

# Agents of Change

## Young Leaders for Sustainability

### Agents of Change – Young leaders for sustainability

Agriculture has been the mainstay of Indian economy. In addition to being an important sector contributing to India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), it employs a large section of the country's population. The state of Punjab has played an important role in agricultural growth and development of India. However, in recent times agricultural sector is facing challenges of stagnation in production, over-exploitation of natural resources, irrational use of inputs and increased uncertainties due to changing climate.

The Centers for International Projects Trust (CIPT) has been working in Punjab since 2008. Through its work, CIPT has addressed the problems of agriculture in the state. It has worked towards finding innovative solutions in areas of development of low-cost technologies, promoting the use of ICT and advocating the cause of farmers. The organisation has a rich experience of working with more than 15,000 farmers in the state.

Through its interventions in the state of Punjab, CIPT has realised that there is a disconnect between what is being practiced by farmers on the fields and what is generally recommended by universities and the agriculture department. While we are working to device ways and means of providing fast, accurate and reliable information to farmers we feel that there is a need to engage with young students for the same. This becomes more important at a

time when we find students at a cross-roads when it comes to understanding on-ground realities facing the sector.

To realise this objective, CIPT launched a programme titled 'Agents of Change' in the state of Punjab along with Khalsa College, Amritsar, a prestigious educational institute. The main aim of the programme was to bridge the gap between the classroom and the farmers field, between curriculum based learning and experimental learning and to transform students as leaders-promoting the cause of sustainability.

### Components

The programme launched on July 23, 2015 saw the participation of around 750 students from the Department of Agriculture, Khalsa College and faculty members. Dr. SS Johl, renowned agricultural economist and Chancellor, Central University of Punjab, was the Chief Guest. In the next few months the students, faculty members and staff of CIPT will operationalize the programme involving the following steps

- 1. Formation of groups:** the students will arrange themselves into groups of 10. Each group will be represented by students from year 1-4 of the Bachelor programme and year 1-2 of the Master programme. The team will have two team leaders – ideally students

from the Master programme or year 4 of the Bachelor programme. To ensure participation of female students, each group will have at least 2 female members. The team will be guided by mentors comprising 2-4 teachers from the Department of Agriculture, Khalsa College.

2. **Selection of villages and its adoption:** Once the groups are formed, each team will identify two villages where they will visit for interaction with the farmers. Prior to visiting the village the students will make contact with the village leader and functionaries of the Cooperative Society. They will prepare a plan to organise 25-30 farmers on a designated date for the meeting. Students will also prepare an outline of the major issues facing the agriculture and probable solutions for ensuring sustainability in the village. These will form part of the discussion which will be conducted in the villages.
3. **Activities in the village:** Upon reaching the village, the students will be guided towards the discussion with the farmers by their mentors and team members of CIPT. After a formal round of introduction, an interactive session will follow where students will ask questions pertaining to the socio-economic condition of the village, enquire about current farming practices and discuss challenges faced in the farming sector. The idea behind the interaction is to create a forum where students become recipient of on-ground information. Based on their understanding and guided by their mentors, the students will discuss ways to find solutions of some of the problems outlined by the farmers.  
  
In addition, the students will also train the farmers in using the interactive Decision Support System (DSS) developed by CIPT and upload the application on their mobile phones. The DSS provides information on agricultural practices for five major crops of Punjab – namely rice, wheat, maize, cotton and sugarcane. Each team will make at least 2 trips to the villages.
4. **Preparation of project report:** On completion of the field visit, the students will compile the information obtained from the farmers and will develop a project report that encompasses information relating to – village profile, demographic and socio-economic details, challenges faced by the farmers relating to natural resources use and agricultural production. They will also research and discuss amongst themselves key approaches which could provide solutions to the

identified problems. The report would also outline the role of different stakeholders in finding solution to the problems. As part of the report preparation phase, the students will be trained in research methodologies and report writing.

5. **Shortlisting top 10 finalists:** Based on a scrutiny of the project reports submitted by all the groups, top ten teams will be shortlisted for the final round. The entries will be judged on the basis of the originality of content and attempt to find realistic solutions. CIPT team and mentors comprising faculty from Khalsa College will then work with the shortlisted teams to elaborate their project report as a proposal that details out the issues and solutions. CIPT plans to organise interaction programmes of the shortlisted teams with external experts so as to widen the horizon of knowledge and information for the young minds as they take on the mantle to work towards finding innovative solutions of the problems facing Punjab agriculture.
6. **Selection of top 3 teams:** The shortlisted teams will finally make a presentation to a panel of jury members comprising external experts, representatives of Khalsa College and CIPT. The top three teams will have the chance to work with CIPT in realising some of the approaches and solutions identified by them in select villages. CIPT's attempt is not towards making the programme end with a competition to select and award top 3 teams. We believe that the programme will give an opportunity to begin a long term engagement with the farming community in the state. CIPT will undertake an evaluation of the programme to fine tune aspects that will make the programme more comprehensive and effective.

We are hopeful that the role of the students in working towards conservation of resources and protection of our planet will not be limited to the activities of the programme. It's just the beginning of a journey to tell the world that 'we care'. Our confidence stems from the encouragement and support we received during the launch of the programme. We truly believe in what American author Margaret Mead said –

*'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.'*