

Agricultural Extension in South Asia

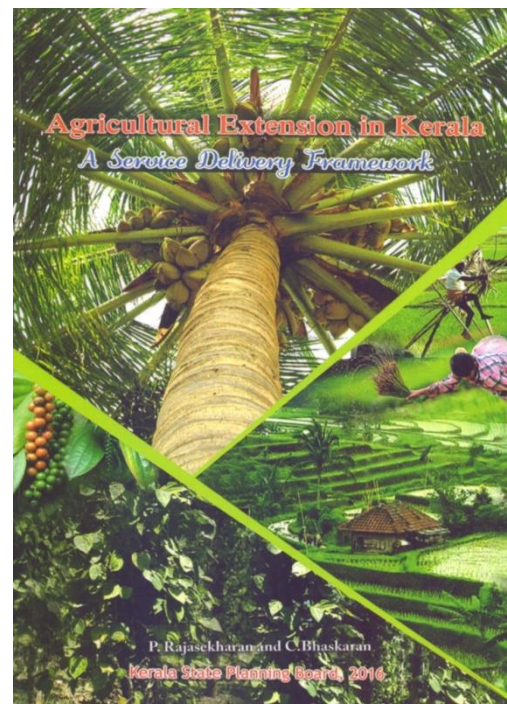
AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION IN KERALA: A SERVICE DELIVERY FRAMEWORK

Dr. P Rajasekharan and Dr. C. Bhaskaran (2017),
Kerala State Planning Board
Trivandrum, Kerala, India



Extension delivery system in Kerala is unique as it operates in a socio-economic and agrarian milieu that is quite different from the rest of the country, with a few elements that can be showcased globally as well. This has evolved along with the transitions in the agricultural sector in the state, which has witnessed several shifts in emphases. Quite possibly, these changes also reflect the direction in which the state's primary sector moves on. Growth pattern of agriculture in Kerala has been disturbing, with almost consistent downward trends in area and production. While productivity has shown increasing trends in almost all crops, profitability has been changing in response to the several externalities on which neither the state nor the farmers have had any sway. Needless to say, various parameters of agricultural growth show that the primary sector had been going through a phase of irreversible downturn, with the proportion of people involved in agriculture and the contribution to the state's GDP decreasing day by day. Though this is in line with the national trends, the transition in Kerala has been drastic and fast.

How has the extension delivery system, structurally and functionally, responded to these changes? Has it ever been able to influence the trajectory of this transition in any manner whatsoever? Or is it that the extension system is always invariably led by the changes in the external environment? How powerful and effective are the interventions by an extension system in slowing down this trend, if not reverse it? Has the extension delivery system changed itself to take on these emerging challenges? It appears that the extension system can be viewed in two ways: one, as a self-evolving system in response to the greater external changes or two, as a tool to safeguard the concerns of the actors by minimising the impact of changes. Documenting the features of an extension system would require deeper and precise analysis of either one or both of these perspectives. Any historiographical description of the transition of agricultural extension should necessarily consider these concerns as it is important not only to understand the drivers of such changes, but also to design new strategies to influence them as much as possible.



An incisive reading of the book 'Agricultural Extension in Kerala: A Service Delivery Framework' authored by Dr P Rajasekharan and Dr C Bhaskaran, published by the Kerala State Planning Board, evokes a plethora of questions on the drivers of change in the agricultural sector and how best the extension delivery system has been able to address them. Though the book does not specifically attempt to document the phases of transition in agriculture and concomitant changes required in the extension strategies, it is heartening that it gives an unprecedented overview of the institutional changes in the extension delivery systems in Kerala

over a period of time. The book has documented these changes comprehensively and explained the contexts of resultant changes.

The book characterises the agricultural sector in Kerala as 'preponderant with miniscule sized holdings, diversified cropping patterns, predominance of perennial crops and homesteads based farming systems'. Historically, this is an outcome of a series of socio-political changes in the state, which are considered to have contributed to the accomplishments that have been showcased as 'unparalleled'. The development model of Kerala is widely considered as 'enigmatic' since the higher indices of human development are not attributed to economic growth, unlike other developed economies. Kerala has a rather different paradigm of development, mainly anchored on equitable redistribution of public resources and supported by the prosperity created by remittance by migrants who are employed in the Middle East and other regions globally. The fact that the socio-economic development of Kerala has not been triggered by the growth in the productive sector, explains why agriculture has turned out to be a less important livelihood option. Agriculture, which had already been weakened by such changes, was further threatened by the onslaught of globalisation, with several multilateral agreements and policy changes impacting its growth retrogressively. Unregulated competition, price volatility and decreasing profitability have aggravated the crisis in the agricultural sector, forcing several farmers to seek new alternate options.



There is a clear and succinct review of these changes by analysing the trends of agricultural growth since 1960 and comparing it with the trends at the national level. An overview of agriculture in Kerala, presents a summary of the core issues in this sector. Skewed cropping pattern with emphasis on cash crops and drastic reduction of food crops, marginalization of holdings, price volatility, increase in cost of cultivation and declining livestock population have been identified as major issues. Figures relevant to Kerala have been judiciously used to illustrate the temporal pattern of changes in agriculture, which would help us understand the scenario better. The authors have also tried to come up with a few indicators that would describe the nature of agriculture in the state more vividly.

The extension delivery framework for the state is contextualized by a systematic and concise review of the origin and evolution of extension as a discipline and praxis. In fact, extension science as a discipline that would help provide solutions to development problems through conscientization as defined by A W van den Ban has changed in terms of form and purpose over a few decades. The book rightly observes that extension approaches have changed according to the preferences of the funding agencies and the

immediate requirements of times. For instance, as the authors observe, extension during the 20th century has been centrally funded and top down in structure with the TOT model being increasingly replaced by participatory approaches. However, the theoretical underpinnings of these changes do not seem to have been explored in detail. I would love to believe that this omission has happened for fear of the enormous magnitude of the topic.

These minor deliberate omissions notwithstanding, the book has brilliantly illustrated the diverse extension systems in developing economies and tried to relate the inferences to the emerging institutional arrangements for extension service delivery. Finding out a typology of extension service delivery based on different places and historical phases is quite interesting; as it would possibly prompt an avid observer to go deeper into the historical contexts of the transitions in agricultural extension. Equally noteworthy is the historical description of the extension initiatives in India during the pre and post-independence periods. Though they are not exhaustively explained, it gives the reader a bird's eye view of the series of developmental interventions that have shaped up the paradigm of agricultural development in the country. However, a student of extension history would like to know the logic of the evolution of development initiatives based on the learning from previous experiences.

The progression of extension initiatives from the Economic Conference of Mysore (1914-18) to Etawah Pilot Project (1948) shows how the development perspectives, approaches and tools have changed during the pre-independence period and how they have contributed to the strategies of agricultural and rural development in independent India. Sad to say, the dynamics of this change in relation to the political transition in India has not been seriously understood by extensionists. However, the authors present the sequel to the development narrative of yesteryears, by briefly explaining the current initiatives, which are huge by scale and triggered by multiple agencies and actors. Similarly, the history and evolution of agricultural development and extension in Kerala has also been documented with rich evidences drawn from a wide range of authentic sources. Though the authors have exercised great caution in documenting the major historical milestones chronologically, emphasis seems to have been given to agriculture in the southern part of the state alone, with brief explanations of the contributions of some prominent rulers of Travancore. An account of similar interventions in Cochin and Malabar regions has not found a place in this section.



People’s representatives play a very important role in agricultural development in Kerala. A scene from *Onamthuruthu padashekaram* under Neendur Krishi Bhavan

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It is against this exhaustively drawn up background, that the authors examine the extension delivery system in Kerala. The compilation of agricultural development and extension initiatives in Kerala across the twelve five year plans has turned out to be an exhaustive collection; a sure delight for any student of the development history of Kerala. Each five year plan has witnessed the design and implementation of a few development programmes reflecting the perspectives, concerns and priorities of the plan. It is an invaluable and unprecedented documentation as far as Kerala’s development history is concerned. This lengthy section carefully examines the extension interventions in the past with a focus on the critical factors of

their success or failure. Alongside, the logic of establishing new institutional mechanisms to sustain the positive outcomes of past systems has also been explained convincingly. The authors' narrative on integrating the positive elements of the Training and Visit (T&V) system and a few other externally funded projects during that period into the new paradigm of 'integrated development and extension' at the grassroots level (by means of establishing an exclusive 'Krishibhavan' in every gram panchayat) is a telling example of the continuity and coherence of ideas maintained throughout the book.

Transition of an existing paradigm to a much evolved new system as signified in the collapse of the T&V system provides us with several lessons on the need to design new institutional arrangements for extension delivery. The interactivity between extension agency and farming community had increased in the T&V system, but it was not necessarily participatory in its approach. It was in this very place, Krishibhavan was prospectively established as the hub of agricultural development in a gram panchayat, expecting greater intensity of contact with farmers, participation of stakeholders and adoption of group approaches in resource management. The uniqueness of this system is its organisational setup; which includes an Agricultural Officer, who is compulsorily a graduate in agriculture, leading a small team of three agricultural demonstrators.

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Assistant Director of Agriculture Mr George K Mathai (Ettumanoor Block) with Agricultural Officer Smt.Arya .V.C and her team of Agricultural Assistants (Smt. Sabitha, Smt. Aswathy and Sri. Rajeesh) and Mrs.Abitha, Block Technology Manager, ATMA

Krishibhavans, since their inception in 1987, played a pivotal role in supporting agricultural development in the state. These institutions have grown into the primary referral points of the farmers for access to information, inputs as well as services. Over a period of three decades, the roles of Krishibhavans have multiplied, with several programmes designed around this hub. Of all these changes, introduction of decentralized planning programme consequent to the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments had been the most significant one, which radically transformed these institutions functionally. It is hailed as a unique institutional arrangement to facilitate planning of development programmes at the local level, with mandatory supply of funds, transfer of development agencies and redeployment of personnel to the three tier local self-government institutions. An ardent student of development history of Kerala, however, would expect something more. Analysis of the functional and administrative changes brought about by decentralization and its implication on extension delivery could have been elaborated further, as it would have given more insights on the nuances of participatory planning and development envisaged in democratic decentralization. Still, the section on the history and evolution of agricultural development and extension in Kerala is lucidly written, with incisive description of ATMA programmes and various other interventions designed and customised at the behest of the State Planning Board, to strengthen the

extension service delivery in Kerala. These programmes are aptly described by the authors as alternate model of extension beyond T&V system and ATMA.

The book showcases the context and evolution of the prestigious LEADS (Lead farmer centred extension advisory and delivery services) programme, which has attracted national attention as a hybrid version of the constructive components of several previous experiments in extension service delivery. Undoubtedly, the success of LEADS as an approach and strategy deserves to be explored further by extension experts in the country. The programme acknowledges the significance of reaching out to farmers more intensely through peer group dynamics and addressing specific issues by providing customised solutions. It also envisages providing support to farmers viz. credit linkage, periodic review of field problems by Monthly Technical Advice (MTA) sessions, conscientization through demonstrations, etc.

The most important and conspicuous outcome of this intervention had been the evolution of ATMA PLUS, an institutional arrangement to overcome the limitations of ATMA. The need to customize ATMA by considering state level characteristics had been a long standing demand by many extension scientists and policy thinkers. As the authors argue, funds from ATMA had been grossly inadequate to meet the specific requirements of the state. ATMA PLUS has rendered ATMA more effective by adding new mandates and additional funds for forming groups, mobilising resources and creating innovative learning situations at the field level. More importantly, this approach also involves formulation of location specific development programmes under the aegis of local self-governments, enabling seamless integration with decentralized planning.



About 60% of the total enterprises established by Kudumbasree (State Poverty Eradication Mission, Kerala) are in the livestock sector.

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The book is to be lauded specifically for attempting a review of the impact of extension services in Kerala. The book also explains the good extension practices followed in ATMA and SAMETI, many components of which are worth emulating elsewhere. It is heartening that the authors have seriously addressed the issue of continuing agricultural education for various stakeholders, by brilliantly presenting the need to enhance the capability of the extension work force to take on new challenges. The list of core competencies required by extension professionals in the state and the institutional arrangements for imparting them are going to be eye openers for administrators. By the way, this would also remind the reader of the need to include new domains and methodologies of extension research that is much required to provide theoretical support to the practitioners of this 'new' paradigm of extension. The book does not leave out this concern either. Surprisingly, though not very deep and exhaustive, the book in its eleventh chapter gives clear theoretical perspectives on emerging challenges in agricultural extension in Kerala. This chapter gives a few indications of the prospects of trying out market led extension, issues and implications of privatizing extension and linking smallholders with value chain. These observations would, in all likelihood, be prophetic; as agriculture in Kerala is geared to try out several such innovations as a means to survive and sustain.

There is also an elaborate description of the ICT initiatives in agricultural extension, developed by various agencies in Kerala to support extension service delivery. As an appropriate and out-and-out conclusion to the logic and narration followed in the book, a progressive phase of the evolution of extension is deftly presented as a new framework and model of agricultural extension and service delivery in Kerala, in the concluding chapter. Termed as ASDP (Agricultural Extension and Service Delivery Project), this new project is envisaged as a comprehensive strategy, addressing all major concerns, pertinent to Kerala's agriculture. The proposed model includes natural resource management, credit linkage, diagnostic services, market linkage, social capital, mechanisation, input supply, eco-friendly and sustainable management of crops, etc, as spokes of the central theme of agricultural extension services. But quite convincingly, the prospects of employing this new model are not grounded on any unrealistic notions. It is firmly based on the experiences drawn from the successful cases and pilot programmes implemented across the state. Details of these cases are presented vividly, though they are brief and crisp. Illustrating the efficacy of these cases seemed refreshing.

Finally, what is the impression left behind? Comprehending the innumerable dimensions of the complex process of extension delivery has been attempted with an air of ease and élan. The book is a treasure house of new insights on extension service delivery in changing times. This is not only because of the compilation of even the subtle details of these new experiments, but also on account of the objectivity in drawing inferences and the invigorating style in which they are presented. Unlike the usual genre of books in extension, this goes down to the finer details of extension praxis, in a different socio-economic and political milieu. It touches upon every relevant thing in the framework of extension service delivery and does not leave out anything. However, the book opens up an exciting scope for a voluminous documentation of the evolution of extension delivery systems in every state, I would say, in the form of a monograph. Presenting the socio-political, economic and the historical backdrop in which any extension system would evolve and transform, would still remain a big challenge, as is evident in this work too.



Dr Jiju P Alex is Professor, Agricultural Extension, at the Kerala Agricultural University, Trichur, Kerala (jijupalex@hotmail.com)

**AESA Secretariat: Centre for Research on Innovation and Science Policy (CRISP),
Road No 10, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034, India
www.aesa-gfras.net Email: aesanetwork@gmail.com**