

COVID-19: WHAT CAN EAS DO TO SUPPORT INDIAN FARMERS?



As a community of people closely associated with farming and farmers, Extension and Advisory Services (EAS) have to support farmers to deal with the present crisis. Are we effectively fulfilling this responsibility? In this blog, Dr Mahesh Chander examines how EAS providers can support farmers to deal with these challenging times.

CONTEXT

We are passing through difficult times due to an unprecedented crisis situation caused by [Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) pandemic](#). Many countries across the world, including India, are under lockdown and have issued health advisories asking people to remain indoor and not venture out. This has been disrupting. Farming activities in India are adversely affected due to disruptions in the input and output value chains (Box 1). Farmers engaged in all sectors (food grains, vegetables, fruits, milk and poultry) are affected as they are finding it difficult to harvest and transport their produce.

Box 1: Covid -19 and Impact on Indian Agriculture: Reports from Newspapers

- [COVID-19 will have major economic implications for rural India](#)
- [Farmers may not be infected but are certainly affected](#)
- [Lockdown: After Karnataka farmers dump produce; govt decides to direct it towards needy](#)
- [Covid-19 rumours hurt India's poultry industry](#)
- [Dairy sector lets 1.2 cr litres of milk go down the drain daily](#)
- [Nashik's grapes rot as exports to EU and local sales grind to halt](#)
- [Coronavirus Lockdown Having an Adverse effect on Agriculture Sector in India](#)
- [COVID 19: Punjab's rural economy takes a big hit](#)
- [Lockdown: Fishing community in deep waters](#)

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EAS AND COVID 19

The Extension and Advisory Services (EAS) are expected to be closely associated with farmers for purposeful and effective sharing of information. Citizens in general trust Extension as a credible source of locally relevant information and [appreciate Extension's effective connections with other organizations](#). Currently, when farmers and other agri-value chain actors face unprecedented challenges, the proactive role of EAS can not only enhance its prestige, but it can also build trust in the farming community. It is also our moral responsibility. The major strengths of EAS lie in its dedicated staff, methods and good practices in dealing with farmers and other stakeholders for agricultural development and farmer empowerment.

Extension's response to COVID-19

India has a pluralistic extension system. The Departments of Agriculture at the state/UT level have the most number of staff for EAS on the ground (district, block level and below). Staff at the state level are supported by the National Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare and the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR). Both organizations are trying to intervene in this situation and have issued advisories to farmers on dealing with current challenges. For instance, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) vide its [order no 40-3/2020-D](#) dated 24 March, 2020, issued guidelines to various ministries (Central/State including Union Territories) for containment of COVID-19 epidemic in the country. The Ministry of Home Affairs further issued an [addendum to the guidelines](#) on 27 March, 2020. Besides restrictions on public movement, these guidelines have made exceptions in the interest of farmers to include delivery of food items, operations of cold storage and warehouses, etc.

Following the MHA order, the Agricultural Extension Division of ICAR has developed [Guidelines for farmers and farming sector during lockdown period due to COVID-19](#). These guidelines indicate that many activities concerned with farmers and farming are considered essential and thus, exempted from restrictions during the lockdown. These include:

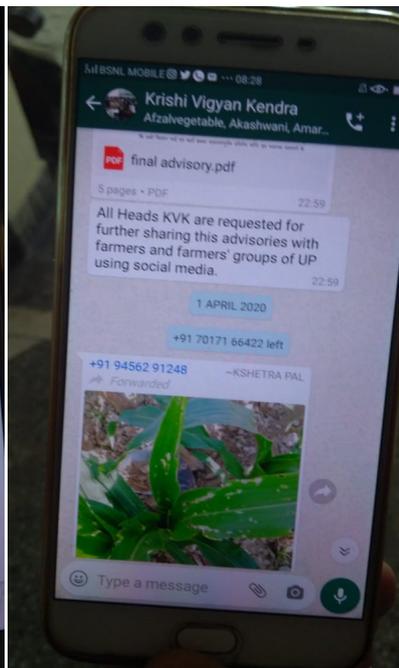
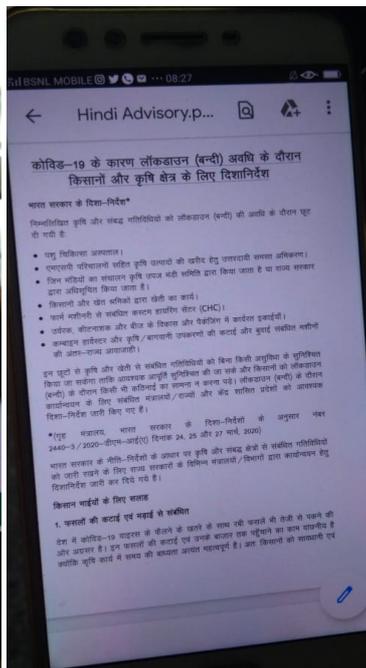
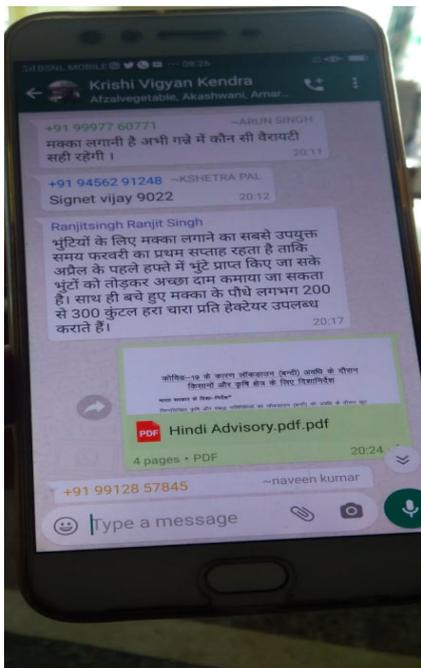
- Veterinary hospitals,
- Agencies engaged in procurement of agriculture products, including MSP operations,
- 'Mandis' operated by the Agriculture Produce Market Committee or as notified by the State Government,
- Farming operations by farmers and farm workers in the field,
- Custom hiring centres (CHC) related to farm machinery,
- Manufacturing and packaging units of fertilizers, pesticides and seeds, and
- Intra and inter-state movement of harvesting and sowing related machines like combined harvesters and other agriculture/ horticulture implements.

These exemptions are likely to facilitate unhindered activities related to agriculture to ensure essential supplies and farmers do not face difficulties during the lockdown. Necessary directions to concerned ministries/department of States and UTs have been issued for implementation during lockdown. Additionally, advisories have been given in the same circular about harvesting and threshing of crops, post-harvest, storage and marketing of farm produce in addition to those about standing field crops.

Farmers have been advised and are expected to follow precautions and safety measures to prevent the disease's spread. Simple measures include social distancing, maintaining personal hygiene by handwashing with soap, wearing of face mask, protective clothing and cleaning of implements and machinery. The EAS can spread awareness about these guidelines using their contacts with farmers via channels like [WhatsApp](#) or other suitable mechanisms. Many Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVK) operate WhatsApp groups connecting several farmers groups for intergroup information sharing.



These advisories need to be disseminated among the farming community rapidly and if possible, in local languages. As soon as these advisories were posted on ICAR's website, I circulated these in several of my networks, mostly WhatsApp groups, for further sharing. In the WhatsApp group, 'ICAR Extension Research-2020', Dr A K Singh, DDG (Agricultural Extension) appealed, "These advisories may be shared with farmers and other workers to bring awareness". His appeal was positively responded to by many ICAR Extension scientists, with some of them making available translations in regional languages. Likewise, the ATARIs and KVKs across the country are expected to spread these advisories and help farmers by providing guidance on farming matters in the prevailing circumstances. If we, as extension service providers, do our job well, farmers will develop confidence in us. So COVID-19 is an opportunity in disguise to develop our skills and preparedness to handle such exigencies.



Though EAS has supported farmers during natural disasters (Box 2), COVID-19 is a totally different disaster. Not many have experienced such a pandemic in their lifetime.

Box 2. EAS and Natural Disasters

On 4 January last year, I published a [blog](#) for AESA entitled, 'Natural Disasters and Extension & Advisory Services (EAS): Lessons for Better Preparedness'. In this blog, I discussed what and how EAS can contribute to disaster reduction, adaptation and mitigation during different phases of natural disasters viz. before, during and after. This blog gives some idea about how EAS professionals can play meaningful roles in times of natural calamities. The ICAR-IVRI [organized animal health cum awareness camps in Odisha](#) in the aftermath of [cyclone Phani](#). The IVRI team led by me assessed the situation and addressed various challenges and problems faced by farmers. The farmers were apprised about steps to be taken, including dos & don'ts, for restoring animal health as early as possible. I also shared this field experience through [Facebook posts](#) for wider awareness. Besides IVRI, many other ICAR institutes and several NGOs played a crucial role in providing relief and rehabilitation for recovery from Phani's impact. Many institutions worldwide are now better prepared to cope with common natural disasters by drawing lessons from varied experiences over the years.

World over, the experience of handling the present situation is very limited. It is truly unprecedented, so we need to be innovative and creative to come out with ideas towards solving the crisis. Some of the state Departments of Agriculture are now currently trying to help farmers to deal with the situation.

For instance, the Department of Agriculture, Punjab, is working on a [strategy](#) to ensure that social distancing is followed during the procurement of food grains. The middlemen and related government departments are being taken on board to decongest *mandis* and ensure that close human interactions are avoided. In Haryana, preparations are being made to delay wheat procurement to 20 April and the state has prepared a staggered procurement schedule to make crop arrival steady and cut gluts in *mandis*. Haryana has requested the Centre to approve higher Minimum Support Price (MSP) for farmers who delay the arrival of their produce of wheat. In a letter to the Centre, the state said staggered arrival would allow smooth procurement and help contain spread of the disease as well.

The EAS functionaries can help farmers in direct marketing of their produce to consumers by developing producer-consumer alliance. We can promote startups that can take up various roles along the value chains. For instance, [some startups](#) are supplying [farm fresh fruits and vegetables](#) to consumers by linking farmers and consumers. Also, many initiatives are being taken by farmers to help themselves. For instance, [small farmers in Maharashtra](#) are joining hands to take vegetables and fruits to the doorsteps of housing societies as big markets and Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMCs) are not fully functional because of lockdown. In many places, the district administration is connecting farmers' groups to housing complexes. As a result, profits earned are directly accruing to cultivators instead of getting divided among middlemen and wholesale dealers while consumers are getting a better deal. In Meghalaya, the Department of Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare, Government of Meghalaya (India) is using ICT solutions to support farmers who are facing marketing issues resulting from the lockdown imposed due to [COVID-19 Pandemic](#). EAS in South Asian countries need to enhance their capacities to deal with disasters, something similar to what [Extension Disaster Education Network](#) (EDEN) is doing in the USA (Box 3).

Can we create something like EDEN in South Asia? If yes, who will take the lead? We know creating something is easier than maintaining it, which calls for dedication and commitment. We should also share our experiences with the [GFRAS](#) and [AESA](#) through the dedicated pages created on their websites.

Box 3. Strengthening EAS capacities to better respond to disasters

The Extension Disaster Education Network (EDEN) serves as a disaster-related resource portal for extension personnel to share with their clientele to help the latter prepare for, stay safe during, and recover from disasters. Several disaster-related educational programs are available through EDEN. Currently, it is a hub of extension resources related to the COVID-19 situation.

Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS) has created [a dedicated section](#) on its website to collect tips and best practices; to better address the problems created by COVID-19. This section is divided into three categories:

1. Technical information on how to promote and move towards e-extension;
2. Initiatives and recommendations around the globe on how to keep agricultural production functioning and delivering during the lockdown. This initiative is called 'When no global, go local - how to ensure food security during the COVID-19 pandemic by reinventing value chains';
3. Practical information for extensionists, rural service providers and farmers on how to protect themselves while carrying out their job.

The Agricultural Extension in South Asia (AESA) too has created [a new section](#) on COVID-19 and EAS to:

- a. discuss how EAS can support farmers in dealing with the impact of COVID-19,
- b. share good practices from EAS, primarily from South Asian countries and
- c. promote tools and frameworks to help EAS better address these challenges.

This gives an opportunity to everyone concerned to share their experiences on:

- a. nature of the challenge including location and the type of farmers
- b. specific interventions including the organisation behind the initiative
- c. how these interventions are being implemented and
- d. what impact of interventions is being witnessing currently.

The Farmers Producer Companies (FPCs) are [selling fruit and vegetable baskets](#) in line with the demand from individual consumers or housing societies. The EAS can make efforts to expedite formation of FPOs. Already, the KVKs have been given target to promote and organize FPOs in every district. Shri Kailash Choudhary, Union Minister of State for Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare, while inaugurating the one-day [Review Workshop of Krishi Vigyan Kendras](#) emphasized KVKs' role in technical backstopping of Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) and helping in marketing of agricultural produce. Shri Roul, the then Secretary, ICAR, said [FPOs can reduce the input cost](#), give farmers more stake in marketing and value chain. Organizing FPOs is not a simple task; not many KVKs are successful in doing it. Yet, there are [success stories of KVKs collaborating with FPCs](#). [MANAGE has documented](#) issues, challenges and successful FPCs across the country. EAS providers can draw lessons from such documents to speed up FPC formation.

The need for linking farmers to the market is being strongly felt, suggests recent extension literature. To meet this emerging demand, [farm universities and KVKs can launch online initiatives](#) to directly link farmers with consumers. Agricultural experts of KVKs may be immediately involved by the government in launching such marketing initiatives so that farmers can find solutions within their districts. Farmers may be allowed to directly sell to consumers at local and district levels by making available places for organizing farmer markets.

As *rabi* harvesting is likely to pick up in the coming days, [the ICAR asked farmers](#) on 28 March, 2020, to follow social distancing and safety precautions while handling farm machines and working in the fields. For tackling emerging issues related to managing crops, livestock and fisheries, farmers should consult and be in touch with agri-scientists in KVKs, ICAR research institutes and state agricultural universities for timely advisories, [Dr Trilochan Mohapatra, Secretary, DARE and Director General, ICAR, said](#).

LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

Only a few possible ideas and actions have been discussed here. There could be several other initiatives which EAS can undertake to minimize the suffering of farming communities. COVID-19 like situations demand more online services. Extension functionaries should have the knowledge and skills in social media and its uses, including the current tools, methods and models for crisis communication. Extensionists need to be equipped to use Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube, etc. They need to learn and master skills to disseminate information and monitor, track, measure, and analyse social media traffic. Besides, skills in mobilizing farmers and facilitating interaction are very much needed to secure coordination of different agencies to broker gains for farmers.

In recent times, [WhatsApp has become very popular among farmers](#) to share information on farming practices, which could be even more useful during COVID-19 like situations. But social media channels, especially WhatsApp, can be harmful too, due to spread of fake, misleading information and rumours. Poultry farmers are currently suffering huge losses due to fake information [circulated via WhatsApp forwards](#) that linked consumption of eggs and poultry to corona virus infection.

Every crisis gives an opportunity to learn and do better. So is the case with COVID-19. Hope we will be able to better serve the farming community now and in the coming days.

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