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Sharing, learning and networking for innovation

Agricultural Extension
in South Asia

Taking Stock and
Shaping the Future:

CONVERSATIONS ON EXTENSION



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Taking Stock and Shaping the Future: Conversations on Extension

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About AESA

Agricultural Extension in South Asia (AESA) is a network of all those who are interested and involved in Extension and Advisory Services (EAS) in South Asia (www.aesanetwork.org).

Our vision is to improve food and nutrition security through effective and efficient EAS in South Asia. Our mission is to promote sharing, learning and networking for building effective and efficient EAS.

AESA is part of the **Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS)**.

The **Centre for Research on Innovation and Science Policy (CRISP)** hosts the Secretariat of AESA. CRISP conducts policy relevant research on agricultural extension and rural innovation.

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We also thank Niharika Lenka for the design and layout of this publication.

Any opinions expressed here are those of the authors of the various blog pieces.

Editors

Background

During the last six years (2013-2019), the Agricultural Extension in South Asia (AESA) Network has served as a platform for collating the voices, insights, concerns, and experiences of people in the extension sphere of South Asia. Diverse professionals shared their concerns on the present and future of Extension and Advisory Services (EAS) in the form of blog conversations for AESA. Together, all of these individuals who are involved, interested and passionate about EAS, discussed ways to move beyond some of the seemingly intransigent problems that are hindering the professionalization of EAS. Nevertheless, these blogs also take the time to celebrate and salute the signs of promising new beginnings.

This publication is an effort on our part to compile 100 such conversations on EAS, which were originally published as AESA blogs, starting in February 2013, into this book. Several of our readers have been asking us to assemble all these reflections into a single document so that these are available as a good reference document for a wide spectrum of actors involved in EAS – scholars, practitioners, trainers, faculty, innovation intermediaries, mentors, leaders and managers – all of whom are involved in driving agricultural and rural transformation.

Introduction

Why conversations are important

The developmental and policy context that led to the establishment and strengthening of EAS in the 20th century no longer exists currently in most countries. To remain relevant and contribute effectively to agricultural and rural transformation we need to continuously challenge our professional beliefs and paradigms that have so far shaped our professional behaviour. We need to experiment, evaluate and learn from alternative approaches, and then re-tool, re-equip and re-acquaint our professionals with new knowledge and skills. Conversations around our present and future contributions are a sine qua non for reinventing extension in order to deal with the emerging challenges. This collection of professional reflections by those involved and interested in the policy and practice of extension, is surely one of the most credible means of strengthening EAS.

Farming context as well as farmers aspirations are evolving rapidly. Since our profession deals with the provision of EAS to rural communities it is all the more incumbent upon us that we pause, take stock, probe, self-reflect and then only move forward with more focused and relevant strategies. This is where these conversations become so crucial as we believe that these are not merely conversations but 'voices for change'. These conversations nearly encompass all the issues that EAS are facing and are critical not only for its present, but also for a future that remains relevant to the changing context.

New challenges before EAS

The global food and agriculture sector faces several new challenges. While agribusiness companies and globalised supply chains are transforming agriculture in many parts of the world, the sector faces several new challenges. These include: changing climate, a depleting natural resources base, unstable market dynamics, the unrealized productivity potential of youth and women, along with the critical need to feed the world's growing population through sustainable farming practices.

In South Asia, the agricultural sector is dominated by small farms – often with weak bargaining powers and a limited political voice. Women constitute the majority of the agricultural labour force in small-scale and subsistence farming in the region. The Global Food Policy Report (IFPRI 2018) noted that "South Asia is highly vulnerable to climate change, as climate variables such as temperature, rainfall, flooding, and drought increasingly affects agricultural activities". These new challenges also mean that EAS need to tackle a diversity of objectives that include, but go well beyond, transferring new technologies. A pluralistic, demand driven and gender responsive extension provision that offers a much broader support to rural producers, is critical for agricultural development and ending hunger in South Asia.

While EAS need more human and financial resources to address these new challenges, trends towards state withdrawal from extension and decreased public funding initiated in several countries during the 1990s affected the delivery of EAS. In South Asia, this gap has been partially filled by new non-traditional actors

providing extension services, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), private companies engaged in agribusiness (e.g.: selling inputs and procurement and value addition of farm produce), producers' organizations, independent consultants, etc. While they bring enormous value to EAS, lack of coordination of the multiple stakeholders has often jeopardized the effectiveness and inclusiveness of the whole system.

In South Asia, historically, the main focus of public EAS has been on cereals. The horticultural sector started receiving attention only in recent years. Livestock and fisheries are yet to get the desired attention. Though South Asian countries have a long history of organising and reforming extension services, much more needs to be done to strengthen their capacities to deal with the rapidly evolving challenges in agriculture.

New approaches and new capacities

In this changing context, previous top-down approaches where EAS would simply transfer new technologies to producers can no longer address modern challenges, and it appears clear that the EAS will be able to effectively support producers only if it develops new capacities to meet these fresh challenges. For this to happen, diverse EAS providers should also coordinate in order to be able to offer a very wide range of services. While technology transfer focusing on dissemination of new technical knowledge may still be needed, other aspects have become equally or even more important. These include provision of market information, supporting farmers on business and negotiation skills, promoting entrepreneurship among farmers, developing capacities to work with women, youth, migrants and vulnerable groups, supporting adaptation to climate change, etc. Many of these new capacities that are needed at the individual, organisational, and enabling environment levels are articulated in the New Extensionist Position Paper (GFRAS 2012).

Moreover, solutions for most of these new challenges would require new forms of interaction, organization, and agreement between multiple actors (Leeuwis 2004) within the Agricultural Innovation System. EAS could support the innovation process by:

- organising producers and building their capacities to deal with production, natural resource management, and marketing challenges;
- building necessary linkages for producers to access market, credit, and other types of information and inputs needed to improve their production and livelihoods;
- creating space or opportunities to exchange information and experiences among farmers and rural communities for scaling innovation; and
- building coalitions or platforms to facilitate development of consortia of different organisations to address specific issues (e.g. value chain development, participatory irrigation management, inputs to policy formulation, etc.) and also for information sharing and learning.

Clearly, to perform these new roles and provide these broader ranges of services, EAS need new knowledge and skills. Governments can play an important role in creating enabling conditions for agricultural innovation through coordination, development of an appropriate policy framework, innovative financing mechanisms and knowledge management. There is a need to generate policy-relevant evidence on the performance and impact of EAS through research and evaluation. However, the capacities to perform

these roles are limited across all levels – individual, organisational and the enabling environment. A recent capacity needs assessment of EAS providers undertaken in four South Asian countries (Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka) revealed several gaps in capacities at these different levels (AESAs 2016). The conversations in this compilation explore many of these issues, discuss the challenges and ways forward, and also present some promising solutions to address these challenges.

Organisation of this document

The 100 conversations which we published over the last six years are grouped under the following 11 themes:

- Capacity Development for Extension Professionals;
- The Governance of Extension and Advisory Services;
- Strengthening Extension Research;
- New Approaches and Tools for Extension and Advisory Services;
- Promoting Agripreneurship and Technology Commercialisation;
- ICTs for Extension;
- Skill Development;
- Livestock Extension;
- Engaging Youth, Farm Women and Producer Organisations in Extension;
- Influencing Policies;
- Dealing with Uncertainties.

This book ends with a reflection on the AESA web portal; and a deliberation on what else is needed, beyond conversations, to strengthen EAS.

We hope this publication will significantly contribute to the process of strengthening EAS in South Asia and beyond.

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Final Remarks: Beyond Conversations

Many of us recognise the importance of conversation, but also know its limitations. The dilemma that we face today is whether these conversations are enough to create new capacities and organisational values that can go on to facilitate institutional and policy changes that strengthen EAS.

We at AESA strongly believe that conversations about our profession are necessary, and these can facilitate the generation of incremental changes. Yet these alone are not sufficient to bring about transformational changes (distinguished by radical breakthroughs in paradigms, beliefs, and behaviour) that are needed currently, not only within EAS, but also among other actors in the wider AIS.

AESA blogs were not a one-way communication. There is an inbuilt system for receiving feedback and responding to these. We have been receiving comments – agreeing and disagreeing with the stated positions in the blog – and other feedback providing viewpoints that also needs to be examined. As often said, “Good disagreement is central to progress”.

Some of these conversations also led to new initiatives. For instance, our blog conversations on the weaknesses in extension research in India and subsequent comments and suggestions on these from our readers motivated us to

- undertake an analysis of current research publishing in extension in India;
- organise the first training on Good Practices in Extension Research and Evaluation in 2016; and
- develop a Manual on Good Practices in Extension Research and Evaluation in 2017.

Since then, the demand for such trainings has increased, and together with other partners we could subsequently organise four such trainings for students and faculty in India.

Similarly blog conversations around enhancing capacities among extension led us to organise a capacity needs assessment (CNA) workshop for EAS providers in four South Asian countries. This also led to the Development of a Facilitators Guide on CNA of Extension and Advisory Services.

Several of the AESA blogs have significantly influenced the development of new extension curricula at the MSc and PhD levels in India, and some of these are currently identified as reference materials for the prescribed course content. We are sure many other blogs on the rest of the themes are also contributing to new debates in our profession. Additionally, these conversations have also helped some of our practitioners in better realising the wider scope and contribution of EAS in agricultural and rural transformation.

However, it remains to be seen how these contributions are going to bring about more such changes in the future among EAS and other actors in the AIS. Conversations on EAS will lead to transformational changes only if:

- these lead to reflection, experimentation, and learning among several practitioners at varied levels within the professional knowledge networks in EAS (something which the AESA Network has initiated in Asia and GFRAS globally);
- such conversations also happen among other professionals groups representing other AIS domains (research and education, business and enterprises, the enabling environment); and
- these professional groups representing the different domains interact with each other and jointly reflect, experiment, and learn.

We can't foresee where these conversations are taking us currently and whether we will be able to instigate transformational changes through these kinds of effort. But we firmly believe that we have initiated something interesting, albeit on a small scale. "Big things have small beginnings" goes an old adage and we look forward eagerly to it.

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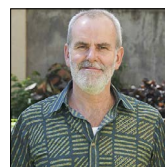
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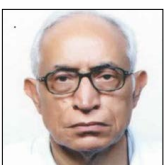
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Taking Stock and Shaping the Future: CONVERSATIONS ON EXTENSION

During the last six years (2013-2019), the Agricultural Extension in South Asia (AESAs) Network has served as a platform for collating the voices, insights, concerns, and experiences of people in the extension sphere of South Asia. Diverse professionals shared their concerns on the present and future of Extension and Advisory Services (EAS) in the form of blog conversations for AESAs. Together, all of these individuals who are involved, interested and passionate about EAS, discussed ways to move beyond some of the seemingly intransigent problems that are hindering the professionalization of EAS. Nevertheless, these blogs also take the time to celebrate and salute the signs of promising new beginnings.

This publication is an effort on our part to compile 100 such conversations on EAS, which were originally published as AESAs blogs, starting in February 2013, into this book. Several of our readers have been asking us to assemble all these reflections into a single document so that these are available as a good reference document for a wide spectrum of actors involved in EAS – scholars, practitioners, trainers, faculty, innovation intermediaries, mentors, leaders and managers – all of whom are involved in driving agricultural and rural transformation.



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