



**National Dialogue on "Innovative Extension Systems for Farmers' Empowerment
17-19 December 2015
New Delhi, India
TAAS, ICAR, DAC, NAAS, BKS, BMGF, YPARD, CSISA**



While several interesting recommendations were made at this National Dialogue, it remains to be seen how these are going to be implemented. Sajesh V.K. and Bhagya Vijayan who participated in this National Dialogue share their observations here.

THE CONTEXT

Trust for Advancement of Agricultural Sciences (TAAS) in collaboration with Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), Department of Agriculture, Cooperation & Farmers Welfare (DAC), National Academy of Agricultural Sciences (NAAS), Bharat Krishak Samaj (BKS), Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), Young Professionals for Agricultural Development (YPARD) and Cereal System Initiative for South Asia (CSISA) organized National Dialogue on "Innovative Extension Systems for Farmers' Empowerment" at National Agricultural Science Centre Complex (NASC), New Delhi, during 17-19 December 2015. The purpose was to develop a roadmap for innovative agricultural extension systems towards effective technology transfer. The organizers circulated a concept note indicating the need, objectives, and broad themes including the possibilities of multi-stakeholder interactions (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0TX5SvS4IMRMThPZS1ENks5R0k/view?usp=sharing>).



PROGRAMME

Inaugural Session

Shri Radha Mohan Singh, Union Minister of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, inaugurated the programme on 17 December 2015 (<http://www.icar.org.in/en/node/9993>). The Hon'ble Minister highlighted the role of Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs) in fastening the lab-to-land process and their special contribution in creating awareness on soil health across the country. Government of India has recently launched schemes like *Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana*, Soil Health Card Scheme and *Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana*. It also proposed National Agricultural Market Scheme. The minister expressed optimism that such schemes will revolutionize agriculture in years to come. The government is also seriously debating on bringing out a viable insurance scheme for the farmers, the Minister said in his address (<http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=133457>).

Technical sessions

The major themes of the dialogue were as follows:

- Current Status and Challenges of Extension System
- Farmers' Perception and Need
- Revisiting and Strengthening Extension System
- Role of Media and Communication System
- Involvement of Women and Youth
- Private-Sector Extension
- Coordination and Convergence
- Policy Interventions and Institutional Changes

Under each theme, 5-6 experts in the relevant area presented their viewpoints for 5 to 10 minutes followed by thorough deliberation by audience and panelists. The outcome of the discussions is presented below.

Current status and challenges

Government has to play the role of facilitator/enabler in the changing extension context and it should focus more on areas which are not served by other agencies. The proposed National Agricultural Education Project (NAEP) needs to be implemented as National Agricultural Research, Extension and Education Project. There is a need to establish a mechanism to coordinate



and document the success stories at various levels and provide opportunities for cross learning. To support smallholder farmers, reforms are necessary in pricing and marketing of inputs and outputs.

Farmers' perception and needs

Promotion and development of Farmers Producer Companies with venture capital and 6 to 8 years of handholding support is an important strategy. Similarly, enhancement of participation of farmers in policy making as well as support for dry land agriculture in the form of deficit price payment system rather than minimum support price (MSP) play a key role. Documenting failure stories along with success stories for learning and improvement is important. A portion of subsidies should be shifted as interest-free loans to farmers.

Revisiting and Strengthening Extension System

Future extension strategies should focus on producer aggregates at various levels. Indian extension should draw lessons from international extension models as well as from private sector and NGO experiences. Clear strategies should be formulated for climate adaptation as well as credit and market linkage. Content development and delivery aspects should be given more attention in case of ICT-based services. Performance of existing extension models need to be improved by enhancing the R&D linkage, training coordination, resource sharing and by widening area of coverage. Operational flexibility is necessary in the extension system to make the extension operations accountable to the local situations and farming communities. Technology options for agro-climatic zones and sub-zones needs to be systematically worked out and should be integrated into programme delivery mechanism as per specificity of each micro agro-eco situation. A chain of change agents including progressive farmers, entrepreneurs, farmers' organizations, cooperatives and local self government agents should be promoted to address the inadequacy in number and quality of existing extension agents. Further focus on training, gender issues and organizational change is necessary.



Role of Media and Communication System

The issue of inadequate coverage of agricultural information in the popular dailies and other print media was discussed. Regular interaction between media person with the farm scientists and farmers need to be promoted. Extension researchers can consider promotion of the use of digital knowledge gathering device. Extension personnel/officials should apply appropriate media mix in the extension education programme.

Involvement of Women and Youth

Nutrition-sensitive extension strategies with women as primary stakeholders are important. Gender-mediated nutrition pathway needs to be identified. Capacity building and nutrition literacy programme

should be given emphasis for establishing Nutrition Smart Villages. To increase the role of women in agriculture, gender-sensitive extension methodologies and training modules need to be developed. Keeping in view of the predominance of smallholders in Indian agriculture and their efficiency being attributed to practice of family farming, the extension system may focus on family farming with greater attention to the involvement of the women and youth. Agriculture Skill Council of India under the Skill Development Mission should identify the skill gaps in agriculture sector and introduce geographical, need-based programmes. To attract and retain youth in agriculture, efforts should begin at the school level by introducing courses on agriculture in school and on agricultural technologies in ITIs and polytechnics in the rural areas.

Private and NGO led extension

The potential of private sector in the skill development of unemployed rural youth and harnessing it for productivity improvement was discussed in this session. Skill training by Tata Kisan Sansar is worth emulating. Promotion of ICT-based extension models incorporating social media, mobile application, video, community radio linking with ordering, input supply and sale of farm produce at farm-gate are good practices. Integration of flexibility, mentoring, ownership, effective communication, forward and backward linkage, sound technology and market in extension approach further adds value to practices. Promotion of good agricultural practices by certification, database creation and premium price as well as creating technology leaders at village level is recommended.

Coordination and Convergence

A High Powered Committee (preferably Cabinet Committee) on farmers' empowerment and welfare at the highest level is necessary. Each relevant ministry (related to Agriculture in Centre and State level) should nominate/designate a Farmer Empowerment and Welfare Officer to track progress of farmer related schemes and similar mechanism should also be replicated at state level for better coordination and convergence. Financial support to ATMA and KVK for convergence activities should be earmarked. A performance monitoring mechanism at each tier for assessment and identification of missing links for better synergy is necessary.

Policy Interventions and Institutional Changes

Some of the pertinent issues discussed in this session include: spending at least 1% of agricultural GDP on agricultural research and extension, clear-cut policy on land consolidation with proper incentives for and against further land fragmentation and strengthening of existing Kisan Clubs with effective convergence of NABARD, SAUs, KVKs and state extension services. State extension services have to be made more accountable to clients. Developing more clarity on roles and responsibilities of extension functionaries, strengthening field level monitoring of extension interventions and mentoring farmers as change agents are key challenges. Panelists highlighted the importance of inclusiveness in agricultural extension with equal emphasis on all the allied sectors like animal husbandry, fisheries, horticulture and greater focus on disadvantaged groups like small and marginal farmer and weaker sections. Farmers need to be empowered to act as pressure group for enforcing farmer friendly policies through legislation. A targeted approach for incentivizing farmers through smart subsidy delivery mechanism is necessary. It is also important to determine the carrying capacity of Indian

farming lands to bring clarity on the extent of individuals/families that can be supported by farming enterprise.

OBSERVATIONS

Focused Deliberations: The three days 'National Dialogue' was well organized. Since the participation was by invitation, the sessions were not crowded, but focused. Experts in agricultural extension from different parts of the country, farmers and few students participated in the dialogue. The active discussion by audience and panelists reflected the meaning and spirit of the dialogue. The recommendations from different sessions were presented in the plenary session by respective conveners and further clarifications were sought. This helped to add any pertinent suggestion which was left out unknowingly or to remove any non-significant recommendation and hence worth replicating in all seminars/conferences.

Time Management: Sticking to the stipulated time limit was found to be often difficult, since view points and experiences on pertinent topics were deliberated in depth. Unlike other seminars/conferences, an opinion making 'dialogue' needs to have more time for discussion, but also need to keep the discussions on the track. The chair proactively interfered whenever discussions became too long or of the track.

Sensitivity to language and regional variations: Most of the panelists spoke in Hindi due to continuous demand from farmers. This illustrates the emerging challenge of communicating science and policy in vernacular languages, especially in the context of increased demand for farmer participation in development of farm policies. Such 'Dialogues' can help in pooling and crosschecking of ideas and experiences for betterment of extension system. Considering the scale and diversity of Indian agriculture, 'Regional Dialogues' can also be planned to formulate regionally differentiated strategies.

Uptake of Recommendations: A number of futuristic ideas and strategies have emerged out of the 'dialogue' justifying its objective. The real success of this workshop however depends on the actual uptake of these ideas by policy makers and its implementation. Involvement of Department of Agriculture and Cooperation and Farmers welfare as well as ICAR as organizers and their officers as experts in the dialogue might help. Post conference follow-ups happen very rarely in India, but TAAS with its good networking at various levels can be expected to carry out this task. Organizers have promised to bring out the proceedings at the earliest and hopefully these recommendations would be out in the public domain soon.

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