

## Blog 20:

### Redeeming the public extension system: Can rural democratization offer plausible alternatives?



*Even while critical debates on the relevance of public extension systems are on- with propositions that argue for more privatized extension services dominating the scene- the significance of public extension systems is only increasing. Rather, it has assumed more relevance as available 'alternatives' fail to proactively address the concerns of the farming community. Needless to state, the overriding alternatives are all about linking the production system with markets, entering value chains and developing competencies for addressing the ever varying market dynamics, argues Dr Jiju P Alex.*

#### Rural lives and livelihoods

Rural life and access to livelihoods are fraught with several problems about which the communities do not have any sway. Thinking of ways to ensure sustainable rural livelihoods warrants recognizing the vulnerability of rural communities. Worldwide, inflation, falling prices of produces and lack of access to inputs and credit make rural lives more difficult. Falling rates of employment generation in villages and tendency of governments to step back from key sectors have also added to their woes. Market, which is pointed out as an alternative, is indeed a reality that can impact lives. But it requires careful fostering of those who are new to its dynamics and vagaries.

#### **Box 1: Is market the only way out?**

Enhancing market linkage and improving capability to respond to the likes and dislikes of market would sound reasonable to anyone who explores ways of salvaging the desperate small producer. However, the notion that livelihood options of small and marginal farmers would improve by simply linking them with market has not yet yielded convincing results in most such cases. This is because of the fact that quite often, in market linked interventions, small farmers are not properly and adequately facilitated to take on the emerging challenges. It is also accompanied by proposals for reducing the role of public sector in many ways. Sometimes the situation gets compounded by restricted support from the government, implying drastic cuts in incentives and subsidies. In policy environments that consider governmental support as unproductive welfarism (Davidson and Ahmad, 2003, Mathews 1997), survival of the small producers become nearly impossible.

Recent global experiences show that such approaches to development falls severely short of a critical look at the current socio economic, political and environmental trends that have pushed a large number of people to the margins of the development sphere. Economists have attributed this to the neoliberal economic policies (Stiglitz 2012). It is true that these economic reforms have opened up new avenues that would ideally go beyond even national boundaries.

It might also have expanded markets that would give the producer more opportunities. However, it has also created a situation where survival of communities is becoming increasingly dependent on markets, the trends of which are more or less determined by the preferences of the urban elite.

In fact, there is a growing discontent on the efficacy of markets in resolving livelihood issues. The spiraling economic crisis has posed serious questions about the sanctity of being too much dependent on market. This discontent which has manifested in several parts of the world in the form of open protests against the economic crisis is characterized by three disturbing revelations: markets were not working the way they were supposed to, for they were obviously neither efficient nor stable, and that the political systems are fundamentally unfair (Stiglitz, 2012).

Since neoliberal policies could push even well endowed communities up against the wall (Steiglitz,2012), there is commendable scope for bringing back a growth model propelled not by market alone, but by the logic of redistributive growth, grounded on the rights of the communities and the collective ownership of their resources and promptly linked to the market.

Hence, the focus of intervention should be to enhance livelihood security and sustainability by scaling up institutional mechanisms that can help reduce the vulnerability of communities. In fact, the capability to thrive- something that we frequently talk about rural communities in the emerging contexts- cannot be acquired on their own, unless socially responsive public systems come to their rescue.



This invariably requires a new orientation to extension intervention with emphasis on improvement of service delivery mechanisms and a host of issues ranging from self reliance to sustainability and empowerment.

## Role of the state: Lessons for agricultural extension

Agricultural extension in India as well as in other developing economies can draw valuable lessons from this situation. There is a growing body of evidence which suggests that the public sector should earnestly step in more than ever before, as investments in agriculture for the common good have been showing declining trends during the post reform period resulting serious setbacks for the less endowed farmer (Jha, 2007, Mani et al 2011).

It is widely observed that national extension systems in many developing countries have declined over the last couple of decades due to lack of political and financial support, reduced investment, attrition of human resources and physical infrastructure, and lack of clarity on the roles of the public extension institution vis-a- vis other stakeholders and service providers (Rivera, 2011). Governments guided by the provisions of the structural adjustment agenda tend to shirk their responsibility by assigning the interventionist role to multiple actors, private and non- governmental sector included. Though this might have enhanced pluralism of intervention, social control over the agencies that are given this responsibility has been ignored. The key question is how these moribund systems could be rejuvenated.

## Rural democratization: Making extension responsive and effective

Redeeming public extension systems by functionally linking them with people in a large way would be an uphill task given the reasons cited above. Rural democratization bolstered by strong linkages with rural institutions and development agencies in the public sector could be a plausible approach to infuse vitality into a declining extension system. It can be made possible through a deep democratization process, which includes devolution of power and resources to the local governments.

### **Box 2: Democratization**

Democratization is a highly evolved form of political empowerment, and can enhance participation, transparency and efficiency. But connecting democratization with development requires a whole set of innovative institutions and processes facilitating seven important pre requisites:

- 1) enhancement of financial resources to local governments,
- 2) participation of stakeholders in deciding development intervention,
- 3) generation and management of human resources, social capital and financial resources for being invested in the process,
- 4) devolution of fiscal and administrative authority to undertake administrative decisions at the local level on key development issues,
- 5) transferring key development agencies to local self governments,
- 6) establishing stakes for people's representatives, local resource persons and local organizations in the functioning of development agencies and
- 7) responsive and participatory auditing systems to enhance transparency.

Evidences from places where intense rural democratization has been tried out show that it would be possible only if a whole new genre of grassroots level participative structures are put in place. As far as extension is concerned, there are several studies that show that decentralization and devolution of agricultural extension to local governments have failed (Carating et al 2010). Weakening of linkages with research, lack of funds for technical training, varying financial situations of local governments, local political priorities which need not necessarily be aligned with the interests of small farmers and the vulnerable have all affected decentralization of extension almost everywhere.

It is evident that a strong sense of empowerment engendered by vigilant public action is required to make this mechanism functional. People's involvement in all stages of development intervention will have to be ensured mandatorily. In places where decentralization has been able to turn around the approaches to development significantly for longer periods, there were robust administrative reforms and institutional mechanisms for sustaining participation by linking them with development initiatives at the grassroots level, as explained in Box 2. In any case, an organic vigil instigated by an informed public sphere and bolstered by proactive political groups would keep these changes moving.

### How does rural democratisation work in India ?

In India, the Panchayati Raj System which has been strengthened by the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendments during 1995 offered immense scope for reorienting the formal extension system. There are provisions to transfer the responsibility of local agricultural and economic development to the local self governments. There are also opportunities to formulate participative fora for people's involvement in planning, implementing and monitoring development programmes. The state governments have the freedom to devise their own mechanisms to enable participation in local development initiatives. For instance, Kerala (one of the southern states of India) has successfully implemented democratization in India and it improved the reach and effectiveness of agricultural extension in the state (Box 3).

#### **Box 3: Democratisation in Kerala**

In Kerala, as part of democratic decentralization, a substantial share of public funds and a host of development agencies have been transferred to the local self governments. Extension agencies are now being directed to work in unison with local self government institutions, with considerable accountability of the former to the latter. The possibility of linking rural institutions with the process of planning has enhanced institutional multiplicity and synergy. Larger sections of the farming community have been covered by the extension agency as a direct result of decentralization and convergence of agencies at the grassroots level. This has led to better channelization of resources- fiscal, human and physical- and better targeting of beneficiaries. More significantly, service delivery and project management are being ICT enabled, with unique programmes for e- governance. There had been a spurt of development initiatives born out of local ingenuity, as a result of this new paradigm of growth oriented democratic decentralization.

Deliberating on the scope of decentralization of agricultural extension, Swanson and Rajalahti(2010) observes that decentralisation not only gives local government control over personnel and finances, but in theory focuses control closer to the level of farmers and thus can improve extension accountability to their needs. Rural democratization, supported by efficient systems of service delivery and functional linkages can bring about substantial changes in the delivery of extension services. It also leaves adequate room for linking rural enterprises with value chains duly supported by credit and micro finance institutions. Since there is better scope for wider consultation with stakeholders, identification of critical problems and applying precise solutions are also possible. Better management of common resources and productive initiatives by collectives of farmers, farm women and rural entrepreneurs aided by the common wisdom of the community and public funds are yet other possibilities.

However, not everything is well with the new systems. Bureaucracy and local politicking have had their share in setting in the signs of degeneration. Devolution of authority and financial resources may have to be enhanced to take up new challenges. Building capability of the actors at the grassroots level to manage the institutions that have been formulated for facilitating decentralization would be the biggest challenge. The ways of preventing deterioration and improving efficiency also necessitates detailed enquiries about this system. Building up autonomous and sustainable systems would remain as uphill tasks unless these vulnerabilities are addressed.

### **Learning from the praxis of democratization: Role of extension scientists**

Extension scientists as development interventionists and social researchers should explore the dynamics of rural democratization in detail. While doing this, we should be able to characterize the policy environment required to revive rural institutions democratically. Innovations in linking grassroots level democratization process with better livelihoods would show the way ahead for effective utilization of rural resources. How efficiently such systems address important concerns like sustainability and ownership of common resources could be of interest to an extension researcher. Evolving a robust system of rural democratization warrants critical social action and a departure from the conventional norms of participation. It is the outcome of a long drawn socio-political process, which would prompt the extension scientists to look at it critically and ideologically. It would be unfair on the part of extension scientists to leave out this important innovation in public administration and service delivery from the realm of their academic interests.

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