

Expert to Facilitator: Issues on Changing Role of Extension Personnel under Extension Reforms

U. Barman¹ and B. Kumar²

Introduction

All extension work takes place within a process of development, and cannot be considered as an isolated activity. Extension programmes and extension personnel are part of the development of rural societies. (Oakley and Garforth, 1985). After independence, India has given due attention to the development of the public extension system. The Community Development Programme (CDP) was initiated in 1952 and National Extension Service (NES) in 1953. The large-scale food deficits of late 1950s compelled the Government to abandon its comprehensive rural development strategy in favour of increasing food production. This was the beginning of the intensive approach. The launching of the World Bank funded Training and Visit (T&V) System in 1974 was a radical reform to streamline the agricultural extension delivery process.

T & V system improved the funding and human resource intensity of extension and brought a unified command for extension. However, the approach ignored the wide variations in agro-climatic, socio-economic conditions and gave mixed results. It did help improve yields of cereals in irrigated regions, but failed to make any serious impact in rainfed areas that constitute 70% of the net cropped area (ICAR, 1998). In this context the need for reforms in Agricultural Extension has been explicitly raised in the National Agriculture Policy; the report of Expenditure Reforms Commission, as well as, the Tenth Plan Approach Paper. The concerns have been fuelled lately by the wave of pluralism, market liberalization and globalization sweeping across the world. Therefore a broad Policy Framework for Agricultural Extension (PFAE) was developed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India to give policy directives in extension reforms (DoE, nd).

According to the Policy Framework for Agricultural Extension, public extension by itself can no longer respond to the multifarious demands of farming systems. There

¹Ph.D. Scholar, ²Prof. and Head, Dept. of Agricultural Communication, G.B.Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, Pantnagar, U.S.Nagar, Uttarakhand- 263145

is need for reappraisal of the capacity of agricultural extension to effectively address, contemporary and future needs of the farming community effectively. Therefore based on the experiences of the Innovations in Technology Dissemination undertaken in 7 states under the National Agricultural Technology Project (NATP), a new scheme called "Support to State Extension Programmes for Extension Reforms" was introduced to operationalise agricultural extension reforms across the country in 2005. The scheme aims at making extension system farmer driven and farmer accountable by way of new institutional arrangements for technology dissemination in the form of an Agricultural Technology Management Agency (ATMA) at district level. A focus of the scheme is to provide extension support to a group of farmers rather than to individual farmers (Anonymous, nd). Commodity oriented Farmer Interest Groups (FIGs), SHGs are promoted at block/village level to make the technology generation/dissemination farmer driven and farmer accountable.

The ATMA model emphasizes the role of farmers and their active participation in programme planning and resource allocation. It is based on a group approach. The group approach plays a valuable role in policy advocacy and in realizing economies of scale. One major benefit of the group is that farmers support each other to learn and adopt. The benefits of farmer groups include making agricultural extension services more client-driven and efficient. It assumes that farmers will be able to understand their situation and act on it. It aims to make the development process self reliant and sustainable. Therefore it tries to eliminate dependency symptoms from the farmers through the process of empowerment. However the group approach is dependent on sufficient mobilization at the grassroots in order to achieve the desired objectives. Extension efforts after the reforms, therefore, start with people's potential and proceed to their enhancement and growth. In that context the extension agent now becomes a facilitator rather than an expert (DAC---). The role as a facilitator of agricultural knowledge system would only increase as more participants from the private sector would get involved in extension (Sulaiman and van den Ban, 2000). According to Heron (1999) a facilitator is a person who has the role of empowering participants to learn in an experiential group. Here, the experiential group is one in which learning takes place through an active and aware involvement of the whole person. Davis (2002) described that facilitation refers to managing and maintaining a group process. The primary focus of the facilitator is on "how" things are going in the group. A facilitator is a person who is not necessarily an expert on a specific issue but an expert on process. To act as a facilitator, apart from technical skills, extension personnel need several social science skills (Farrington et al, 1998).

Building the capacity of extension personnel as a facilitator is not an easy task and a series of issues arise in relation to this intervention. The whole extension process is dependent upon the extension personnel, the critical element in all extension activities.

Indeed, the effectiveness of extension personnel can often determine the success or failure of an extension programme (Oakley and Garforth, 1985). Keeping this in view, some issues in relation to the changing role of extension personnel as facilitator under post extension reforms situations have been discussed.

Adult Learning and Facilitation

Group approach to extension is a way of disseminating information and technologies on agriculture and rural development through farmers' groups. It aims to develop local skills and empower local people to solve their own problems. Learning is an important prerequisite to empowerment. Adults learn differently and have some characteristics which should be addressed by the extension personnel while facilitating farmers groups.

Adult learners are autonomous and self-directed. Adults bring a wealth of information and experiences to a group learning situation. Each learner's experience is unique and different. They have considerable experience to draw upon. A group provides opportunities for adult learners to work together and share their experiences with each other. Extension personnel must acknowledge the experiences of the farmers. As a facilitator he should help farmers to connect learning to this knowledge/experience base.

Adults will commit to learn when the goals and objectives are considered realistic and important to them. They will resist learning activities they believe are an attack on their competence. Adult learners need to see that the learning and their day-to-day activities are related and relevant. Adult learners need direct, concrete experiences in which they apply the learning in actual work situation. Adults need to receive feedback on how they are doing and the results of their efforts. Adults need to participate in small-group activities during the learning to move beyond understanding to application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Transfer of learning for adults is not automatic and must be facilitated. The learning should be experiential. The facilitator must try to hear from all the adults in the group. He must consider that the adult farmers are interested in information and ideas that solve problems that they are presently faced with. Extension personnel as facilitators should be skilled enough to apply the principles of adult learning. Therefore extension personnel should be trained as facilitators to perform their new role.

Group Dynamics and Facilitation

Many activities are best performed by farmers' groups rather than individuals. Groups allow members to share ideas, experiences and problems. Groups provide a forum for extension personnel to introduce ideas and skills that may be relevant to the

farmers' problems and needs. This benefit can be achieved if groups are self reliant and productive. But groups may become dependent on extension personnel. Groups may fail because of conflicts among their members. In group situation, personalities come into play, along with a wide variety of perspectives. Each farmer may have his or her own opinion and idea about the problem. This is because of group dynamics which naturally come into play in every group. Some of the dynamics operating in groups are co-operation, participation, competition, group pressure, group cohesiveness, group conflicts, communication, leadership, problem solving etc.

Dynamics of any group is highly complex. The extension personnel as a facilitator should know not only the group members but also the ways in which they affect each other in the group. Unless the group has power to overcome obstacles it cannot solve the problem. Most of the programmes under ATMA are done in groups through FIGs, SHGs etc. Hence sustainability and effectiveness of farmers' groups are key to the success of ATMA. The extension personnel must know the dynamics of the group to make it effective. They must facilitate the group to act as a productive unit. They should make an attempt for conscientization of the group members. An understanding of group dynamics is essential for the extension personnel and they should acquire knowledge on group dynamics to facilitate farmers groups.

Gender and Facilitation

Women are key stakeholders of agriculture and active participants in the system. Despite their contributions, women face major constraints in terms of time, access to and control over resources, and the benefits they receive. Women typically have much less contact with extension agents; control very few technologies and farm inputs. Without this kind of support, their productivity and enthusiasm can be severely eroded. Ignoring gender needs and interests reduces the level of participation of all segments of the community, thus jeopardizing any development efforts. Agricultural extension services are often directed to men and extension personnel are also accustomed to serve male farmers. Therefore in ATMA, special provision is made for mainstreaming gender concerns. Ignoring gender issues often leads to unwanted consequences and failed development efforts. Extension staff should be able to appropriately identify women's needs and constraints, priorities and opportunities and ensure that extension services meet their requirements. Therefore extension personnel must be sensitized on this issue to facilitate the farming community, both men and women, for development.

Role of a Facilitator

The role of extension personnel is changing from an expert to a facilitator. As a facilitator, extension personnel should ensure that the farmers' groups work as a

constructive, collaborative, creative and cohesive unit. In the role of a facilitator, extension personnel are more concerned with helping the farmers to gain confidence, to organize them and to get involved in extension activities. Their role is essentially to help support and actively encourage farmers to develop their own initiatives and to begin to tackle their own problems. They have to encourage the farmers to participate in group processes, help them to solve problems based on constructive discussion, and help to resolve conflict among the members etc. For that purpose they have to act as an enabler, supporter, team builder, problem solver, conflict manager, encourager, motivator, and counselor etc. These roles are completely different from the role of an expert as played earlier while disseminating technology under a top-down approach. It demands appropriate in-service training for extension personnel to perform the role of facilitator. Necessary adjustments in the curricula of formal education in agricultural extension will also be needed (Qamar, 2002) to build the capacity of an agricultural graduate as a facilitator.

Skills of a Facilitator

From the above discussion it is clear that for performing the role of a group facilitator, extension personnel need a different set of skills. A facilitator should develop the skill of questioning, paraphrasing, summarizing, conflict management, observing, recording, problem solving etc (Lawson, 1996). They need to listen and watch for nuance, content, body language and other feedback and anything else that impacts the group. Skill in giving and receiving feedback from the group is also important for a facilitator. The facilitator should be skilled in distinguishing process from content.

The facilitator should be skillful in evoking participation and creativity and also have other skills like time management, persuasion, coaching, initiating etc. Facilitation often involves the softer side of human emotion, psychology, and relationship.

A facilitator must understand human behaviour, and must be able to read not only individuals, but interaction between individuals and the subtleties of group dynamics. Effective facilitators know the dynamics of group process and are skilled in using techniques for keeping the group task-focused, encouraging creative thinking, building consensus and keeping all group members involved. A critical skill is the ability to create and maintain a safe, open and supportive environment for all group members. Another is being able to recognize and deal with disruptive behaviour (Hawkins, nd). According to Thiagi Group (1999) effective facilitators are flexible, adaptive, proactive, responsive and resilient. The facilitator should be skilled in application of adult learning principles, communication, attention, and summarization skills etc. They must be able to cope with different types of behavior: aggression, passiveness, etc.

Implications for Training of Facilitators

It is clear that many new skills are required for extension personnel. To act as facilitators, capacity building of extension personnel should be a thrust area under post extension reforms period. Till date, extension personnel are trained in technical subject matter but no effort has been made to develop soft skills like facilitation skills. Therefore extension personnel need sound foundation of these skills to motivate the farmers to learn effectively. In this context training has a great role to play.

Organizing training for the extension agent itself is a challenging job. They are highly experienced adults. They have already worked under the T&V system for many years and may have developed a stereotype approach towards extension services. They develop a feeling of being experts due to long association with such a top-down approach. Under such a situation, training has to be organized for the extension personnel to transform them into facilitators. Simply delivering the content during the training session is not sufficient to achieve that challenging goal. Only a good facilitator can develop a good facilitator. If the trainer is not a good facilitator then the entire effort will not produce any fruitful result. In this context, quality of the training and trainer acquires significance. But the value of training as well as the trainer is yet to be fully acknowledged in agricultural development.

Training cannot necessarily lead to change unless due care is taken to bring desirable change (Kumar and Hansara, 1999). Success of training will depend on how the trainer develops a bond with the trainees, what approach he is adopting in breaking the resistance to learn, and to what extent he is successful in making the learning environment conducive for learning etc.

In this context some questions come to mind as to whether the states are ready to meet the challenges. How can we build the capacity of extension personnel as facilitator? What types of courses are to be designed for conducting training programmes to develop facilitators? What are the training needs of extension personnel? What steps have the concerned organizations like SAMETI taken in this regard? Are the trainers' competences enough to transform the extension personnel from expert to facilitator? What procedures are to be followed to select the right trainers? What steps are to be taken to build the capacity of trainers as facilitators? How much time will be taken to develop all the extension personnel as facilitators?

Conclusion

There is no short cut procedure to developing a good facilitator. At the same time it is equally difficult to change the mind set of extension personnel who are serving as experts under a top down approach like T&V system. Experience, the world over, is that it

is easy to change farmers than to change government agencies. Internal reforms are thus going to be the greatest challenge for the Indian Extension System (Sulaiman and van den Ban, 2000). Therefore proper planning is needed after addressing all the issues discussed above to build capacity of extension personnel for acting as facilitators. Besides, there is need to orient all levels of training organisations to create a climate of facilitative learning. Above all, the institutions of agricultural higher education also need to redesign their curriculum and teaching of extension education to build future generations of facilitators. Needless to say, more and more short term courses for trained facilitators on the lines of ISABS(Indian Society for Applied Behavioural Science) need to be initiated at MANAGE, NAARM and NIRD. Probably on line learning on facilitation will also help in spreading the scarce skill. The welcome approach of facilitating development requires an all out approach to create a conducive climate in which extension personnel inculcate the sensitivity and competency to handle development works.

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