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POSTMASTERS AS COMMUNITY-BASED EXTENSION AGENTS



The effectiveness of frontline extension could be considerably enhanced by forging partnerships with the Rural Postal Network. Drs R. Roy Burman, Sujit Sarkar, V. Lenin, S.K. Dubey and J. P. Sharma share their experiences in promoting technologies through this network here.

CONTEXT

Public-sector extension, represented mainly by the State Department of Agriculture (DoA), continues to be one of the main source of information to a majority of the farmers in India. However, most of the states are able to cater to their agricultural extension services only up to the block level, with only few states going up to the village level. With the shifting emphasis of the Indian agriculture towards diversification, sustainability, efficiency and commercialization and a widening ratio of extension worker to the farmer in the country, it has become essential to look for alternative frontline extension approaches so that farmers can be reached with improved technologies to enhance farm productivity and income. (Frontline extension is a catalytic force for the field extension, which involves a higher level of extension interaction by highly qualified staff of the research and education system. It is assumed that the scientist who has generated/assessed/refined the technology can demonstrate better to the farmers in their fields).

Keeping in mind the above challenges, Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI), New Delhi has designed an innovative extension approach for effective delivery of IARI technology through Post Offices for distant farmers. Rural branch post office caters to 5-15 villages and the branch post masters (BPM) mostly are farmers. The model is aimed at utilizing the strength of the vast network of postal department in technology dissemination to distantly located farmers through village post masters working as community based change agents.



IARI and KVK scientists interacting with village post master at Sitapur (U.P.)

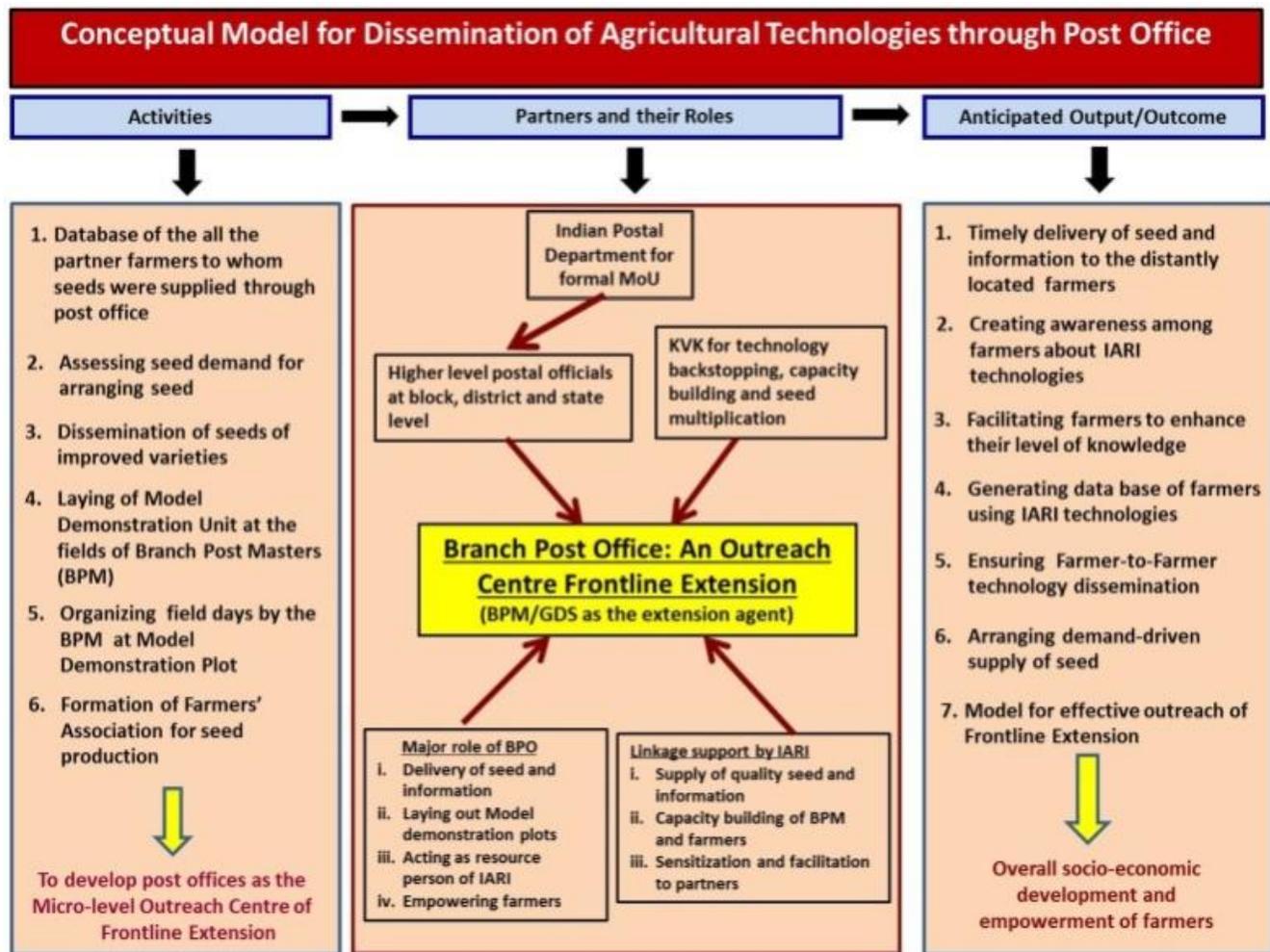
Box 1: The Indian Postal Network

The postal department in India has world’s largest network that covers the entire country with its 155,015 post office branches. Almost 90 per cent of these post offices are in rural areas (139,144 post offices). The rural branch master who is the sole staff at such branch post office belongs to the same cluster of villages or its neighbourhood. The village postmasters mostly are farmers and they know the local farming situation and farmers’ plight well.

With this background, an action research was conceived on establishing linkages with post office during *Rabi* 2009-10 by the Division of Agricultural Extension, IARI for dissemination of agricultural technologies and information to the farmers who are remotely located.

THE INITIATIVE

In the first phase of the study, the post offices and their personnel at district, block and village level in Sitapur district of Uttar Pradesh were contacted to explore the linkage possibility. Seven branch post offices of Sitapur district, Uttar Pradesh were identified. Major activities as recognized by the post office personnel were timely delivery of the seed and package of



practices posted by IARI to the farmers, regular discussion with the fellow farmers about the improved crop cultivation technologies and establishing the model demonstration plot by the branch postmaster for the other farmers.



IARI, KVK scientists, branch post master and farmers at paddy (P 2511) demonstration (Sheopur, M.P.)

Training of farmers and branch post masters at Buxar,

Analysis of agro-climatic situations: In order to identify the suitable crop and their appropriate varieties for the region, prevailing agro-climatic condition in project area was analysed.

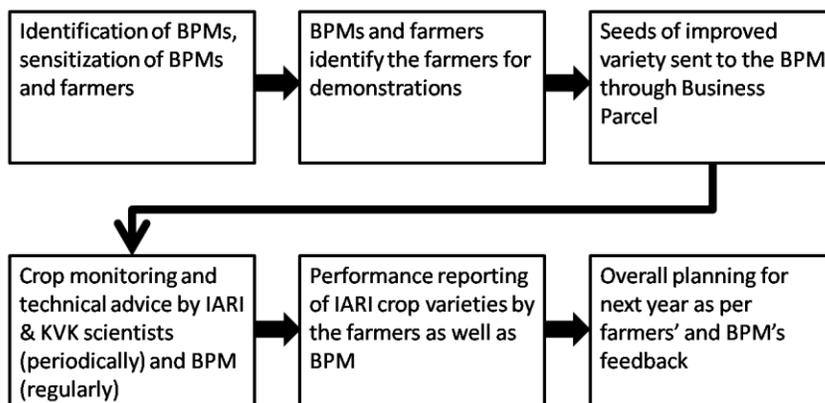
Participatory discussions: Discussions were organised with farmers to identify the priority crops and major crop-based interventions. The prevailing practices include paddy and *bajra* during *kharif*; wheat and mustard during *Rabi*) and vegetables *viz.*, bottle gourd, okra, pumpkin, brinjal during the summer season.

Training: Village level post office staff and the farmers were the main stakeholders in this entire process. Training programmes were organised at Jammu, Sitapur, Buxar, Sirohi and Sheopur in collaboration with the KVKs to strengthen their capacity with respect to IARI technologies and their correct use at the farm level. The participants were exposed to the crop management technologies, integrated nutrient management, integrated disease and pest management and post-harvest handling of the related crops. The Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) in the region is the partner for technology backstopping and providing training to the branch post masters and the farmers in a particular location

Dissemination of seeds: Seeds of improved crop varieties along with improved package of practices were sent to the branch postmasters who in turn distributed the seeds to the farmers identified by the village postmaster and the KVK scientists for demonstration of the improved varieties. The KVKs evaluated the variety and technology prior to its dissemination through branch postmasters. The KVKs are expected to multiply the seeds of improved varieties at the local level and make it available to village postmasters.

Process of Post Office Linkage

The model was validated at five locations including Sitapur (UP), Buxar (Bihar), Sheopur (Madhya Pradesh), Sirohi (Rajasthan) and Jammu (Jammu & Kashmir) for effective dissemination of farm information to the remotely located farmers.



FINDINGS

The model was found effective for making improved agricultural technologies available in the rural areas in relatively lesser time and cost. Yield of major cereals, oilseeds and vegetables increased by 11-30%. Capacity building of village postmasters (knowledge gain 23-36%) has benefitted the farmers of the area. Majority of the farmers (73%) were satisfied with this new extension model in delivering agro-technology and information services. More than three-fourth of the farmers (84%) felt that prestige and social recognition of the farmers in the community increased significantly.



Branch post masters as community based changed agents

It was observed that more than 90 per cent of farmers received the seed of above crops sent through post office within 4-6 days of despatch. The model was effective not only in dissemination of low volume seeds of mustard, pearl millet, vegetables and flowers but also high volume seeds of paddy and wheat.

Frequency of farmers visiting post office and postmaster increased significantly and postmasters were acting as opinion leaders in the community. The model emerged as an alternate extension mechanism for dissemination of technology (village postmasters as community-based extension agents).

SCALING OUT

Based on encouraging results and positive feedback of the stakeholders, the model was tested in 60 districts in 14 states of India (Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat) covering about 175 branch post offices. The model was identified as a potential agro-advisory mechanism by Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) and Department of Agricultural Research & Education (DARE), Ministry of Agriculture and the plan is to cover 100 districts of the country through this model. John Deere India Private Limited has shown interest for utilizing this mechanism for disseminating information related to farm mechanization. To scale up the innovative model, technologies other than improved crop varieties like bio-fertilizers, agro-chemicals including Pusa Hydrogel etc., are planned to be promoted through this mechanism.

IMPLICATIONS

These types of experiments in forging links with two public institutions could be institutionalised as an effective model for frontline extension by the large number of agricultural research centres in the country. The strong network of quality human resource manpower of village level postmasters shall definitely complement and supplement the efforts of the existing public sector extension personnel in the country.

CHALLENGES

Initially the branch post masters showed inhibitions in such association as that was new to them. There was no formal agreement between the Department of Posts and IARI. But we identified those branch postmasters in Sitapur and later, other four districts, who were involved in farming themselves. Being farmers themselves, they were motivated to join this innovative venture and the incremental advantage of the improved technologies reinforced their conviction. Level of participation of branch postmasters depends on the extent to which the KVK personnel could convince and motivate them.



Training of farmers and branch post masters at Jammu

IARI or ICAR has no formal MoU with Department of Posts (Government of India) . But a proposal was submitted to the Business Development and Marketing Directorate (BDMD), Department of Posts for this purpose, which is under review. The Department of Posts is also

interested to forge such alliance and the formal MoU will foster stronger linkage between the two public sector departments.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of IARI-Post office Linkage Extension Model proved the viability of considering post office as medium of technology delivery and branch postmasters as para extension officers and the importance of experimenting with public-public linkages for farm technology dissemination. Research institutions may identify and disseminate technologies in collaboration with postal department for providing agro-advisory services all over the country.

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