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HUMANIZING AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION OR RENDERING IT TECHNICAL?

In this blog, Dr. R. M. Prasad encourages extensionists to consider extension from a human perspective rather than solely from a technical standpoint.

INTRODUCTION

This blog seeks to raise concerns about the lack of cross-learning and the adoption of new concepts and theories by extension professionals. My reflections stem from an insightful article I recently came across, which revealed important issues that our current practices fail to address. This blog intends to discuss those key concepts and suggest ways they could enhance our extension practice which continues to follow a "business as usual" (BAU) approach.

The article, *Humanizing Agricultural Extension: A Review* by Cook et al. (2021), presents valuable ideas that could shift the course of our extension practices, if only we were willing to move beyond our comfort zone and adopt them.

RENDERING TECHNICAL

In the above article, the authors explain how socio-political processes—despite their central importance—are often ignored as agricultural extension becomes "rendered technical," a concept introduced by Li (2007, 2011).

"Rendering technical" is the process of transforming social problems, which involve power struggles and political interests, into technical challenges that can be "solved" through standardized interventions. This approach depoliticizes and simplifies complex issues, making them easier to

manage but at the cost of ignoring the real, lived experiences of rural populations. By reducing these challenges to purely technical problems, solutions are framed in a way that primarily serves economic interests rather than addressing broader social issues.

The article stresses that the way extension services are rendered technical is deeply rooted in power dynamics. When complex socio-political issues are transformed into technical ones, what gets defined as important, possible, or necessary is shaped by those in power. For instance, the widespread assumption that low yields on smallholder farms are purely technical problems ignores the socio-economic contexts that might inhibit farmers from increasing their production. Development agencies often attempt to frame a potential problem as technical to make it appear both intelligible and fixable. In this process, certain aspects of problems are selectively edited into the technical narrative, while other dimensions are edited out.

The Rendering of Power

A central argument in the article is that agricultural extension often renders power invisible, removing consideration of how power structures influence farmer decision-making. By excluding these dynamics, extensionists can propose depoliticized "solutions" that are disconnected from the real struggles of farmers.

For example, the exploitative relationships between smallholder farmers and market players like transporters or buyers are long known, yet agricultural extension continues to frame these power imbalances as minor issues that can be overlooked. In reality, such power dynamics heavily influence the adoption of technologies or new practices, but extension services typically avoid addressing these deeper structural issues.

A humanized extension approach would reorient the focus on these boundaries and recognize that increasing agricultural production alone cannot drive improvement in farmer livelihoods. In fact, reducing production and reallocating labour might even result in better household outcomes by minimizing debt risks or enabling farmers to pursue off-farm wage opportunities (Green, 2019). Humanised extension might also consider the opportunity costs of the increased labour requirements of technologies, including the transition to new technological regimes, given the rising costs of labour and opportunities for wages and remittances from off-farm sources. A humanized extension model would also acknowledge the gendered nature of power, understanding that female farmers often have even fewer opportunities to alter their practices compared to their male counterparts.

The Rendering of Place

The article also highlights how extension often renders "place" abstract, ignoring the specific material realities of different locations. For example, land tenure plays a pivotal role in determining a farmer's willingness to invest in new technologies. Farmers, particularly women, may face precarious land tenure, which discourages long-term investments in productivity enhancements. In cases where women farmers do not have secure tenure, either as tenants or due to marital conditions, their willingness to adopt new technologies is understandably low.

However, when agricultural extension focuses on the technical dimensions of farming, these nuanced concerns get overshadowed. The diversity and situatedness of rural livelihoods become reduced to a technical problem, where the focus is placed on abstract improvements in yield. In a humanized extension model, extensionists would take into account the specific social, economic, and environmental contexts of each region. By doing so, they could challenge the prevailing logic of "scaling up" interventions based on lessons from one location, which may not be relevant in another.

Humanised extension would situate extension and thereby accept the unique circumstances in which extension succeeds and fails. A place-based extension approach would also recognize the importance of building meaningful relationships between extensionists and farmers. This would include paying

attention to the often-overlooked "ripples" of social change that extend beyond direct extension interventions. These secondary effects, although difficult to measure, play a crucial role in long-term practice changes in rural communities.

The Rendering of People

The article further criticizes how agricultural extension often shifts the blame for non-adoption of technologies onto farmers, attributing it to their "lack of awareness" or "resistance to change." This narrative depoliticizes the real structural forces, such as marginalization, gender hierarchies, and economic exploitation, that inhibit adoption. Instead, extension services focus on individual farmer practices, treating them as isolated actors whose behaviour can be corrected through technical solutions.

When both power and place are rendered invisible, agricultural extension turns its focus to the individual. Female and male farmers are portrayed as predictable, rational actors who fail to maximize their productivity due to abstract conceptualizations like "yield gaps." This oversimplification ignores the realities of their lives, including risk aversion, social relations, and gender dynamics.

In contrast, a humanized extension approach would seriously consider the social and gendered realities that influence farmers' decision-making. Extensionists would no longer view farmers as mere economic actors; instead, they would acknowledge the personal, social, and economic constraints that shape their choices. The humanized model would focus on improving farmer livelihoods, not just maximizing production.

Moreover, the rendering of people extends to the extensionists themselves, transforming them as experts. Often, they are driven by the desire to apply standardized and quantifiable methods, relying on "scientific" solutions that can be easily scaled up and replicated. This removes the socio-political processes from the equation and reduces their work to producing technical findings that are detached from the real needs of farmers.

A more reflexive and open extension model would encourage extensionists to re-examine their own assumptions and biases, allowing them to engage more meaningfully with the socio-political dynamics at play. This approach would reject the false notion that extension is purely a technical problem, recognizing instead that social power, place, and the lived experiences of people must be central to any solution.

DOUBLING FARMERS' INCOME: A CASE OF RENDERING TECHNICAL

The Government of India's initiative to double farmers' income (DFI) between 2015-16 and 2022-23 is an ambitious project that, while well-intentioned, falls into the trap of rendering technical. A state-wise synthesis report published by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) highlights this issue. The report is largely focused on technological interventions and ignores the socio-political realities that shape farmers' incomes.

The initiative identifies seven sources of growth, including increased productivity, livestock production, input efficiency, crop intensity, diversification into high-value crops, improved price realization, and non-farm jobs. However, as noted by Chand (2017), the lack of reliable data on farmers' income has made it difficult to assess the impact of these interventions.

KVKs (Krishi Vigyan Kendras) were tasked with implementing the DFI initiative through technological interventions and baseline surveys. While the report shows a rise in income across different regions, it fails to account for the perceptions and experiences of the farmers themselves. For instance, the highest increases in income were reported in Ladakh, Jharkhand, and Goa, but there is no detailed analysis of how these technological interventions impacted different groups of farmers.

CONCLUSION

The ICAR report on Doubling Farmers' Income is a prime example of how extension efforts can be rendered technical, focusing narrowly on technology adoption while ignoring the complex socio-political realities of rural farming communities. Various limiting factors and 'Farmer first' as the central focus were either ignored or sidelined. The report presents a rosy picture of technological success but overlooks the real struggles faced by farmers related to gender, land tenure, labour, and market access.

To create a more meaningful impact, extension professionals must shift towards a humanized extension model—one that embraces the socio-political dynamics that shape rural livelihoods. A humanized approach would engage with the realities of power, place, and people, facilitating change not just through technological solutions but through a deeper understanding of the human dimensions that drive farmer decisions.

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