

A shared vision: NIF partners with NIAS

The National Innovation Foundation (NIF) has a long history of supporting and facilitating innovation at the grassroots level. Last month, NIF signed a memorandum of understanding with the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), a policy think-tank and research body in Bengaluru. The partnership is aimed at enhancing NIF's innovation outreach and exploring mutual opportunities for collaborative activities.

"The collaboration will manifest in a Honey Bee Network hub of NIF", said Dr. Hippu Salk Kristle Nathan, an assistant professor at the Energy and Environment Policy Programme at NIAS. "What this means is that we will create a platform for innovators to showcase their technology, network with others, and also develop ideas with the help of our scientists." Dr. Nathan will be steering this collaboration, and will be involved in everything from chalking-out activities to implementing them. "NIAS will be visiting remote and tribal areas in Karnataka and other parts of the country, and using the technology that NIF already has in its database, a list of several thousand innovations, will try and do a match-making of the problem with solutions", he added. "We will also be involved in mutual learning – NIF persons can come here, and NIAS students can do their field work at NIF, with their respective faculty as co-supervisors. We will be using our research expertise in answering key questions; for instance, why do some innovations succeed and others fail to catch on."

Dr. Baldev Raj, the Director of NIAS has expressed his enthusiasm for the new partnerships, saying "Research and public policy would remain as integral components of the diffusion exercise and NIAS has the ecosystem and commitment to fructify this collaboration in mission mode."

The National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) is a multidisciplinary institute with four schools of research and twelve different programmes that are involved in research in a variety of areas. Its research - often described as ranging from 'monkeys to missiles' - has had several far-reaching successes so far. The study by Prof DP Sengupta and Prof Dilip R Ahuja of the Energy and Environment Policy Programme (EEPP) recommending the advancement of the Indian Standard Time by half an hour has found audience all way up to the Cabinet Secretariat. The EEPP has also been involved in solar-energy research. A recent article by Dr. Nathan of EEPP in the Economic and Political Weekly argued for a novel 'urban first, rural later' approach in the expansion of Solar Photovoltaics, so that the urban industrial, commercial, and institutional consumers can absorb the uncertainties of this technology. The EEPP group is currently looking at the best possible ways to funnel urban

saving from solar rooftops into energy-deprived rural areas. Apart from policy research, NIAS also specializes in extensive field studies.

The National Innovation Foundation (NIF) is an autonomous body under the Department of Science and Technology and provides institutional incubation support to technological ideas and innovations emerging from the minds in the informal sector of the society including those from children. “We have had a number of partnerships recently. These include one with the National Health Systems Resource Centre, New Delhi, another with the apex body for technical assistance set-up under National Rural Health Mission of Government of India mandated to assist in policy and strategy development, a third with John Deere India Pvt Ltd to work on select grassroots innovations and link formal science (engineers/scientists) with informal grassroots innovators, a fourth one with ICAR for verification, validation, value addition and dissemination of grassroots innovations and now the fifth one with NIAS”, said Dr. Nitin Maurya, Innovation Scientist at NIF. “The partnership between NIF and NIAS is like a marriage between action and research. While this partnership envisages a number of activities, some of the most important ones would be action research on diffusion of innovation, what are the pathways, enablers and delimiters of innovation diffusion, and so on”, he added.

The Honey Bee Network (honeybee.org), an integral part of NIF, was founded 25 years ago by Prof Anil K Gupta of the IIM Ahmedabad in order to identify grassroots innovators and document their work. “NIF took this work forward with various incubation activities”, said Dr. Maurya. “Over time, NIF will provide some grassroots innovations to be displayed at NIAS, posters showcasing the creativity of common people and work done by the network. As the cooperation progresses, NIF would be willing to provide support for human capital well. As Professor Gupta often says, 'no start is ever going to be a perfect start. We start imperfectly, learn from our mistakes and then improve on the way.'”

“We are a research institute and NIF is an action-oriented organization, so the collaboration will surely be a win-win scenario that will benefit both organizations”, said Dr. Nathan. He also added that the collaboration will be evaluated each year for its hits and misses. Later, the collaboration could even translate to an academic programme.

NIAS and NIF signed an MoU to foster Grassroots Innovation at NIAS on 10 May 2015