the services provided by the Call Centre given the popularity of the service, by increasing the number of operating hours and agents. Future directions of the 'Tea Advisor' android mobile application include upgrading it into a cross-platform application and expanding the community of practice to individual tea growers. Also, in future, the Govimituru subscribers are expected to benefit more through value-added services for particular growers with specific messages on their choice, as a TRISL and Dialog, Public Private Partnership project. A YouTube channel on tea cultivation will also be initiated in the future.

W B Kahandawa is a Senior Advisory Officer at the Tea Research Institute of Sri Lanka.

Email: warnasiri@yahoo.com