

## Agricultural Extension in South Asia

**DIGITAL COMMUNICATION FOR  
AGRICULTURAL AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT**  
Participatory Practices in a Post-COVID Age  
(1<sup>st</sup> Edition)

**Editors:** Ataharul Chowdhury and Gordon A. Gow (2024)

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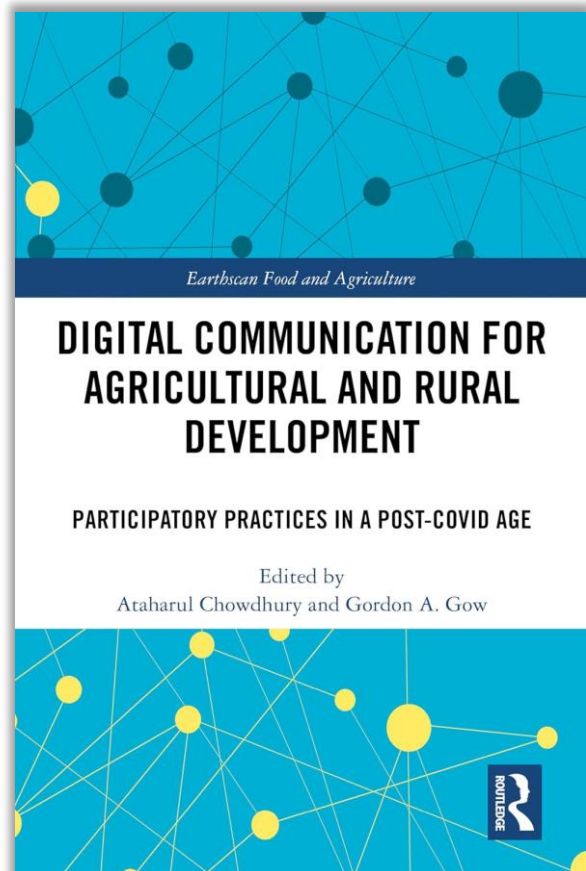
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Digital communication offers timely access to market trends, weather forecasts, and best farming practices, improving agricultural and rural development. It helps bridge the knowledge gap between rural farmers and experts by providing remote training and support through online platforms. Additionally, it connects rural communities, fostering creativity, productivity, and economic progress.

This insightful volume, edited by Ataharul Chowdhury and Gordon A. Gow, tackles the complex challenges and evolving landscape of digital communications and participatory practices within the context of agricultural and rural development, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era. The book highlights the knowledge gaps and challenges associated with digital participation, especially for marginalized groups with limited access to technology. Comprising 16 chapters, it underscores how digital technologies can either empower or marginalize communities, depending on their application.

The book offers an interdisciplinary perspective, drawing insights from fields such as agricultural extension, communication for development (C4D), communication for social change (CfSc), digital media, and social change. One of the book's strongest features is its in-depth exploration of misinformation in agriculture. In a sector where misinformation—such as that regarding GMOs or climate change—can directly affect decision-making and community trust, the book discusses how digital spaces have become saturated with information, often leading to disinformation and social isolation. This issue is compounded by capitalistic surveillance and the commodification of communication.



The chapters emphasize how digital tools and platforms often reflect existing power structures, particularly in media and governance. Participation in a digitally mediated world is not merely about engagement but is tied to the dynamics of power, control, and resistance. The authors introduce frameworks like "power, profit, and propaganda" to address these concerns.

The book critiques the dominance of corporate social media in agricultural extension services, proposing alternatives like decentralized and open-source platforms that could better serve marginalized groups. Several chapters address the challenges faced by rural populations, particularly in terms of access to technology and digital literacy. The digital divide between urban and rural areas and the limited opportunities for marginalized groups to engage meaningfully in digital spaces are also explored. The work highlights digital education's growing role, discussing the impact of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing use of digital tools in agricultural advisories and extension services.

The book is organized into three parts, each addressing key aspects of digital communication and participation in agriculture. Part One explores the historical and theoretical foundations of participatory communication, emphasizing the importance of access (mental, material, skill-based, and practical) for meaningful digital participation and examining how digital media can both amplify marginalized voices and reinforce systemic exclusion. Part Two focuses on the ethical and political challenges, discussing the spread of misinformation in agriculture and proposing a framework to counter "power, profit, and propaganda" while advocating for decentralized, non-commercial platforms. Part Three presents case studies from countries like Canada, Ghana, and Kenya, showing how digital literacy programs supported rural communities during the pandemic and offering practical solutions to the barriers smallholders face in accessing digital services.

The book concludes by reflecting on the lessons learned from participatory development during the pandemic and offers a forward-looking perspective on the role of digital communication in fostering inclusive participation in agricultural and rural development. It stresses that participation must go beyond the mere transfer of information and should consider socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts to ensure that digital tools genuinely empower communities.

The book proposes a "participation triangle," which includes inclusivity, monitoring of digital outcomes, and co-creation with local communities as essential components for future development initiatives. Looking ahead, the editors predict that artificial intelligence and decision-support systems will play an increasingly important role in agricultural advisory services but caution that these technologies must prioritize inclusivity and sustainability.

However, one limitation of the book is that while it offers solutions like open-source platforms and decentralized approaches, it does not delve deeply into the systemic barriers that may hinder the widespread adoption of these technologies in low-resource settings. I agree with the authors' arguments supporting open-source platforms and decentralized approaches. However, systemic barriers—such as unreliable internet and power supplies, outdated hardware, and the higher technical expertise required to implement open-source software (OSS)—limit the ability to use and update OSS effectively. The lack of training and awareness further complicates adoption in these settings. Additionally, OSS and its documentation are often in English, making it less accessible to non-English-speaking communities.

Government policies and limited public or private investment in IT infrastructure and capacity-building can also prevent OSS from gaining traction. Bias toward proprietary software and concerns about legal or security risks may lead to hesitation in adopting OSS. Moreover, OSS often

lacks structured support and suffers from irregular updates, making it difficult to maintain in low-resource settings. Interoperability issues with existing proprietary systems and hardware can further hinder open-source platform adoption. These barriers restrict the widespread adoption of these technologies in low-resource settings.

Overall, this book is an invaluable resource for academics, policymakers, extension and development practitioners, and students interested in the intersection of digital technology and rural development. It is an essential resource for those aiming to foster more inclusive and sustainable development in rural and agricultural contexts.

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