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Nurturing Agri-Startup Ideas through Structured Pre-Incubation Mentoring

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About the Publication

The Extension NEXT Good Practices Bulletin Series documents and disseminates innovative, evidence-based extension practices that have demonstrated positive impact in agribusiness incubation. The series aims to facilitate knowledge sharing by highlighting successful, replicable, and scalable initiatives, enabling incubation professionals, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to learn from proven field experiences and promote their wider adoption.

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Authors' Note



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The MANAGE-CIA Pre-Incubation Mentoring Programme was formulated to address a critical gap in the entrepreneurial journey: the need for structured guidance before ideas enter formal incubation. While considerable support is available for established startups, aspiring agripreneurs at the ideation stage often require mentoring, practical knowledge, and exposure to the entrepreneurial ecosystem to transform innovative concepts into viable enterprises. This Good Practice Note documents the programme's design, implementation, achievements, and key lessons, providing a comprehensive account of an institutional approach to strengthening early-stage entrepreneurship in agriculture.

The programme demonstrates that pre-incubation is much more than a preparatory phase; it is a process of developing entrepreneurial thinking, validating ideas, building confidence, and connecting innovators with the resources, expertise, and networks required for venture creation. By integrating expert-led learning, founder interactions, personalised mentoring, and incubation linkages, the programme has enabled participants to refine their business ideas and progress towards incubation, funding, and enterprise development. The experiences documented in this publication highlight the value of combining institutional support with practical entrepreneurial learning to build innovation-driven Agri-startups.



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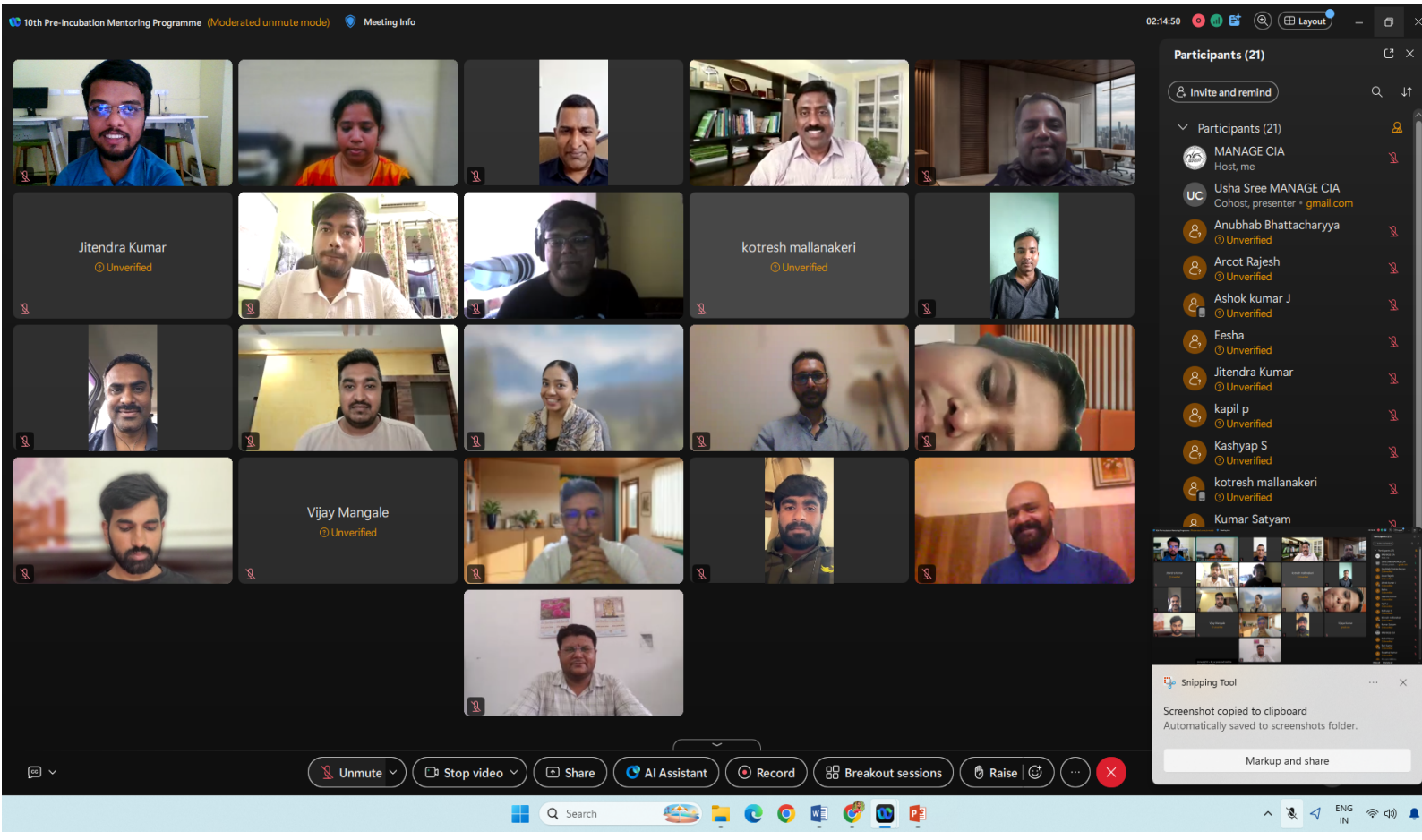
This Good Practice Note is intended as a resource for agribusiness incubators, agricultural universities, innovation hubs, entrepreneurship development organisations, policymakers, and other institutions involved in startup promotion. The approaches presented here may serve as a practical reference for designing and strengthening pre-incubation programmes suited to diverse sectors and regional contexts.

We express our sincere appreciation to the mentors, Agri-startup founders, resource persons, and the MANAGE-CIA team for their valuable contributions to the successful implementation of the programme. We also acknowledge the enthusiasm and commitment of all participants whose interest, ideas, engagement, and entrepreneurial aspirations have shaped the programme's continued growth. We trust that this publication will encourage wider adoption of structured pre-incubation support and contribute to strengthening innovation and entrepreneurship across agriculture and allied sectors.

Nurturing Agri-Startup Ideas through Structured Pre-Incubation Mentoring



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Abstract

The MANAGE-CIA Pre-Incubation Mentoring Programme, launched by the Centre for Innovation and Agripreneurship (CIA), National Institute of Agricultural Extension Management (MANAGE), Hyderabad, in September 2021, is a structured capacity-building initiative designed to support aspiring agripreneurs and early-stage Agri-startups in transforming innovative ideas into viable and scalable business ventures. Recognising the limited availability of systematic support during the ideation stage, the programme addresses critical gaps in idea validation, business-model development, market assessment, financial planning, and investment readiness through expert-led training and personalised mentoring. Between 2021 and 2026, the programme conducted ten batches, benefiting 280 participants from 23 States and 4 Union Territories, representing diverse educational, professional, and entrepreneurial backgrounds.

The programme follows a structured 22-day learning process comprising expert-led thematic sessions, interactions with successful Agri-startup founders, guided pitch-deck development, and one-on-one mentoring by domain experts. Participants gain practical exposure to design thinking, business-model development, customer validation, digital marketing, financial planning, legal compliance, networking, and investment readiness while refining their startup ideas with continuous expert feedback. The programme also connects participants with incubation opportunities, funding schemes, and the broader agricultural innovation ecosystem, enabling a smooth transition from ideation to enterprise development.

The programme has contributed to strengthening entrepreneurial competencies and facilitating startup growth, with 19 participant startups progressing to incubation at MANAGE-CIA and eight startups receiving PM-RKVY funding amounting to ₹35 lakh. Its technology-enabled delivery, strong mentoring network, standardised implementation process, and participant-fee-based model have enhanced its accessibility, sustainability, and scalability. The experiences and lessons documented in this Good Practice Note demonstrate a practical and replicable model for strengthening pre-incubation support and fostering innovation-driven entrepreneurship across agriculture and allied sectors.

Introduction

Entrepreneurship is an innovation-driven process through which individuals identify unmet consumer needs, respond to disruptions in existing business processes, and transform creative ideas into commercially viable ventures (Henry et al., 2020). Entrepreneurs are frequently motivated by personal fulfilment, professional independence, and the aspiration to develop and commercialise innovative solutions. They are often characterised by youthful dynamism, higher educational attainment, and access to strong professional networks (Picken, 2017). However, converting an entrepreneurial idea into a sustainable venture is a complex process influenced by market conditions, institutional structures, resource availability, and the responsiveness of the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Tehseen and Ramayah, 2015).

Business incubators function as important entrepreneurial support institutions by providing a conducive environment for startup creation, survival, and growth. Through structured guidance, mentoring, infrastructure, networking, technical assistance, and access to financial and market resources, incubators enable entrepreneurs to navigate different stages of the business development process. Consequently, incubation contributes not only to the development of viable enterprises but also to employment generation, innovation, and broader socioeconomic development (Hausberg and Korreck, 2020; Mian, 2021; Rosado-Cubero et al., 2023).

Stages of Incubation Support

Incubation support generally operates through three interrelated stages:
(i)Pre-incubation, (ii) Incubation, and (iii) Post-incubation

Pre-incubation supports individuals and early-stage teams in identifying entrepreneurial opportunities, refining ideas, validating problems and proposed solutions, and developing preliminary business models. It prepares aspiring entrepreneurs to enter formal incubation with greater clarity regarding their customers, markets, resources, and venture requirements.

Incubation supports startups in converting validated ideas into viable enterprises. During this stage, entrepreneurs receive technical and business mentoring, infrastructure support, networking opportunities, market linkages, assistance in product development, and guidance in mobilising financial resources. The emphasis is on developing products or services, strengthening business models, building organisational capabilities, and achieving market entry.

Post-incubation supports enterprises that have completed formal incubation and are ready for further growth. It facilitates business expansion, market diversification, investment mobilisation, strategic partnerships, and scaling of operations. Continued mentoring and ecosystem linkages help enterprises address growth-related challenges and improve their long-term sustainability. (Hillemane et al., 2019; Mian, 2021; Nana et al., 2024)

2. Genesis of the MANAGE-CIA Pre-Incubation Mentoring Program

Pre-incubation plays a foundational role in supporting entrepreneurs before their ideas become operational or investment-ready ventures. It enables aspiring entrepreneurs to identify problems, validate proposed solutions, assess markets, develop business models, and prepare minimum viable products. It also helps them understand the entrepreneurial ecosystem and evaluate the technical feasibility, commercial viability, and stakeholder relevance of their ideas.

Despite its importance, pre-incubation has received less attention than formal incubation and acceleration. Many support programmes primarily target startups that already possess validated ideas, prototypes, registered entities, or demonstrated market potential. Consequently, individuals at the ideation and early-validation stages may remain outside established incubation systems, although decisions made during these stages strongly influence venture development (Theodoraki, 2020; Theodoraki and Messeghem, 2017; Mele et al., 2024). Structured pre-incubation initiatives can strengthen entrepreneurial intentions and facilitate the transition from ideas to startup creation (Mele et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2017).

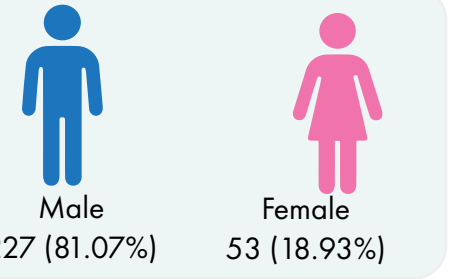
The need for such support is particularly significant in agriculture, where startups operate within complex value chains involving farmers, input suppliers, processors, research institutions, financial organisations, government agencies, markets, and consumers. Aspiring agripreneurs must understand production risks, seasonality, stakeholder behaviour, regulatory requirements, market linkages, and the socioeconomic conditions of farming communities in addition to technology and business management.

Many aspiring agripreneurs possess technical knowledge or innovative ideas but have limited exposure to customer validation, business planning, financial management, market assessment, resource mobilisation, regulatory systems, and startup development. They may also face difficulties in accessing mentors, professional networks, technical resources, funding institutions, and potential partners. Without systematic early-stage guidance, entrepreneurial ideas may remain poorly defined, technology-driven rather than demand-oriented, and inadequately prepared for incubation or investment (NAAS, 2022).

To address the early-stage capacity-building and mentoring needs of aspiring agripreneurs and Agri-startups, MANAGE-CIA initiated the Pre-Incubation Mentoring Program in September 2021. The programme is designed as a structured 22-day intervention that supports individuals in refining their entrepreneurial ideas and transforming them into viable and scalable business propositions.

3. Profile of the Participants

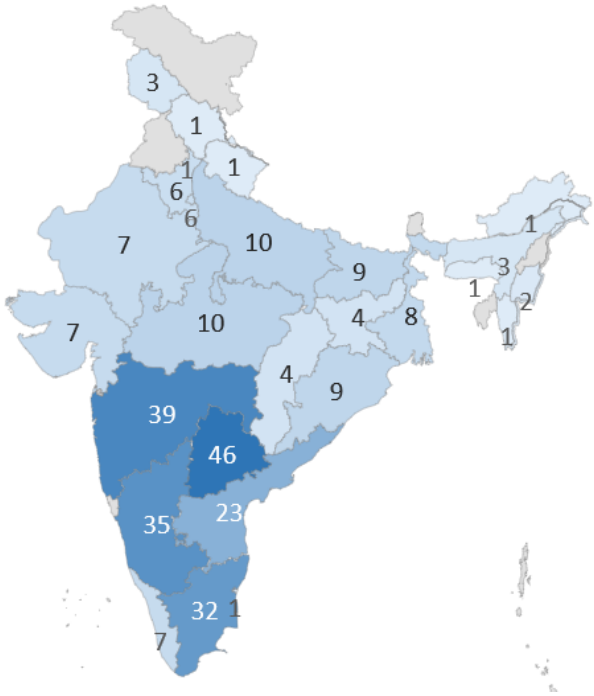
MANAGE-CIA has completed ten batches of the Pre-Incubation Mentoring Program from 2021 to 2026, benefiting 280 aspiring agripreneurs and early-stage Agri-startups from 23 States and 4 Union Territories across India. The programme has attracted participants from diverse educational and professional backgrounds. Of the total participants, 227 (81.07%) were male and 53 (18.93%) were female. Entrepreneurs constituted the largest participant group, accounting for 139 (49.64%), followed by 103 working professionals (36.78%) and 38 students (13.57%). Of the 280 participants, 223 (79.64%) were at the ideation stage, indicating that the programme primarily reached aspiring agripreneurs requiring early-stage support to refine and validate their entrepreneurial ideas. In addition, 35 (12.5%) participants had developed prototypes, while 22 (7.85%) had commercialised their products or services. The participation of entrepreneurs at different stages enabled the programme to address diverse needs, ranging from idea conceptualisation and business-model development to product validation, market strategy, and enterprise growth.



Gender



Profession



State-wise Representation



Stage of the Startup

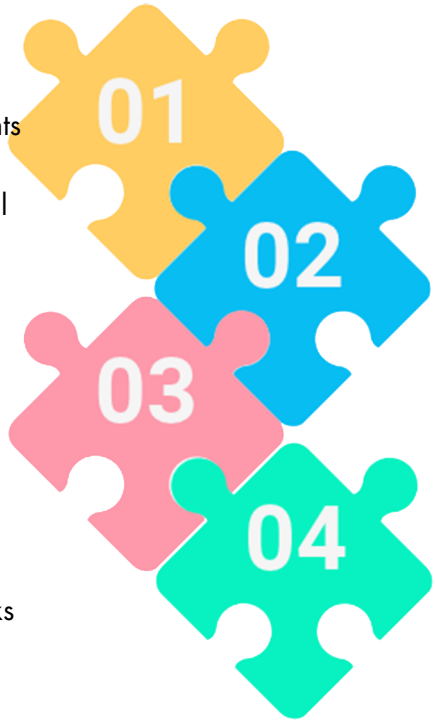
4. Implementation Process

The Pre-incubation mentoring programme follows a blended and participatory learning approach. It begins with 30 hours of interactive sessions conducted over 15 days, combining conceptual inputs from domain experts, practical experiences shared by Agri-startup founders, and pitch-deck preparation. The interactive sessions are followed by one week of personalised mentoring and handholding. During this stage, participants select mentors according to their specific business needs and engage in individual discussions to refine their startup ideas, business models, financial plans, market strategies, and pitch decks. The programme functions as a preparatory platform between idea generation and formal incubation by integrating expert knowledge, entrepreneurial experience, practical application, and individual mentoring. It enables aspiring agripreneurs and early-stage Agri-startups to access structured guidance through a single programme and strengthens their readiness for validation, incubation, funding, market entry, and enterprise development.

Pre-Incubation Mentoring Program Stages

Outreach & Mobilization

Reach and mobilize participants through digital promotion, university outreach, institutional networking, and continuous stakeholder engagement



Pitch Desk Presentation

Guided preparation, expert evaluation, and iterative refinement of startup pitch desks

Pitch Desk Presentation

Guided preparation, expert evaluation, and iterative refinement of startup pitch desks

One-on-One Mentoring

One week of personalized guidance, participant-led mentor selection, and confidential facilitation

4.1 Strategic Outreach and Participant Mobilization

The Pre-Incubation Mentoring Program follows a multi-channel outreach strategy to reach aspiring agripreneurs, students, working professionals, innovators, and early-stage Agri-startups from different sectors and geographical regions. The programme combines digital promotion, institutional networking, continuous entrepreneurial engagement, and direct communication to generate awareness and mobilize participants requiring structured support for refining their startup ideas.

- Multi-Channel Awareness and Digital Promotion: Information about the programme is disseminated through the MANAGE and MANAGE-CIA websites, social media platforms, digital posters, brochures, email communication, WhatsApp groups, and other online channels. Programme details, including objectives, session themes, duration, participation fee, eligibility, application process, and mentoring support are communicated clearly to help potential participants assess the programme's relevance to their entrepreneurial needs.
- Online Outreach Sessions with Universities: MANAGE-CIA conducts online outreach and orientation sessions in collaboration with agricultural universities and other higher-education institutions to introduce students and aspiring entrepreneurs to the Pre-Incubation Mentoring Program. These sessions explain the programme structure, eligibility, application process, learning components, mentoring support, and expected outcomes, while also addressing participants' queries and encouraging suitable candidates to apply.
- Continuous Engagement through MANAGE-CIA Platforms: Outreach is reinforced through the Saturday Webinar Series, stakeholder-connect programmes, training programmes, workshops, student visits, startup interactions, and other MANAGE-CIA capacity-building initiatives. These platforms provide opportunities to introduce the programme, explain the role of pre-incubation, clarify application requirements, and familiarize potential participants with the support available for idea validation, business-model development, mentoring, incubation, and funding readiness.

4.2 Expert-Led Thematic Sessions

The programme follows a carefully sequenced learning process that guides participants from understanding themselves as entrepreneurs to developing, validating, financing, and presenting their ventures. Practitioners, professionals, startup founders, subject-matter experts, and the MANAGE-CIA team facilitate the sessions using startup cases, practical examples, structured templates, diagnostic questions, and interactive discussions. Participants are encouraged to apply each concept directly to their own business ideas during the sessions. This application-oriented approach enables them to identify gaps, receive immediate clarification, refine their assumptions, and progressively improve their venture concepts. The thematic sessions are delivered through the following process:

4.2.1. Entrepreneurial Orientation and Ecosystem Awareness

The programme begins by helping participants assess their entrepreneurial interests, attitudes, strengths, and areas requiring development. Through reflective questions, discussions, examples of entrepreneurial journeys, and experience sharing, participants examine the personal qualities and behaviours required to start and manage a venture.

The sessions then introduce the Agri-startup ecosystem by mapping the roles of incubators, government departments, financial institutions, research organisations, mentors, investors, and industry actors. Rather than only providing information about schemes, facilitators explain how entrepreneurs can identify suitable programmes, assess eligibility, approach relevant institutions, and use incubation support at different stages of venture development. This introductory stage helps participants understand both their own readiness and the external support systems available to them.

4.2.2. Idea Validation and Product Development

Participants are guided to move from broad ideas to clearly defined and evidence-based business opportunities. Facilitators use problem-identification exercises, stakeholder analysis, customer discussions, feasibility questions, and market observations to help participants distinguish between assumed problems and problems genuinely experienced by potential users.

Design-thinking methods are then applied to develop user-centred solutions. Participants are guided through understanding users, defining the problem, generating alternative solutions, selecting feasible options, and developing prototypes or minimum viable products. This iterative process enables participants to test their ideas at a smaller scale before committing substantial resources. The unique feature of this stage is that participants are encouraged to question and modify their initial ideas rather than defend them without evidence.

4.2.3. Business and Market Strategy

Once the idea has been validated, participants convert it into a structured business proposition using the Business Model Canvas. Facilitators explain each component through practical examples and then guide participants in identifying their customer segments, value propositions, channels, customer relationships, revenue streams, key activities, resources, partners, and costs.

Competition analysis is conducted by helping participants identify direct, indirect, and potential competitors. They compare alternatives based on factors such as price, quality, accessibility, technology, customer experience, and service delivery. This enables them to identify realistic points of differentiation rather than making general claims that their solution is unique.

Digital marketing and branding sessions guide participants in defining their brand identity, selecting suitable communication channels, developing customer-focused messages, and planning market-engagement activities. Participants learn how to match digital platforms and promotional strategies with the behaviour of their intended customers. This stage is effective because participants progressively connect customer needs, competitive positioning, revenue generation, and market communication within a single business strategy.

4.2.4. Financial, Legal, and Operational Readiness

Participants translate their business models into financial estimates using guided exercises on startup costs, operating expenses, pricing, revenue projections, cash flow, working capital, and break-even analysis. Experts explain the concepts using simple venture-level examples and assist participants in applying them to their own enterprises.

Rather than preparing optimistic projections only for funding applications, participants are encouraged to examine assumptions related to production volume, customer acquisition, pricing, recurring expenses, and the time required to generate revenue. This helps them assess financial feasibility and identify areas where costs can be controlled.

Legal and intellectual-property sessions use practical scenarios and compliance checklists to explain entity registration, licences, taxation, contracts, regulatory requirements, trademarks, patents, copyrights, and protection of business information. Participants are guided to identify the registrations and legal protections relevant to their sector, product, and stage of development. The practical value of this stage lies in helping participants anticipate financial and regulatory risks before they become barriers to business operation or investment.

4.2.5. Networking and Investment Readiness

Participants are introduced to networking as a planned process of identifying, approaching, and maintaining relationships with relevant stakeholders. They map the organisations and individuals who can contribute to technology development, market access, technical validation, finance, mentoring, regulatory guidance, and business partnerships.

Facilitators demonstrate how entrepreneurs can introduce themselves, communicate their requirements clearly, follow up after meetings, and build mutually beneficial relationships. Participants are encouraged to view networking as long-term relationship development rather than merely collecting contacts.

Investor-readiness sessions build on all the earlier thematic outputs. Participants convert their validated problem, solution, market assessment, business model, competitive advantage, financial requirements, and growth plan into a structured pitch deck.

Overall, the effectiveness of the expert-led thematic sessions lies in their progressive sequencing, direct application to participants' ideas, use of practical tools, interaction with experienced practitioners, and continuous refinement through feedback. The sessions enable participants to leave the programme not only with increased knowledge but also with improved business models, clearer market strategies, greater compliance awareness, and more investment-ready venture propositions.

4.3 Experience-sharing sessions

The programme conducts interactive, case-based sessions in which Agri-startup founders trace their journeys from problem identification to scaling and sustainability. Practitioner-led storytelling and discussion help participants understand real challenges, assess strategic options, anticipate risks, and apply relevant lessons to their own ventures.

- Diversity of Entrepreneurial Pathways: Founders from diverse sectors, regions, customer segments, business models, and maturity stages expose participants to varied entrepreneurial pathways, helping them understand that strategies are context-specific and must be thoughtfully adapted rather than copied directly elsewhere.
- Learning from Real Challenges: Founders candidly discuss challenges, decisions, resource mobilisation, setbacks, business-model adaptations, and stakeholder relationships, including failed experiments and operational difficulties, enabling participants to learn from both successful actions and mistakes encountered during enterprise development and growth.
- Interactive and Reflective Learning: Through guided discussions and question-and-answer sessions, participants examine founders' decisions, consider alternatives, and connect shared experiences with their own ideas, gaining practical insight into applying business concepts under real market, financial, institutional, and operational conditions.

4.4 Pitch Deck Presentation

The Pitch Deck Presentation stage is designed as a structured process through which participants communicate, test, and refine their Agri-startup ideas. The programme treats pitching as a progressive learning process involving preparation, timed presentation, expert feedback, and revision to strengthen participants' analytical ability, communication, confidence, and readiness for incubation and investment.

- Pre-Assessment and Participant Profiling: Before the session, participants complete a structured Google Form on their background, startup stage, mentoring needs, and pitch readiness, enabling the programme team to assess gaps, shortlist participants, schedule presentations, and facilitate relevant, individualized mentoring.
- Guided Pitch Deck Preparation: A standardized PowerPoint template guides participants through key pitch components, helping them identify information gaps, strengthen internal consistency, and organize their startup ideas into a clear, concise, logical, and investor-oriented presentation before the pitching session.

- Structured Presentation of Startup Ideas: Each shortlisted participant delivers a 15-minute pitch before experts, encouraging focused communication and evidence-based presentation, while probing questions assess customer needs, feasibility, innovation, scalability, financial viability, and readiness for implementation.
- Expert Feedback and Iterative Refinement: Experts provide specific and actionable feedback on both the business concept and presentation. Participants are guided to revise unclear assumptions, strengthen market and financial evidence, improve slide organization, and sharpen their value proposition.

4.5 One-on-One Mentoring Sessions

The One-on-One Mentoring Sessions provide individualized guidance tailored to each participant's startup idea, stage, and challenges, helping refine concepts, strengthen strategic clarity and confidence, and prepare for validation, incubation, and enterprise development.

- Participant-Led Mentor Selection: Participants select up to three experts who facilitated earlier sessions, enabling informed choices based on familiarity with their expertise and approach. This process aligns mentoring with specific needs such as validation, business modelling, marketing, finance, regulation, and investment readiness.
- Focused Individual Interaction: Each participant receives a focused mentoring session of up to 60 minutes to present the startup concept, discuss progress, and seek guidance. Through probing questions and practical feedback, mentors assess assumptions, identify gaps, evaluate feasibility, and recommend actionable next steps.
- Confidential Facilitation: A MANAGE-CIA team member coordinates schedules, introduces participants and mentors, manages session time, and addresses technical or communication issues. Strict confidentiality is maintained throughout, allowing participants to discuss business challenges, strategic concerns, and sensitive information openly and confidently.

5. Outcomes and Impact

The Pre-Incubation Mentoring Programme produced measurable outcomes in terms of incubation, funding, geographical coverage, and sectoral diversity. Of the programme participants, 19 start-ups were selected for incubation at MANAGE-CIA, demonstrating their progression from early-stage ideas towards structured enterprise development. Among these, eight start-ups, representing 42.1% of the incubated start-ups, were selected for funding under PM-RKVY, with a total of ₹35 lakh sanctioned. This funding provided financial support for product development, technology validation, market testing, and commercialisation. Since information on incubation or funding secured by participants through other incubators and support institutions was not systematically captured, the reported figures represent documented outcomes through MANAGE-CIA and should not be interpreted as the total programme-wide incubation outcome.

19	8	₹35 lakh
Start-ups selected for incubation at MANAGE-CIA	Start-ups selected for funding from PM-RKVY	Total Funds Sanctioned

The programme also supported start-ups from nine states, reflecting its wider geographical reach. Telangana contributed the highest number, with seven start-ups (36.8%), while the remaining start-ups came from Bihar, Haryana, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. This indicates the programme's ability to reach and support agripreneurs from different regional and institutional contexts.

9 states	12
Geographical representation	Diverse agricultural and allied focus areas

In terms of gender participation, 16 start-ups were male-led (84.2%), and three were female-led (15.8%). The selected start-ups represented 12 agricultural and allied focus areas, demonstrating the programme's sectoral diversity. Agricultural inputs and fisheries accounted for three start-ups each, while animal husbandry, food technology and value addition, and waste-to-wealth accounted for two start-ups each. The remaining start-ups operated in agro-processing, dairy, farm mechanisation, organic farming, digital agriculture, online platforms, and value-chain and supply-chain management.

Overall, the outcomes show that the programme not only strengthened participants' entrepreneurial capacities but also created pathways to formal incubation, public funding, technology development, market validation, and business growth across a diverse range of agricultural sectors.

6. Key Success Factors

The success of the MANAGE-CIA Pre-Incubation Mentoring Programme is driven by a strong institutional support system, a well-coordinated implementation mechanism, and access to high-quality entrepreneurial resources. The following factors have been instrumental in ensuring its effectiveness:

- Strong mentoring and professional networks: The programme leveraged MANAGE-CIA's extensive network of incubators, research organisations, government agencies, financial institutions, and startup ecosystem partners, enabling participants to access valuable professional guidance and future incubation opportunities.
- Access to a diverse pool of experts: The involvement of subject-matter specialists, successful Agri-startup founders, incubation professionals, financial experts, government officials, and industry practitioners ensured that participants received multidisciplinary guidance covering both technical and business dimensions of entrepreneurship.
- Technology-enabled programme delivery: The use of the Webex online platform enabled seamless participation from aspiring agripreneurs across different states, making the programme accessible, flexible, and cost-effective while facilitating interactive learning and one-to-one mentoring.
- Dedicated programme management and coordination: A committed MANAGE-CIA team ensured smooth programme implementation by coordinating experts, scheduling sessions, managing participant communication, organising pitch presentations, facilitating mentoring interactions, and maintaining programme quality.
- Financially sustainable delivery model: The participant-fee-based approach supported programme implementation without dependence on external project funding, ensuring continuity while covering the costs of expert engagement, digital delivery, learning resources, and mentoring support.

7. Challenges

The implementation of the Pre-Incubation Mentoring Programme involved several challenges; however, these were effectively addressed through appropriate institutional, technical, and operational strategies, contributing to the programme's successful delivery.

Challenges Faced	Strategies Adopted
Variation in participants' entrepreneurial experience, startup stages, and sectoral and technical backgrounds	The programme addressed diverse learning needs through broadly applicable entrepreneurial sessions delivered by experts and Agri-startup founders from different sectors. Participants could select mentors based on their specific requirements and familiarity with the experts' areas of specialization. The MANAGE-CIA team reviewed mentoring needs, coordinated appointments, and facilitated one-on-one sessions enabling mentors to provide tailored guidance based on each participant's startup idea, stage, sector, and specific challenges.
Attracting sufficient registrations is challenging because the programme is paid and online.	MANAGE-CIA collaborates with agricultural universities and other higher-education institutions to conduct online outreach and orientation sessions that create awareness about the programme. These sessions explain the programme structure, benefits, mentoring support, application process, and expected outcomes, address participants' queries, and encourage suitable students and aspiring entrepreneurs to register.
Maintaining active participation in an online programme	Sessions incorporated discussions, practical examples, question-and-answer interactions, founder experiences, pitch presentations, and individual mentoring rather than relying only on lectures. Regular communication and session reminders were used to encourage attendance and sustained engagement throughout the programme.
Technical and connectivity difficulties during online delivery	Joining instructions and Webex links were shared before the sessions, and the MANAGE-CIA team provided coordination and basic technical support. During pitch presentations and mentoring interactions, team members assisted in resolving connectivity, audio, screen-sharing, and communication issues. Learning materials and available session resources were shared to support participants who experienced temporary disruptions.
Encouraging participants to openly discuss business information	One-on-one mentoring sessions were conducted in a confidential and supportive environment. A MANAGE-CIA team member facilitated the sessions only for coordination and technical support, while maintaining confidentiality so that participants could openly discuss innovation, business models, operational difficulties, and strategic decisions.
Balancing programme quality with affordability and continuity	The programme adopted a participant-fee model to cover expert engagement, coordination, online delivery, learning resources, and mentoring costs. Online implementation reduced expenditure on travel, accommodation, and physical infrastructure. Standardized processes and reusable resources further improved cost-effectiveness and enabled successive batches to be organized.

8. Lessons Learned

The experience of implementing the Pre-Incubation Mentoring Programme provided several important lessons for strengthening future pre-incubation and entrepreneurship development programmes.

- Combination of expert and practitioner knowledge: Engaging subject-matter experts alongside Agri-startup founders enabled participants to understand both business concepts and the practical realities of establishing and managing an enterprise.
- Personalised mentoring support: One-on-one mentoring was essential for addressing differences in participants' startup stages, sectors, business models, and individual challenges.
- Participant-led mentor selection: Allowing participants to select mentors based on their specific needs improved the relevance of mentoring and encouraged greater ownership of the learning process.
- Clear pathways beyond training: Linking the programme with incubation and PM-RKVY funding created tangible progression opportunities and motivated participants to convert their ideas into formal enterprises.
- Flexible online delivery: Online implementation enabled experts, mentors, and participants from different geographical locations to engage without the costs and logistical requirements associated with physical programmes.
- Reusable learning resources: Session recordings, presentations, templates, and reference materials created a continuing knowledge resource that participants could revisit while developing their ventures.
- Institutional partnerships strengthen participant mobilisation: Collaboration with agricultural universities and higher-education institutions was effective in creating awareness and encouraging students and aspiring entrepreneurs to register.

9. Sustainability

The sustainability of the Pre-Incubation Mentoring Programme is supported by its participant-fee model, institutional ownership by MANAGE-CIA, online delivery mechanism, established expert network, reusable learning resources, and standardized implementation process. These features enable the programme to continue across successive batches and create opportunities for wider replication.

9.1 Financial Sustainability and Cost-effectiveness:

US $13.22/ Participant Program Expenditure	2.29x Program revenue relative to expenditure	US$386 / Programme Average Programme Expenditure

- The programme follows a participant-fee model in which the collected fees are used to cover expert engagement, online delivery, programme coordination, learning resources, and mentoring. Across nine programme batches, with an average of approximately 29 participants per batch, the programme generated an average revenue of ₹83,900 per batch against an average expenditure of ₹36,600 per batch. This financially sustainable model enabled full cost recovery, reduced dependence on external funding, and maintained the average programme expenditure at approximately US$13.22 per participant.
- This reduces dependence on short-term project funding and provides a predictable mechanism for organizing future batches. To strengthen financial sustainability, MANAGE-CIA may periodically review the fee structure in relation to programme costs and participant demand, while exploring opportunities to subsidize participation for deserving candidates.

9.2 Institutional Sustainability

- MANAGE-CIA provides institutional ownership by designing the programme framework, identifying experts, coordinating sessions, monitoring participation, organizing pitch presentations, and facilitating mentoring appointments. The involvement of a dedicated programme team ensures continuity, quality control, and consistent implementation across batches.
- The programme also draws upon MANAGE-CIA's established relationships with Agri-startups, incubators, research institutions, government agencies, financial institutions, and industry professionals. This network supports continued access to relevant experts, mentors, practical knowledge, and incubation opportunities.

9.3 Technical and Operational Sustainability

- The programme is delivered through Webex, allowing participants and experts from different locations to join without travel. The platform supports live sessions, presentations, discussions, experience sharing, pitch evaluations, and one-on-one mentoring.
- Standardized schedules, participant assessments, presentation templates, session links, joining instructions, and mentoring procedures make implementation easier to repeat across batches. Session recordings, presentation slides, and reference materials are retained and shared, creating a reusable knowledge base for continued learning.

10. Scaling-up Potential

The scaling potential of the Pre-Incubation Mentoring Programme is reflected in its adaptation by MANAGE-FISHub for the fisheries and aquaculture sector. The MANAGE-FISHub Pre-Incubation Mentoring Programme, launched on 15 August 2025, has completed two batches and trained 59 participants. This sector-specific replication demonstrates that the programme model can be customised to address the entrepreneurial capacity-building and mentoring needs of innovators in agriculture and allied sectors. The model has strong potential for wider replication by agribusiness incubators, agricultural and veterinary universities, fisheries institutions, entrepreneurship development cells, and innovation centres. Successful replication would require a structured curriculum, relevant domain experts, trained mentors, participant-needs assessment, personalised mentoring, standardised learning tools, and linkages with incubation and funding opportunities. The programme can be extended to additional sectors, states, regions, and participant groups and institutionalised within incubation, entrepreneurship-development, and startup-support schemes.

11. Conclusion

The MANAGE-CIA Pre-Incubation Mentoring Programme has demonstrated the importance of structured pre-incubation support in strengthening the entrepreneurial capabilities of aspiring agripreneurs and early-stage Agri-startups. By integrating expert-led thematic sessions, practical insights from successful startup founders, personalised mentoring, pitch-deck development, and exposure to the startup ecosystem, the programme effectively bridges the gap between ideation and formal incubation. It enables participants to validate business ideas, refine business models, assess market opportunities, strengthen financial and operational planning, and improve investment readiness.

The programme has also shown that early-stage entrepreneurs benefit significantly from continuous mentoring, access to multidisciplinary expertise, and opportunities to interact with incubators, investors, research institutions, and industry professionals. The progression of participants into incubation and funding support reflects the programme's effectiveness in creating pathways for enterprise development. Its online delivery model, institutional support, standardised implementation process, and participant-fee-based approach further enhance its sustainability and scalability. Overall, the programme provides a practical and replicable model for nurturing innovation-driven entrepreneurship in agriculture and allied sectors. By strengthening entrepreneurial competencies during the early stages of venture development, it contributes to the creation of sustainable Agri-startups and a more vibrant agricultural innovation ecosystem.

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MANAGE Centre for Innovation and Agripreneurship (MANAGE-CIA)

MANAGE Centre for Innovation and Agripreneurship (MANAGE-CIA), hosted at the National Institute of Agricultural Extension Management, is a recognized Centre of Excellence in Agribusiness Incubation that provides a comprehensive platform for nurturing agri-startups from ideation to commercialization. It offers a robust ecosystem that supports innovation, incubation, mentorship, and capacity building, enabling entrepreneurs to develop sustainable and scalable ventures in agriculture and allied sectors. As a Knowledge Partner under the Pradhan Mantri Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana programme, MANAGE-CIA plays a strategic role in strengthening agribusiness incubators across the country by sharing best practices, providing handholding support, and fostering ecosystem development. The centre focuses on promoting innovative solutions to critical challenges in agriculture, thereby generating employment opportunities, enhancing rural livelihoods, and contributing to inclusive economic growth. With a strong national presence, MANAGE-CIA has incubated over 734 agri-startups and mentored more than 1,293 agripreneurs across 26 states and Union Territories, reflecting its significant contribution to advancing India's agri-startup ecosystem.

Website: https://www.manage.gov.in/managecia

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About the issue

Agricultural entrepreneurship and innovation are increasingly important for transforming the agricultural sector, creating new economic opportunities, and addressing emerging challenges across agriculture and allied sectors. However, a critical gap often exists between the generation of an innovative idea and its transition into a viable enterprise. While established start-ups have access to incubation, funding, and institutional support, aspiring agripreneurs and early-stage Agri-start-ups at the ideation stage often have limited access to structured mentoring, practical entrepreneurial knowledge, market exposure, and relevant networks. Pre-incubation provides an important pathway to bridge this gap by helping innovators develop, test, refine, and strengthen their ideas before entering formal incubation.

Recognising the importance of structured support at this stage, the MANAGE-CIA Pre-Incubation Mentoring Programme was developed to strengthen early-stage entrepreneurship in agriculture. This Good Practice Note documents the programme's design, implementation, experiences, achievements, and key lessons, highlighting how structured pre-incubation support can foster entrepreneurial thinking, validate ideas, build confidence, strengthen business propositions, and connect innovators with relevant expertise, resources, networks, incubation opportunities, and funding pathways.

The publication is intended as a practical resource for agribusiness incubators, agricultural universities, innovation hubs, entrepreneurship development organisations, policymakers, and other institutions involved in promoting agricultural entrepreneurship. The approaches and lessons presented may serve as a reference for designing and strengthening pre-incubation programmes suited to diverse sectors, entrepreneurial needs, and regional contexts.