

BEYOND THE FIRST STEP: EXPLORING THE COMMITTEE REPORT ON EXTENSION AND DOUBLING OF FARMERS' INCOME



The Eleventh Volume of the Report of the Committee on Doubling Farmers' Income (DFI) examines the status and reforms needed in the agricultural extension system in India. Though a first step in the right direction, this report warrants more discussion and debate in order to address omissions and to develop an implementable plan of action, argues Dr R M Prasad.

CONTEXT

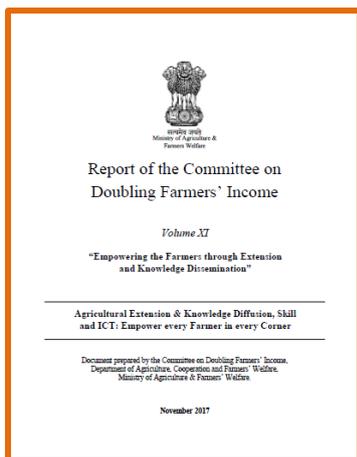
The Government of India in April 2016 constituted a committee on 'Doubling Farmers Income' under the Chairmanship of Mr Ashok Dalwai. Six out of the 14 volumes prepared by the Committee are currently available online (<http://www.agricoop.nic.in/doubling-farmers>). The committee submitted its report "Empowering the farmers through extension and knowledge dissemination" (Vol. XI) in November 2017. The committee is seeking comments and suggestions on these draft reports including the one on extension.

WHAT THE REPORT SAYS

The report is organised in eight chapters. The first chapter covers the role, importance, and status of Extension. The DFI Committee defines 'Extension' as "an empowering system of sharing information, knowledge, technology, skills, risk and farm management practices, across agricultural sub sectors, all along the agricultural value chain, so as to enable the farmers to realise higher net income from their enterprise on a sustainable basis". The definition covers two outcomes of the extension process at the farm level: getting higher income from farming; and realising the income gains on a sustainable basis. The report draws specific attention to some important facts –even though currently agricultural extension services are available on a pluralistic platform, the quality of extension tends to suffer given its tendency to repeat a limited set of extension activities, as well as from procedural bottlenecks.



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The second chapter deals with the changed role of Agricultural Extension. The DFI Committee is guided by the fact that more than 85 per cent of farm holdings in the country are small and marginal and are economically challenged, and there is need for deploying scales of operation. Psychological counselling is intended to be an integral part of extension advisory. The report indicates that a team of researchers are presently working on creation of a 'Stress Index' (SI) for farmers and preparing a training module for village level volunteers. The Committee argues that for meeting the new challenges, broadening the extension perspective is crucial for efficient and cost effective extension, real time extension, location specific extension, and extension for sustainability. The report recognises *intensification* and *diversification* of agriculture as

strategies that can significantly contribute to doubling of farmers' income. Both the strategies are based on existing resources available with farmers, wherein efficient utilization is the key need. It also mentions the reduced focus of extension on horticulture, dairy, livestock, poultry and fishery sub sectors as shortcomings of the current agricultural extension system. These warrant greater attention from the extension service systems so as to meet the objective of doubling farmers' income.

Another observation of the Committee is that University Extension has an important function to perform as 'concept nursery and think tank', while organically integrating with mainstream extension when covering their service area. The report also touches on PPP in extension service delivery and recommends that a progressive National Level Ranking Framework (NLRFW) for extension service providers, both public and private, needs to be put in place.



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Chapter 3 describes the roles, responsibilities and models of the extension system. The report proposes the establishment of an 'e-national bank for Agricultural Technologies (e-NBAT) as a national level repository of knowledge, converging all standard practices and technologies on a common extension platform to be owned and managed by MANAGE. The report also suggests that the role of Directorate of Extension (DoE) of the Ministry of Agriculture, which is currently serving as

a subordinate office, needs to be changed and more autonomy granted to it. DoE and MANAGE will need to work in tandem to help enhance the delivery capacity of the agricultural extension system across the country. The linkages among MANAGE, EEs and SAMETIs are also discussed in this chapter. The extension model for doubling farmers' income is provided in page 44 of the report. But it is debatable whether this can be considered as a model. The technology flow proposed in page 59 of the report also needs to be further debated and discussed for further refinement.

The human resource use efficiency in Extension is covered in Chapter 4. The extension manpower density in the different states of India is presented in the report. In view of the changed scenario, the DFI Committee is of the opinion that minimum ratio of extension service providers to farming families can be revisited and recommends the ratio as: a) Hilly areas - 1:400; b) Irrigated areas - 1:750; and c) Rainfed areas - 1:1000. The report highlights the need for incentivizing for effective extension delivery. The need for performance-linked incentives for field functionaries and the concept of 'one village-one farmer friend' is also projected.



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The Committee observes that ATMA remains a platform of relevance to meet DFI challenges, and that it is necessary to refresh the institutional mechanism and implementation procedures so as to harvest the advantages of a platform that aims concurrently at both public-public partnership and public-private partnership. Essentially, both models of PPPs need to function with a spirit of synergy. The report also indicates that the outcomes realised from ATMA have not been up to its potential, due to some dilutions which are discussed in the chapter. The Committee observes that commercial agriculture requires additional extension services for which reorientation of the existing extension system is necessary, including incorporation of banking and financial institutions, co-operatives, etc., as extension platforms.

The fifth chapter deals with ICT in Extension. The report indicates that digital technology has the potential for creating a virtual extension platform that is available to farmers 24x7 – anytime, anywhere – for fastest and cheapest transfer of technologies. It is clearly mentioned that both farmers and extension workers are to transform as e-farmers and e-extension workers in the days to come by appropriately utilizing ICT tools. “Access to information” and “information to access” of appropriate location-specific content and advisory system in languages understandable by farmers, is highlighted in the report.

Though there are many ICT interventions in agriculture in both public and private domains, only major ICT interventions of the DoA & FW are listed in the report. Suggestions for promoting ICT in Agricultural Extension are also given in the report. Areas requiring immediate ICT interventions are also indicated.

Chapter 6 covers issues and concerns relating to the empowerment of women for income enhancement. NSS data indicate that there has been steady decline of men in agriculture over the last three decades, with the percentage of men coming down from 81 per cent to 63 per cent as compared to women, in whose case, it has come down from 88 per cent to 71 per cent. This trend is referred to as “feminization of Indian agriculture”. According to reports by FAO, if women farmers in developing countries have equal access to production resources as men, their productivity can be enhanced by 20-30% and agricultural production could be raised by 2.5 to 4%. Hence there is a need to create an alternative system for empowering women.

The report indicates that it is important to significantly increase overall allocation for women in agriculture by making it to at least 50 per cent (from the current 30 per cent) or more across all schemes of the Ministry. The need to formulate new schemes specifically to suit the needs of women farmers in different agro-ecological contexts is also specified.

The seventh chapter focuses on strengthening technology backstop institutions. The report indicates that an institutional mechanism for promoting partnership between, and among, related labs on common farmer-related problems would be highly useful, if put in place. (An element of doubt about establishment is reflected here.) The report also points out that there is need for developing operational guidelines for implementing individual social responsibility initiatives in public and private institutions. (But the report is silent on institutional social responsibility.) Technological backstopping can be strengthened by establishing a four-way mode of communication: between labs, from lab to land, and land to lab, and between farms. The scope of AC and ABC scheme of MANAGE for technological backstopping is also provided in the report.



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Chapter 8 presents the recommendations of the report under three heads – Redefining Agriculture Extension, Key Recommendations, and Other Recommendations. Some of the major recommendations are given in Box 1 (below).

Box 1: Major Recommendations

- Agricultural Extension has to be redefined with focus on income security of farmers. Income security is both a challenge and an opportunity.
- Focus areas that demand strengthening of the extension system are listed out, which have to be addressed.
- Extension should follow a 'project approach' through projects of suitable sizes to provide full support and facilitation to farmers, including backward linkages (production) and forward linkages (marketing), along with an integrated farming systems approach through convergence.
- ATMA has to be retained with reforms and a strong monitoring mechanism to ensure adequate compliance with implementation procedures.
- Capacity building of extension functionaries should concentrate on the principles of agri-business extension.
- A one-time catch up grant may be provided for upgrading the performance of training institutions in the country, after identifying gaps.
- A Central Board of Studies has to be constituted at the national level to review and regulate changes in curriculum across all the 74 Agricultural Universities of the country so that the standards and content of education in agriculture address the field level problems of farmers.
- A national and state e-Agricultural policy has to be formulated to explore and outline the possibilities of leveraging ICT for agricultural extension.
- Setting up of an integrated portal on Agricultural marketing by integrating websites of e-NAM, AGMARKNET, APEDA, APMCs, MPEDA, etc.
- The public and private extension system should be synergised through win-win PPP models, aligned with state and district plans, and promoted through outcome linked incentives.
- Situation-specific protocols are to be developed for building more transparency and trust into the partnerships with private extension services known for their aggressive marketing strategies vis-a-vis the public extension system, to avoid conflicts of interest.
- The extension system should promote and support the agricultural value system by guiding the farmers appropriately, for which extension functionaries also need to be suitably oriented.

WHAT THE REPORT DOESN'T SAY

The report is silent on the need for developing an appropriate field extension system in line with the T&V system. This is all the more relevant in the context of doubling farmers' income.

The role of extension in the wider agricultural innovation system (AIS) is not addressed in the report. Extension services have to widen the agenda and emerge as a "bridging organisation" linking several actors, rather than just being an intermediary between researcher and farmer. This is not reflected in the report.

Information, knowledge, and skill are identified as the three faces of Extension in the report. Wisdom is another important concept which is not included in the report. The traditional wisdom of farmers must be effectively used by the extension system.

Though the pluralism of the extension system is highlighted and the need for convergence is mentioned in the report, the dynamics and mechanism of convergence are not properly addressed. A separate chapter on Convergence would have been ideal.

The most important skill to be learned today is “Learn to self-learn and fast-learn”. This will not be easy for farmers who do not have the requisite mind set and attitude to accept digital technologies. This is not seriously taken into account in the report.

The need for attracting and retaining youth in agriculture is a greatly felt need. However, the report has not given due importance to this. Extension services for skill development, entrepreneurship development, incubation centres, and agri ventures could have been presented in detail as a separate chapter in the report.

Governance of the extension system covering appropriate monitoring and evaluation tools, issues related to implementation of programmes, capacity development efforts for professionalism, etc., has to be discussed in greater detail in the report.



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Extension for sustainability is an important issue that needs to be properly addressed. The report only makes passing mention of this critical issue.

There is no mention about extension research in the report, which is a serious limitation. The need for promoting extension research for strong extension service delivery is critical, which is not addressed in the report.

A protocol for scaling up of successful pilots titled “From pilots to projects” is very much needed in the report. There is a critical need to move from project (pilots) to systemic interventions (scales). It is observed from the field that many of the successful pilots are not upscaled, the reasons of which have to be probed into and addressed.

The report makes several sweeping generalisations without proposing any action plan. For instance, the report talks about emphasising targets that focus on outcomes that result in profitability enhancement at the farmer end. It also mentions that there is scope for on-farm, off-farm and non-farm activities, which can generate additional job opportunities, which is very important from the point of doubling farmers’ income. It talks about the need for the Directorate of Extension and MANAGE to work in tandem to enhance the delivery capacity of the agricultural extension system across the country, without exploring the reasons for why they are not working / or should work in tandem.

FINAL REMARKS

I appreciate the efforts of the Committee in preparing a report on extension and doubling farmer income. The report clearly indicates that the current extension service system has so far been largely co-ordinated for input marketing and associated services, besides farm management. The report discusses a suitable architecture for the extension network needed in the country.

However, based on my reading of this report, I feel that it is a half-baked attempt to reform the extension service delivery in India. Many useful documents that should have been consulted for a report like this are missing. For instance, Report of the 12th Plan Working Group on Agricultural Extension (Planning Commission, 2012) which presents detailed analysis on extension and has made several relevant recommendations seems to have not been consulted while drafting this report (as this is not listed in the References section on page 123). Otherwise also, only very few documents are included in the references which has affected the completeness and totality of a report like this.

While the DFI Committee Report “Empowering the farmers through extension and knowledge dissemination” is a first step in the right direction, it warrants more discussion and debate among the extension fraternity in the country. This is important for addressing the lapses in this report and for reorienting the current extension system to make it more vibrant, realistic and field-oriented.

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