

# INTERVIEW

**Rasheed Sulaiman, Director of the Centre for Research on Innovation and Science Policy (CRISP) Hyderabad, India**

*Could you please tell us a little about your academic background and why you chose to work in the area of agricultural innovation systems?*



I am an Agricultural Extension Specialist by training. Extension is commonly used to describe technology transfer and promotion activities and service. It also sometimes involves farmer education. Before taking up my current position as Director of the Centre for Research on Innovation and Science Policy (CRISP), Hyderabad in April 2006, I worked with the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) in New Delhi as an Extension Scientist. I spent 13 years of my professional life as a researcher at ICAR's National Centre for Agricultural Economics and Policy Research (NCAP) in New Delhi.

The first major study I was involved in investigated the pros and cons of privatizing agricultural extension services in India. It revealed the changing nature of information demand of farmers and the diversity of organizations involved in technology transfer. This study revealed to me the lack of linkages among the different agencies involved in technology transfer and the weak relationships between them and other agencies dealing with technology development and support services.

During this period (1997-1999) I participated in a project exploring

UNU-MERIT Profile: Rasheed Sulaiman

the nature of partnerships emerging in Indian agriculture. It was led by UNU-MERIT researcher Andy Hall, who then worked at the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics in Hyderabad. Through this project Andy and I started to experiment with using the innovation systems concept to explore these issues and, along with other colleagues in India, we did several case studies on partnership arrangements. This helped us identify some of the underlying difficulties of pursuing a partnership-based approach to innovation. Institutional issues – basically the way scientists and the private sector were conditioned to operate and the antagonistic relations that this led to between them — were at the centre of these difficulties and understanding how to bring about institutional change and how innovation capacities can be strengthened is still a central question in my research.

Later, I started to use the innovation systems framework to explore new forms of agricultural extension emerging in India and to analyse extension policy arrangements in Asia. When Andy moved to the then UNU-INTECH (now UNU-MERIT) in 2004 I collaborated with him on two research projects: *New insights on pro-poor innovation: Lessons from civil society* and *Enhancing Agricultural Innovation: How to go beyond strengthening research systems*.

I joined CRISP in April 2006. Currently CRISP hosts the South Asia



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December 2006

Rural Innovation Policy Studies Hub of UNU-MERIT (known as the LINK initiative) and I am the South Asia Director for the network. We look forward to this collaboration developing further in the coming years.

***What are your current interests and what motivates you to keep working in this area?***

My main area of research is understanding rural innovation and exploring new ways of enhancing rural innovation capacity. Obviously this interest stems from my early work on both extension and on partnerships, institutions and innovation. But possibly more important is the fact that these powerful perspectives that could unlock the potential of Indian rural areas have yet to permeate the policy community in our country. And while many other countries with agro-based economies have grasped the opportunities offered by globalization, Indian agriculture is stagnating and the livelihoods of rural people are suffering. Meanwhile our shops are rapidly filling with Chinese apples, Italian tomato purée, and California grapes – all of which India produces in abundance.



Part of the UNU-MERIT South Asia Hub team outside their new offices in Hyderabad, India

Our frustration is only compounded by the fact that we have one of the largest agricultural science infrastructures in the world and yet we still can't enable the process of innovation needed to deal effectively with the challenges and opportunities

of the modern world. Knowing this and also knowing the lessons we have learnt on agriculture and rural innovation - and therefore convinced that something could be done about this situation - keeps us going. It frustrates us, but it also inspires us!! CRISP is a small organization. And stimulating policy change – especially in India – is a massive task, but it needs to be done and one has to start somewhere.

***As the Director of the LINK network in South Asia, what is your perspective on the contribution of UNU-MERIT and its partners to developments in South Asia***

Let me start by saying that we welcome the fact UNU-MERIT has decentralized its research on agriculture and rural development to South Asia and other regions. We always value the intellectual insights and other support coming from research organizations in the developed world. But all too often we in the South get treated like poor cousins and we find that the research interests of our Northern/international partners don't match regional priorities. We appreciate UNU-MERIT's efforts to physically partner with us in the region. Researchers and policy makers in the region are only too willing to welcome organizations like UNU-MERIT once they have made the effort to introduce themselves. For example, this week we visited the National Science Foundation in Sri Lanka to discuss collaboration with our LINK network. Not only did they welcome us with open arms, but they also allocated some of their budget for joint activities with us. The combination of a UN organization like UNU-MERIT and a regional organization like our own is very powerful in building these sorts of productive relationships with regional policy processes. In the case of Sri Lanka, the National Science Foundation was very keen to bring in other LINK partners from other regions to share experiences.

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As I said earlier stimulating policy change is always difficult but at least

the LINK initiative gives a focus trying to achieve this. The work of CRISP and the work I did at NCAP and with Andy and others, has contributed to a respectably large body of empirical material on rural innovation and innovation capacity and the institutional and policy measures needed to strengthen this capacity. In South Asia the real priority is to use these insights to make a policy difference. I don't see any other initiative trying to do this in the area of rural innovation.

***At Globelics-2006 in Kerala, there was a push for more development oriented innovation research-what role in your view does innovation play in (rural) development in South Asia***

Supporting innovation is important for South Asia, where roughly 40% of the world's poor live and where poverty is basically a rural problem, as more than 75% of the poor in South Asia live in rural areas. The poor can improve their livelihoods, only when their capacity to access, adapt and apply new knowledge, technology and information to their own context is strengthened. Building this capacity is the core of promoting rural innovation. There are several institutional constraints to do this and this needs to be addressed. Promoting rural innovation is the way forward for rural development in South Asia.

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***What are the main developments in rural or agricultural innovation and innovation capacity building in SA at the moment? In what direction are the research and intellectual debates heading, and are the policy makers following?***

As I have mentioned earlier, there is an increasing realization in this region that agricultural and rural innovation is critical for addressing the high levels of poverty and rural distress. National governments in

South Asian countries are implementing several programmes for agricultural and rural development. The public sector over the past 5 decades or so has set up R&D organizations and technology transfer units. NGOs are also playing an important role in rural development. Private sector participation is also on the rise. Though several organizations exist, due to a number of reasons, the patterns of interaction are so restricted and this constrains knowledge flows among them.

India is currently experimenting with a "consortia" approach in agricultural research through a new National Agricultural Innovation Project (NAIP) funded by the World Bank. This project envisages building a consortium of actors to address emerging issues in agricultural development. Microfinance institutions in South Asian countries are also experimenting with ways of improving the capacity of the poor to pursue improved livelihoods. However, most agricultural and rural development programmes are operating on a technology development and transfer paradigm that is not sufficient for promoting rural innovation or building innovation capacity.

Policy makers have slowly started realizing this but they are not clear on how to do things differently. This is clear from several policy consultations the LINK associates are involved with. LINK associates are part of several working groups and policy consultations in India and to a limited extent in South Asia. In India, LINK South Asia is collaborating with the Centre for Policy Research (CPR), New Delhi. LINK South Asia is contributing to these debates and discussions by participating in these debates and in shaping the focus of the discussions.

*Dr. Rasheed Sulaiman was interviewed by Lina Sonne, UNU-MERIT PhD Researcher, currently carrying out research on the financing of rural innovation in India.*



Lina Sonne