

BEYOND THE MANDATE: REIMAGINING EXTENSION CAREERS



In this blog, Archana Prasad reflects on her decade-long career in the field of agricultural extension within an evolving agricultural ecosystem and offers insights on how extension graduates can effectively prepare for the future.

A PERSONAL RECKONING

When I graduated with a degree in agricultural extension, I believed I had a clear sense of what lay ahead. The pathways were few but established: state extension services, research assistantships, or, if lucky, a fellowship with a government program. But soon into my career, I realised something sobering — the sector was evolving faster than our preparation for it.



Today, over a decade later, having worked with more than 100 FPOs, grant-funded programmes, consulting firms, and ecosystem-building efforts, I look back with one conviction: we need to radically rethink how we skill and position agricultural extension professionals for the world beyond the textbook.

WHAT EXTENSION PREPARES US FOR — AND WHAT IT DOESN'T

Agricultural extension as taught in most Indian State Agriculture Universities (SAUs) is rich in history, communication tools, and participatory techniques. However, as the farm sector diversifies, the traditional notion of the extension worker as a trainer or mobiliser feels increasingly narrow.

"Extension isn't outdated. But the roles we prepare students for often are."

In 2023, India had over 40,000 registered FPOs across the country — yet a significant percentage continue to struggle with business viability, governance, and market access. Thousands of private agri-tech start-ups, donor-funded livelihood programmes, and expanding CSR efforts in agriculture also demand professionals who understand agriculture and business, community engagement, digital systems, field realities, and funding logic.

The irony? Our graduates have the grounding, but not the exposure.

MISSED PATHWAYS: WHERE EXTENSION PROFESSIONALS COULD THRIVE

Here are spaces where postgraduates and PhDs in agri-extension are uniquely suited to lead, but often unaware of:

- **Development Consulting:** Firms like Sattva, Microsave, Sambodhi, and others increasingly hire agri professionals to lead strategy, monitoring & evaluation, and implementation support for donors and corporates.
- **FPO Strategy and Incubation:** With SFAC, NABARD, and corporate funding for FPO formation, there's demand for professionals who can work across governance, marketing, and business planning.
- **Donor Programs and CSR:** Foundations like the Gates Foundation, Ford Foundation, and Tata Trusts run large-scale agri initiatives requiring talent who can design programs, write proposals, track outcomes, and coordinate partners.
- **Agri-Investment Advisory:** There is growing space in impact investing, blended finance, and agri-startup due diligence. Sector understanding + systems thinking is a critical mix.
- **Strategic Ecosystem Building:** Programs like PM-FME, Digital Agriculture Mission, or state-level agri-accelerators often need consultants who can bridge grassroots understanding with policy frameworks.

THE RIGHT-SKILLING IMPERATIVE

What do all these roles require that agri-extension degrees rarely teach?

- **Markets and value chains:** Understanding demand-led agriculture, price systems, and aggregation models
- **Digital literacy:** Beyond MS Excel, tools like Power BI, digital MIS, geo-tagging, and mobile-based data collection

- **Programme and grant management:** budgeting, donor reporting, log frames, MEL frameworks
- **Communication for influence:** Writing policy briefs, making decks, presenting to funders
- **Systems thinking:** Seeing beyond individual farmer change to institutional and ecosystem impact
- **AI awareness and application:** Understanding how AI can drive decision-support systems, personalised advisories, supply chain efficiency, and forecasting in agriculture

"What no one tells agri graduates is that real impact doesn't require a policymaker's seat — it requires the right exposure."

These are not elite skills. They are learnable. However, they require universities to acknowledge that agriculture is not just production and extension, but a systems work.

WHAT CAN UNIVERSITIES AND PLACEMENT CELLS DO?

- **Expand the definition of career support:** Bring consulting firms, CSR teams, and agri start-ups to campus placements.
- **Introduce interdisciplinary exposure:** modules on finance, marketing, systems design
- **Build alumni networks:** Help students connect with those in diverse roles across the sector.
- **Encourage storytelling and visibility:** Support students to write, speak, and publish their work.

EXTENSION FOR THE FUTURE

We stand at a crossroads. With climate uncertainty, market volatility of agricultural commodities, and digital transitions, the agriculture sector needs professionals who are agile, grounded, and systems-savvy. Extension professionals can be this force — but only if we stop preparing them for the past.

To every university dean, placement head, and curriculum developer: let's equip our graduates not just to serve, but to lead.

To every agri postgraduate wondering if there's more out there: there is. And we need you.

Archana Prasad is a practitioner and ecosystem builder with over 12 years of experience at the intersection of agriculture, livelihoods, and inclusive development. She has worked across FPO transformation, donor strategy, gender-responsive value chains, and consulting assignments in India and Southeast Asia. With a background in agri-extension, Archana brings a unique blend of field insight and systems thinking to her work. She currently serves as an engagement manager at Sattva Consulting. She can be contacted at prasadarchana928@gmail.com

Note: Views are personal; organisations mentioned are cited based on experience, not endorsement or affiliation.

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