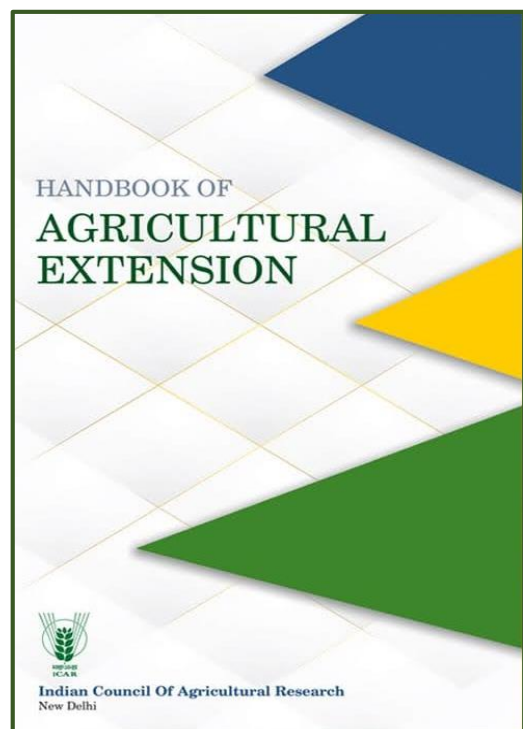


Agricultural Extension in South Asia

HANDBOOK OF AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION
Indian Council of Agricultural Research, New Delhi (2020)
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About thirty years back during my doctoral programme in agricultural extension (1990-93), I realized the duplication of content in the MSc and PhD extension curricula in extension. I was a bit disappointed at the lack of new and relevant content at the PhD level and being forced to learn the same content I had already learnt at the MSc level. In 1996 while working as an extension scientist with the Indian Council of Agricultural Research, I took the lead in organizing a consultation on extension curricula.¹ Later I wrote a paper with Prof A W van den Ban on the extension curricula in India² and its limitations, and how this is adversely affecting the job prospects of our students as well as the professional growth of scientists and practitioners of this discipline. While many appreciated those concerns, there hasn't been any real move to address the difficult situation we are in. The problems were also presented in the 2018 AESA Discussion Paper on extension curricula.³



So far our response to the professional crisis has been limited to discussions for a few days in varied extension WhatsApp groups whenever non-extension professionals are selected for extension positions. While we continue to reward everyone in our discipline for their exemplary contributions (from best extension scientist to lifetime achievement), there has been very

¹Sulaiman RV. (1996). Post-graduate curriculum in Agricultural Extension – A synthesis. Social Sciences education in agriculture: Perspective for future (Selvarajan S and Sulaiman RV, eds.). Proceedings of a workshop by the National Institute of Agricultural Economics and Policy Research.
http://www.ncap.res.in/upload_files/workshop/wsp3.pdf

²Sulaiman RV and van den Ban AW. 2000. Reorienting Agricultural Extension curricula in India. The Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension 7(2):69-78.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13892240008438808>

³Rasheed Sulaiman V, Sreeram Vishnu, Onima VT and Nimisha Mittal. 2018. Agricultural Extension curricula in India: Is it relevant to changing times? AESA Working Paper, Agricultural Extension in South Asia (<https://www.aesanetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/9.pdf>)

limited efforts to fundamentally examine what is wrong with our professional training. Are we equipping our students and other professionals with relevant applied knowledge so that they could either be an effective extension professional (field workers or manager) or a relevant social scientist?

While reading the two draft book reviews on the *Handbook of Agricultural Extension*, independently written by Sreeram Vishnu and Bhuvana Rao, I thought I should also share my views on the book focusing on what both of them have missed. While appreciating their points on the importance of a handbook on agricultural extension and the strengths and limitations of this publication, I thought there is something more fundamental that needs to be said. I want to focus mainly on such aspects.

Firstly, my main concern is about the way the content of extension discipline has always been treated in India. We teach our students a lot of definitions and theories but have often failed to help them apply these in real-life contexts. While students often wonder why they are learning these, field practitioners often question the applicability of these concepts that they have been taught, in their work setting. Our existing curricula and training have failed to provide appropriate problem solving and managerial expertise for our students so that they can fit into exclusive jobs where these skills are needed. On the job front they are facing stiff competition from those who have pursued courses in rural management and social work.

This handbook has the same issues as our existing curricula and the popular text books we have in extension in India. The handbook covers a lot of content we have been teaching in this discipline over the last 4-5 decades without much change. While the nature of agriculture and the challenges it is facing have evolved considerably, we are stuck with offering the same content that we have been teaching over several decades. While the new job market is looking for professionals who can help organizations scale up new knowledge and manage innovation, we are not offering anything to our students to equip them with these skills. Hope the new curricula developed by ICAR will address some of these issues.

For those who are in service, we are not providing them specific expertise to be an effective extension professional with exclusive skills and expertise. For instance, the content in Chapter 4 (Management of Agricultural Extension Organisation) and Chapter 5 (Management of organisational behaviour) are only about concepts, definitions and theories without any links to how it could be applied in varied extension settings. Similarly, the content of Chapter 17 (Capacity building: Theoretical designs and models) has a lot of content on concepts, meanings and theories of training as well as different training types, yet it really fails to help a manager in an extension training organization on how to design, implement or evaluate a training programme better. The same argument holds for the chapter on 'Monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment' (Chapter 11). As we don't teach our students cases and examples of how these concepts and theories are applied in practice, our extension professionals are considered not very essential even in organizations such as KVKs, which are mainly focused on developing capacities of farmers and development professionals. Many people generally believe that extension-related tasks can be performed by anyone and it doesn't need any special training. As we do not teach our extension students what type of approaches and tools work well under varied settings and using these through specific cases and examples, they are finding it difficult to justify their roles in different organizations.

Secondly, extension is a topic of global importance and our professionals should have a broader idea of how the discipline has evolved over the years – both in terms of conceptual development and the way it is managed. While the book tried to provide some evidence of extension in a few countries (Chapters 1 and 6), it provides no analysis on the reforms that have been shaping extension over the past few decades. These include the collapse of the public sector, or more specifically public sector withdrawal, the pressures to decentralize and privatize extension and the increasing calls for promoting and strengthening pluralistic extension delivery and public private partnerships.

Merely discussing in detail all the extension programmes in India from pre-Independence to current efforts is not giving any great insights/benefits to either students or extension professionals. The handbook does not provide any lessons for implementation of the ongoing programmes nor does it offer any critique on the limitations or ways to overcome them. There is no mention of ongoing efforts on promoting advocacy, networking, developing new functional capacities at different levels and promoting professionalism in extension and advisory services through the Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS)⁴ and its regional and sub-regional networks.

Thirdly, the handbook unfortunately fails to provide insights on new knowledge in the fields of communication and innovation studies that have originally contributed to the discipline of extension. Extension is no longer only about transferring new knowledge to farmers. Extension is about facilitating change and helping farmers and other stakeholders to apply and adapt new knowledge through facilitation and knowledge brokering. Organisations are looking for those who can facilitate change through collaborative action at the micro level and bringing about multi-stakeholder interactions at the meso and macro levels. These aspects are not even recognized in this handbook. So, many may be led to believe that this handbook covers everything we need to know about extension currently. While questions for competitive examinations and interviews might come only come from topics discussed in this book helping a very few students to pass the tests and gain jobs within the ICAR-SAU system, this won't help the remaining majority who are learning this discipline. The handbook has very few references in each chapter, so it is not providing additional reference materials for a reader who wants to learn more.

Over the last two decades, several interesting documents focusing on the expanded role of extension, how extension should perform these roles and how new capacities could be developed among extension and advisory services have emerged.⁵ Capacities that are critical for a 21st century extension professional have also been articulated.⁶ Ideally the chapters should have been built on these new insights so as to help readers apply these in the Indian

⁴www.g-fras.org

⁵Sreeram Vishnu and Rasheed Sulaiman V. 2017. 50 Publications every extension professional should read. AESA Blog 75, Agricultural Extension in South Asia.

<https://www.aesanetwork.org/50-publications-every-extension-professional-should-read/>

⁶GFRAS: The New Extensionist Learning Kit. <https://www.g-fras.org/en/knowledge/new-extensionist-learning-kit-nelk.html>

context. Unfortunately, a great opportunity to provide new directions to the discipline has been lost.

Having said all these, I sincerely appreciate the intention of ICAR in compiling many topics that are taught in extension within a single publication. Hope there will be another revision soon that will address some of the shortcomings of this volume.

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