

Blog 10:



Youth: Potential Target for Agricultural Extension

Agricultural extension services should tap the energy and creativity of rural youth to transform agricultural sector, argues Dr Mahesh Chander.

CONTEXT

India is losing more than 2,000 farmers every single day and that since 1991, the overall number of farmers has dropped by 15 million (Sainath, 2013). This has several implications for the future of Indian agriculture and India’s food security. Young farmers can play an important role in ensuring food security if they are encouraged to involve in farming and the challenges they face are addressed. Over the past few years, rural youth have been shying away from agriculture and globally there is an increasing interest in finding ways of engaging youth in agriculture (IFAD, 2012; Paisley, 2013).



Box 1: Why Youth in Agriculture?

Young people are three times more likely to be unemployed than adults and more than 75 million youth worldwide are looking for work, according to the UN International Labour Organization (ILO). Due to their limited access to assets (in particular land), markets, finance and education and skills training, youth are often unemployed or work informally – often in unpaid, very low-skilled, insecure and sometimes hazardous jobs (IFAD, 2012). Most of the educated youth find agriculture as an unattractive proposition; especially the way it is practiced traditionally by their parents. The society largely looks down upon farming, as also families of prospective brides do not prefer farming youth.

When specific youth policies do exist in developing countries, they often do not cater for poor rural youth but tend to be biased towards non-poor males living in urban areas. Consequently, there is growing disenchantment among rural youth towards agriculture vocation and they find it much lucrative to migrate to cities to do even menial jobs. Large-scale migration of rural youth from farming to urban areas has caused concern among the agricultural policy makers, since, such a trend, if not checked, is likely to affect agricultural activities in the future. Thus, checking migration and retaining youth in agricultural sector is currently a big challenge.

Generally youth are willing to adopt new ideas and technologies and therefore agricultural extension services should target youth to transform agriculture. The youth could be the ideal catalyst to change the poor image of persons involved in agriculture, especially in the rural communities given their greater possibility to adapt new ideas, concept and technology which are all important to changing the way agriculture is practiced and perceived. Agricultural extension services can effectively address these issues by encouraging and supporting youth participation in agriculture. Improving their capacities and increasing their involvement will also help in changing the negative perception about farmers as “uneducated and unskilled, physical labourers engaged in a glamourless vocation with extremely low economic returns”.

Box 2: Youth Defined

Youth is often understood to be the period of transition from childhood to adulthood, encompassing processes of sexual maturation and growing social and economic autonomy from parents and carers (Bennell, 2007). There is no universally accepted definition of youth, since the age ranges anywhere from 8 to 40 yrs. On the occasion of the International Youth Year in 1985, the United Nations General Assembly for the first time defined youth as people between the ages of 15 and 24 for its work on youth (with under 15s being classed as ‘children’). For global programming purposes, FAO defines the priority age range for rural youth development from 10 to 25. The World Development Report (2007) expanded the range to include all people between 12 and 24 years.

The Government of India (GOI) officially defines youth as persons between the ages of 13 and 35 years and it also varies depending on the programme. For instance, the National Youth Policy of India considers age group 10 to 34 yrs as youth. The United Nations (UN) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO), however, defined the youth as persons between 15 and 24 years of age for cross country comparison and analysis.

The population in the age-group of 15-34 in India increased from 353 million in 2001 to 430 million in 2011. More than half of India’s population is under the age of 25, with 65 percent of the population under 35. The rural population is about 70%, and the indications are that the migration of rural youth to cities is around 45% in the country, which is quite alarming. The youth from low income families are disadvantaged due to poor telecommunication connectivity, poor quality of educational standards coupled with a high dropout rate beyond primary school stage is a major challenge. Such youth have very limited information about or access to various options in relevant skill training and are often also unable to pay the admission fees for such training.

The Government of India has formulated its youth policy (NYP-2012 draft) to respond effectively to the changing conditions of the young people in the 21st century. This national policy aims to put young people at the center of country’s growth and development by recognizing the problems of rural youth to be addressed through suitable interventions.

YOUTH & EXTENSION

Adult Vs Youth: When India became independent in 1947, about 83% of the Indian population was living in rural areas and most of the Indians were illiterate (over 88%). Adult education was the main focus for extension at that time and the agricultural extension programmes, obviously were mostly designed considering this mass scale rural illiteracy, focusing on interventions aimed at improving the functional literacy among rural adults. However, over the years, the literacy rates have gone up and in 2011, it stands at 74.04%. The rural youth are now more literate, aware, educated and many are looking for new livelihood options including migrating to urban areas. Here lies the importance of developing extension programmes for youth, who are the future farmers.

Head of family Vs Youth: Most of the agricultural extension programmes which we implemented since independence in India traditionally targeted the head of families for training and technology transfer. In extension studies too, we consider the head of family, mostly male as the respondent, though in every diffusion-adoption study we found the early adopters to be younger. Youth are more techno-savvy and they could access information & knowledge promoted through the new ICTs which uses computer, internet and mobiles. Young farmers often have greater capacity for innovation, imagination, initiative and entrepreneurship than older adults and these characteristics should be effectively harnessed by extension services to provide better livelihood opportunities for youth in agriculture.



The investment on youth in agriculture is still minimal, as there are only a few youth focused programs and thus, few clear examples of impact. Nevertheless, the ICAR and departments of Agriculture in many states are recognizing the farmers including the young and innovative ones for the innovative and diversified farming ventures taken up by them. Many young farmers are taking up high risk high returns agri-ventures like protected agriculture, precision farming, organic agriculture, floriculture, medicinal and aromatic plants cultivation etc, which are mostly avoided by the aging farmers. These new agri-ventures need to be actively supported by the government agencies and financial institutions with skill training, financing and marketing support.

Some of the initiatives presented below have tried to enhance capacities of rural youth and some new initiatives have also been planned.

ON-GOING INITIATIVES

Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVKs): Imparting need based vocational training to farmers, farm women & rural youth to change their knowledge, skill & attitude as a result uplift the standard of living, is the main mandate of the KVKs. KVKs numbering over 631, exist practically in every district of India. A total of 4.86 lakh extension programmes/activities were organized by the KVKs during 2012-13, which attracted the participation of 170.16 lakh farmers and 2.61 lakh extension personnel. These KVKs organized 65,314 training programmes under capacity building with the participation of 18.8 lakh farmers/farm-women, rural youth and extension personnel during 2012-13.

Besides this, 8,486 skill-oriented training courses (both on-campus and off-campus) were organized exclusively for 1.91 rural youth, of which 69,163 (36.17%) were young women. These trainings were organized on various vocations viz. crop production and management, post-harvest technology and value-addition, nursery management, livestock, fisheries, income generation activities, capacity building and group dynamics etc. These KVKs also conducted 5,730 capacity building programmes for 1.42 lakh extension personnel, which included 34,563 (24.35%) women extension personnel (ICAR, 2012-13). KVKs need more resources to organize more number of similar trainings.

Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan(NYKS): Established in 1987-88 as an autonomous organization under the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, it has been channelizing the power of youth (13-35 yrs) on the principles of voluntarism, self-help and community participation. Over the years, NYKS has established a network of youth clubs in villages, where Nehru Yuva Kendras (501 at the moment) have been set up, harnessing youth power for development by forming Youth Clubs, which are village level voluntary action groups of youth at the grassroots level to involve them in nation building activities, working for community development and youth empowerment. However, only a few NYKS are involved in agricultural development. Much more could be achieved if NYKS could focus on skilling rural youth in agricultural activities.



NABARD Farmers' Clubs: NABARD's policy support for Farmers' Club Programme emphasizes on linking technologies with farmers' club members, while facilitating market access through capacity building of members of Farmers' Clubs including leadership training; linkage with technology/markets; Self Help Groups (SHGs)/Joint Liability Groups (JLGs) formation and forming Federations of Farmers' Clubs/Producers' Groups/Companies. Under this programme, the NABARD has so far (March 2013) assisted formation of 1.27 lakh farmers' clubs across the country. These clubs are organized by rural branches of banks with the support and financial assistance of NABARD for the mutual benefit of the banks concerned and the village farming community/rural people.

The broad objective of setting up Farmers' Clubs is to achieve prosperity for the farmers with overall agricultural development in its area of operation by facilitating credit counseling, technology counseling and market counseling. The NABARD provide a financial assistance of Rs. 10,000 to each club per annum for three years. The club members are expected to utilize this amount to meet routine expenses for formation,

maintenance, and organising awareness meets. Most of these farmers' clubs have a good representation of rural youth.

NEW INITIATIVES

ARYA (Attracting and Retaining Youth in Agriculture): The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) has constituted a seven-member expert committee, to suggest ways of attracting youth to agriculture. The committee is working on issues such as providing training to farm youth on innovative and sustainable agricultural practices to help make agriculture a profitable venture. This would involve a series of activities, including exploring opportunities in secondary agricultural operations such as value addition of crops and hiring, and servicing of mechanized farm implements. This is going to be an important strategy of the ICAR focused on rural youth mobilization for agricultural transformation during 12th plan (ICAR Reporter (October-December-2012)).

National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM): NRLM aims at creation of opportunities for both wage employment and skill development for the rural youth, who lack skills in many areas of agricultural production and processing. National Skill Development Mission and the National Skill Qualification Framework are, thus, aggressively pushing the agenda of skill development to build the capacity of rural youth so that they are meaningfully employed in rural areas itself. Thus, need based experiential skill learning supported by public sector banks/organizations in rural areas is the key to strengthen the Rural Self Employment Training Institutes (RSETIs) being set up in all districts under NRLM to assist such youth (Likhi, 2013). NRLM requires suitable decentralized convergence of skill development programs run by multiple central ministries including the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC).



Agricultural Skill Council of India (ASCI): Considering the need for skilling the work force in agricultural sector, the Agricultural Skills Council of India (ASCI) has been recently proposed by National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), which could be one ideal institution to train rural youth. The ASCI proposes to train, certify and accredit 56.5 million workforce comprising of farmers, wage workers, entrepreneurs and extension workers, over 10 years through its training partners.

ASEAN-India Farmers Exchange: The Ministers of the ASEAN (The Association of South East Nations) concerned over the small number of young farmers' involvement in the agriculture sector, agreed on the

importance of promoting innovation and entrepreneurship among young farmers to achieve more sustainable agriculture development in the region. This initiative is expected to create greater awareness among the young and innovative farmers on the promising career in the agriculture sector. The 1st Exchange Visit was conducted in Malaysia in conjunction with the 2012 ASEAN Farmers' Week and the Malaysian Agriculture, Horticulture and Agro-tourism (MAHA) International in November 2012, followed by the 2nd Exchange Visit conducted in India during December 19-30, 2012, wherein, farmers' delegation from nine ASEAN member states participated.

MOBILIZING YOUNG FARMERS

Attracting and retaining youth in agriculture is critical for Indian Agriculture. Most of the new innovations (both technical and institutional) require a skilled agricultural work force. For instance, promotion of high value agriculture, precision farming, organic cultivation, Hi-Tech horticulture, micro-propagation, Integrated Pest Disease & Nutrients Management, Post Harvest Management, development of backward and forward linkages etc, require well trained young farmers with enthusiasm and passion for farming and ability to take risks. The rural youth could be the ideal target for skill training in these new areas of agricultural growth and to do this effectively there is a need to mobilize young farmers. Organised groups of young farmers will be useful for introducing new production technologies and organizing effective input and output markets.



Box3: Young Farmers' Associations:

The enthusiasm of youth for new technologies facilitated the initiation of rural youth programmes in USA, leading to the birth of the 4-H clubs in 1914. These clubs well recognized as an innovative way to introduce new agriculture technologies to rural communities, now have become important partners of the Cooperative Extension Service in USA especially on promotion of youth involvement in agriculture. Similarly, in European Union and in other developed countries, the young Farmers Associations are active since long, For instance, the National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs (NFYFC) is one of the largest rural youth organisations in the UK, There are 662 Young Farmers' Clubs in England and Wales.

In India, the recently initiated "The Young Farmers Association (YFA), Punjab" is involved in promoting and modernizing agriculture. The YFA, has started a programme called the Future Farmers Foundation (FFF) to encourage the youth to take up farming as a viable and lucrative occupation to increase farm income, while maintaining sustainability in agriculture.

WAYS FORWARD

The following measures may help boost involvement of rural youth in farming:

- **Farm Youth Policy:** Formulating a comprehensive policy on farm youth including suitable institutional arrangements for its implementation as recommended by the 12th plan Working Group on Agricultural Extension. If acted upon, it would take care of many of the concerns and challenges rural youth face in taking up farming.
- **Extension Programme for Youth:** An exclusive nationwide extension programme may be launched to address the issues concerning rural youth to mobilize them towards their greater participation in agricultural production activities. The proposed “Farmer First” programme of the ICAR to be implemented in 12th plan should focus on young farmers to draw maximum benefit from the programme.
- **Beyond technical skills:** The rural youth may be encouraged, trained and supported for undertaking innovative farming and associated ventures like agri-tourism to supplement income. Sufficient resources should be invested to improve not only technical skill training, and entrepreneurship development but also a range of other skills and competencies, particularly those ‘soft’ skills such as communication, leadership and business skills. This can be achieved effectively, if youth are mobilized through youth clubs, financially supported under extension reforms.
- **Farm Youth Clubs:** Farm youth may be mobilized as Farm Youth Clubs (FYCs) so that it serves as a platform for rural youth to discuss issues related to farming, farm enterprises and skill development. Inter-country and inter-state youth exchanges may also be organized by these FYCs to share experiences on best practices and learning. ICAR/SAUs, state Departments of Agriculture and the Gram Panchayats may take a lead in this.
- **Use of Media:** Success stories of the innovative young farmers/agripreneurs including those youth who have successfully launched agri-ventures/agri-entrepreneurship in different parts of the country may be highlighted through radio, TV and newspapers to motivate other young farmers. The community radio too can play vital role in encouraging and making young farmers aware about the possibilities in agricultural sector. Extension staff should effectively use the mass media and also the social media to encourage and support rural youth to play meaningful roles in agricultural transformation.

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