

## MY MEETING NOTES

Strengthening Social Science and Policy Research  
17 December 2016  
24<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference  
Agricultural Economics Research Association (India)  
(15-17 December, 2016)  
ICAR - Indian Veterinary Research Institute, Izatnagar, Uttar Pradesh, India



*Among the Social Sciences in Agriculture, the field of Agricultural Economics appears to be better placed when we look at the conferences being organized, level of participation, professionalism and continuous improvement in the quality of journals being published. Dr Mahesh Chander narrates the experience of his participation in the 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of Agricultural Economics Research Association, India, especially in the Session on Strengthening Social Science and Policy Research.*

### THE CONTEXT

The 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of Agricultural Economics Research Association (<http://www.aeraindia.in/>) was organized at the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) - Indian Veterinary Research Institute (IVRI), Izatnagar, from 15-17 December, 2016. The conference was on the theme, 'Agriculture for Nutrition Security'. As one of the panelists, I attended the s 'Strengthening Social Science and Policy Research' on the 17<sup>th</sup>, hosted by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) (<http://www.ifpri.org/division/south-asia-regional-office-sao>), International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) (<http://irri.org/>) and AERA.



This session refreshed my memory of reading an interesting document titled - Social Scientists in Agricultural Research : Lessons from the Mantaro Valley Project, Peru (<http://eprints.icrisat.ac.in/11896/1/RP-02589.pdf>). For many, this might be an old story now. Nevertheless, it makes an important point about the significant role of social scientists in agricultural research and development (Box 1).

**Box 1: Social Scientists in Agricultural Research: Lessons from the Mantaro Valley Project, Peru**

From 1977-1980, the International Potato Center, CIP (<http://cipotato.org/>) implemented a program of interdisciplinary farm level research in the Mantaro Valley of highland Peru. Unlike in many other agricultural research projects, anthropologists, economists, sociologists, plant physiologists, agronomists, pathologists, and entomologists were involved in this project. The three main objectives of the program were:

- (1) sensitize CIP and national program scientists to the value of on-farm research,
- (2) develop and field test procedures for on-farm research with potatoes, and
- (3) train national program personnel in the use of on-farm research techniques.

The experience from the Mantaro Valley Project confirmed that the contributions of social scientists to interdisciplinary teams, were no less important than those of biologists. Nearly four decades after, the lessons from this important project have not been well noted. It is not a wonder that social scientists are still deliberating about their contribution toward making biological research more relevant to societal needs.

Appreciably, social science professional associations in agriculture, especially those related to Agricultural Economics and Agricultural Extension Education are more frequently discussing the importance of social sciences in biological research. I attended a brainstorming session on the 'Role of Social Science in National Agricultural Research System' organized by the National Academy of Agricultural Sciences, India (<http://naasindia.org/>) on 23 May, 2015 (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0TX5SvS4IMROTE2NXIycUQxQIU/view?usp=sharing>).

Over 25 leading experts from the social sciences participated. This brainstorming session discussed two issues: the lack of clarity on the potential role of social scientists in the national agricultural research system, and the lack of critical mass of social scientists in many ICAR and State Agricultural Universities (SAU) in India.

I attended yet another brainstorming session last year on 'Strengthening Agricultural Extension Research and Education'. This session discussed the role of Agricultural Extension Education in agriculture development and emphasized on strengthening the discipline by enhancing core competencies of agricultural extension professionals in emerging areas(<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0TX5SvS4IMRcjBoX05wTFExaUU/view?usp=sharing>). These efforts indicate the growing concern and realization that social sciences can and should improve the quality of biological research by making research more relevant to the needs of the society.

**EXPENSIVE MISTAKES: BIOLOGICAL RESEARCH WITHOUT INVOLVING SOCIAL SCIENTISTS**

Some of the technologies found promising by the biologists under laboratory conditions, often fail in field situations. For instance, I shared the cases of urea treatment of straw ([http://www.aps.uoguelph.ca/~gking/Ag\\_2350/straw.htm](http://www.aps.uoguelph.ca/~gking/Ag_2350/straw.htm)), which is highly extolled by animal nutrition specialists but remains not adopted by farmers across the world. It is still being promoted

globally including India at the expense of time, resources and money spent on something which is not acceptable to farmers due to various reasons ([www.fao.org/docrep/014/i2270e/i2270e00.pdf](http://www.fao.org/docrep/014/i2270e/i2270e00.pdf)).

Similarly, *azolla* as animal feed (<http://www.feedipedia.org/node/565>) that failed in Southeast Asian countries is still being extensively promoted in India ([www.fao.org/docrep/014/i2270e/i2270e00.pdf](http://www.fao.org/docrep/014/i2270e/i2270e00.pdf)).

The Hydroponic fodder (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BYvgIJ2Fo>) is the current craze in many parts of India as a miraculous option for livestock in India's drylands, (<http://www.icar.org.in/en/node/6737>).



While all these technologies are claimed promising by biologists, especially those who research and develop them, the social scientists should intervene with evidence generated through field research to establish the socio-economics and operational feasibility of these technologies under field conditions. This could save on a lot of time, money and resources that are wasted on developing technologies which are impractical under field conditions. Any research endeavor is ultimately meant to serve society and social scientists being close to society are aware of societal needs, aspirations and field realities. The social scientists, can add value to the work done by biologists by involving in agricultural research projects as partners in multidisciplinary teams. Moreover, feedback and impact assessment are important domains of any research outcome, where social scientists can contribute significantly.

### **WHAT SOCIAL SCIENCES COULD OFFER?**

As social scientists, we study and analyze the needs and aspirations of different stakeholders in agriculture to ensure that science contributes better in improving efficiency of the system and welfare of humankind. We the social scientists can help organize research, education and training around societal problems in natural science research, by improving focus, design, implementation, evaluation and demonstration of evidences of impact.

The scope of social sciences in agriculture has been defined at national and international levels, to include economics, sociology, political science, geography, philosophy, psychology, anthropology

including agricultural extension education and statistics. If these disciplines were to work in isolation without collaborating with biologists, their impact would reduce significantly in solving problems faced by different sectors in agriculture and by rural communities.



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Special Plenary Session  
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In addition, social scientists can significantly enhance their contributions by improving their skills in tools and methodologies of social research, which often is lacked by many, remarked Dr Pramod K Joshi, Director, IFPRI- Asia.

The Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) institutions (<http://www.cgiar.org/about-us/research-centers/>) in general, IFPRI and IRRI in particular are making efforts to enhance role of social sciences in agricultural research by taking up activities including organizing workshops, seminars, symposium and panel discussions like the one organized at ICAR-IVRI as part of this conference. These efforts are expected to yield in the coming years. There is a large scope for international institutions to improve the capacities of social scientists in developing countries through workshops and trainings.

It is much appreciated that social scientists like Dr Sam Mohanty (<http://irri.org/blogs/item/sam-mohanty>) travelled all the way from Manila to address the gathering at this small dusty town (Bareilly) in north India. “At IRRI, excellent work environment and logistics have been created at the Social Sciences Division to proactively work with multidisciplinary teams of researchers at various locations in different countries including India”, he remarked.

The participants also benefited from the presentation by Dr Pramod K Joshi (<https://www.ifpri.org/profile/p-k-joshi>), who elaborated on the initiatives of IFPRI to improve capacities of social scientists by equipping them with tools and methods of social research. The IFPRI in collaboration with ICAR undertook an important step during September 21-24, 2015 by organizing the ‘Capacity Building Program on Methodologies in Agriculture Extension Research ‘ (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0TX5SvS4IMRZHBiTIwQVImRjQ/view>), for the faculty and scientists of Agricultural Extension.

We need more such initiatives. In this regard, I am particularly happy to mention two workshops held recently on developing capacities of extension researchers in India.

The ICAR - NAARM in collaboration with the Centre for Research on Innovation and Science Policy (CRISP), Agricultural Extension in South Asia (AESAs), ICAR - Central Tuber Crops Research Institute (CTCRI) and National Institute of Agricultural Extension Management (MANAGE), organized a workshop on 'Good Practices in Extension Research and Evaluation' during 29 November - 2 December 2016 in Hyderabad (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0TX5SvS4IMRLVZlbFExdmRpb1U/view>).

A few months back, the Indian Veterinary Extension Forum (IVEF), Puducherry, P.V. Narasimha Rao Telangana Veterinary University (PVNRTVU), Hyderabad, and Karnataka Veterinary, Animal and Fisheries Sciences University (KVAFSU), Bidar, co-organized a national workshop on 'Mentoring Young Extension Professionals for Conduct of Scientific Research' during 4-5, July 2016 in Hyderabad (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0TX5SvS4IMRWS1FdjFJSUpqbk0/view>).

Such collective efforts would certainly help in creating a cadre of professional extension researchers who can carry out impact oriented quality research in extension.

Many participants of the 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of Agricultural Economics Research Association were overwhelmed to hear Dr Prabhu Pingali (<https://dyson.cornell.edu/people/prabhu-pingali>) on 'Redirecting Agriculture and Food Policy towards Nutrition Security'.



He said, it is time that countries realize to become nutrition secure and to understand the impact of ignoring nutrition sensitive agriculture.

While inaugurating the conference, Dr R B Singh emphasized the need for social scientists to help in prioritizing and solving agricultural problems by partnering with biologists (<https://ccafs.cgiar.org/sites/default/files/RamBadanSingh-CV.pdf>).

## LESSONS

Unlike many conferences organized by professional societies in India, this conference focused on technical content, presentations and discussions rather than on awards, certificates, sightseeing,

elections etc. The quality of speakers can be judged by the status of speakers drawn from International Organizations such as IFPRI, IRRI and The Tata - Cornell Institute for Agriculture and Nutrition (TCI) in addition to the presence of eminent Indian scholars in the field of Agricultural Economics who shared their thoughts and vision on important issues impacting the society at large.

To attend this conference of AERA and especially to discuss in the panel on 'strengthening social science and policy research' was a gratifying experience for me. I am optimistic about more proactive involvement of social scientists in agricultural research in the days to come!

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