Capacity Building of Extension Workers as Facilitators under Group Approach of Extension: Issues in Indian Context

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ABSTRACT

Public sector extension has undergone several changes in India. After Community Development Programme in 1952 some more programmes were introduced before commissioning Training and Visit (T & V) System in 1974. The T & V system had a mixed impact and failed to meet the ever increasing multi faceted demands of the farming communities. In this context the need for reforms in Agricultural Extension has been explicitly raised at different levels. Policy Framework for Agricultural Extension mentioned that there is need for reappraisal of the capacity of agricultural extension to address, effectively, contemporary and future needs of the farming community. Therefore a new scheme called “Support to State Extension Programmes for Extension Reforms” is introduced to operationalise agricultural extension reforms across the country in 2005. Extension reforms aim to make development process self reliant and sustainable. It introduces group approach of extension for agricultural development. Extension workers now have to deal with the farmers’ organization. Their works start with the people’s potential and proceed to their empowerment. The extension workers role therefore changes from expert to facilitator. Till date the extension workers are educated and trained as expert to deliver technology to the farmers. To act as facilitator extension workers needs several facilitation skills besides knowledge on group dynamics, andragogy etc. This paper tries to highlight some issues in relation to capacity building of extension workers as facilitator under group approach of extension in India.

Key words: Extension workers, facilitators, capacity building, group approach of extension, India.

Abbreviations: IADP- Intensive Agricultural District Programme, T & V-Training and Visit, WTO- World Trade Organisation, PFAE- Policy Framework for Agricultural Extension, ATMA- Agricultural Technology Management Agency, FMC- Field Management Committee, BTT- Block Technology Team.

1. INTRODUCTION

Agricultural extension systems are affected by various “forces of change” directly or indirectly. The main global forces of change in extension systems are globalisation and market liberalization, privatisation, commercialisation and agri-business; environment concerns, disasters and emergencies; information technology break-through; rural poverty, hunger and vulnerability; integrated, multi-disciplinary and holistic development; broader role of extension; decentralised extension services; pluralistic extension system etc (Qamar, 2000). India is no exception in this regards. India’s national extension system was started in 1952 through Community Development Programme and National Extension Service in 1953. The large-scale food deficits of late 1950s compelled the government to concentrate solely on increasing food production. This was the beginning of the intensive approach through Intensive Agricultural District Programme (IADP) in 1960. After that some more programmes were introduced before commissioning the World Bank funded Training and Visit (T & V) System in 1974. T & V system improved the funding and human resource intensity of extension and brought a unified command for extension. But the approach of T & V, ignoring the wide variations in agro-climatic and socio-economic conditions, gave mixed results. In retrospect, it was widely acknowledged that it had a mixed impact and 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). During 1990s the scenario has changed and there was a demand for technologies and information for new technologies for irrigated regions, location-specific technologies for rainfed areas, diversification of agriculture, information and advice for improved marketing, technologies for value addition, information, advice and technologies for post WTO scenario and technologies for sustainable agriculture etc. The concerns have been fuelled lately by the wave of pluralism, market liberalisation, globalisation and fiscal deficit. Therefore need for reforms in extension system have been explicitly raised in the National Agriculture Policy; the report of Expenditure Reforms Commission, as well as, the Tenth Plan Approach paper. Keeping the recommendations of these policy initiatives in view, and to provide policy directives for extension reforms, a broad Policy Framework for Agricultural Extension (PFAE) had been developed by the Ministry of Agriculture (DoE, nd). 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. One of the major focuses of the scheme is to provide extension support to a group of farmers rather than to individual farmers (Anonymous, nd, 2007a).

ATMA is based on group approach and emphasises the role of farmers and their active participation in programme planning and resource allocation. The farmer-group approach plays 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. Thus farmer-to-farmer extension is amplified. Rather than simply be agents for technologies imposed from outside, the extension agents are expected to become catalysts, mobilizing farmers to experiment on an identified need/solution, recognizing local innovations and helping to assess and encourage them (Madukwe, 2006). The benefits of farmer groups include making agricultural extension services more client-driven and efficient. It aims to make the development process self reliant and sustainable.

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Every group member receives a tangible benefit. Groups can help even the poorest people to improve their livelihoods. Groups provide an opportunity for strengthening friendship and teamwork, allowing members to share ideas, insights, experiences and problems. Groups provide a forum for extensionists and development agents to introduce ideas and skills that may be relevant to the farmers' problems and needs (Anonymous, nd, 2007b). It tries to eliminate the dependency symptoms from the farmers through the process of empowerment. Therefore in the changing situation after the reforms the extension workers becomes a facilitator rather than an expert (DAC, nd). Its role as a facilitator of agricultural knowledge system would only increase as more participants from private sector would get involved in extension (Sulaiman and van den Ban, 2000). To act as facilitator apart from technical skills, extension workers needs several social science skills (Farrington et al, 1998).

According to Heron (1999) facilitator is a person who has the role of empowering participants to learn in an experiential group. Here 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 that is not necessarily an expert on a specific issue but an expert on process. To act as facilitator apart from technical skills, extension workers needs several social science skills (Farrington et al, 1998).

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Building the capacity of extension workers as a facilitator is not an easy task and a series of issues arise in relation to this intervention. Keeping the above in view some issues in relation to the changing role of extension workers as facilitator under post extension reforms situations in India have been discussed so that policy makers can take necessary action to address the issue.

2.1. Issue on Andragogy

ATMA aims to develop local skills and empower farmers to solve their own problems. Learning is an important prerequisite to empowerment. Farmers as adult are autonomous and self-directed in learning. They have a wealth of information and experiences. Each farmer's experience is unique and different. The facilitator provides opportunities for farmers to work together and share their experiences with each other. Farmers need to see that the learning and their day-to-day activities are related and relevant. Farmers need concrete experiences in which they apply the learning in real work.

Transfer of learning for farmers is not automatic and must be facilitated. We know that teaching adult is different from teaching children. Here instead of pedagogical approach extension workers should adopt andragogical approach. The learning should be experiential. Therefore to work under ATMA it is a prerequisite for all the extension workers to develop knowledge on andragogy. Unfortunately during their formal education the matter was not thought. Because the topic is not covered by any course curriculum of any agricultural universities.

2.2. Issue on Group Dynamics

Most of the programmes under ATMA will be done in groups through FIGs, SHGs etc. Farmers’ groups allow members to share ideas, experiences and problems. Groups also provide a forum for extension workers to introduce need based ideas and skills to farmers. It is possible only when the groups are working properly, self reliant and productive. But group members at individual level, particularly the small and marginal farmers, have already developed dependency symptoms towards the extension workers. Again, farmers groups may fail because of conflicts among the members. Providing service of extension is though a new concept at national level but it is an old concepts for Assam, a north eastern state of India. In Assam, farmers’ organisations called Field Management Committees (FMCs) are running for decades. But a large numbers of FMCs are not working properly due to group conflict and other sort of problems which could not handle properly by the extension workers. In group situation group dynamics naturally come into play. Dynamics of any group is highly complex. The extension workers as a facilitator should not know 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. So sustainability and effectiveness of farmers’ groups are keys to the success of ATMA. So an understanding of group dynamics is essential for the extension workers and they should acquire knowledge on group dynamics to facilitate farmers groups. But this knowledge is also not received by the extension workers during their formal education.

2.3. Issues on Gender

Women are key stake holders of agriculture. Despite their contributions, women face major constraints in terms of time, access to and control over resources, and the benefits they receive. Ignoring gender needs and interests reduces the level of participation of all segments of the community, thus jeopardising any development efforts. Extension services are often directed to men and our extension workers are also accustom to serve the male farmers. Therefore in ATMA, special provision is made for mainstreaming gender concern. Thirty percent activities are earmarked for women. Extension workers should be able to is appropriately identify women's needs and constraints, priorities and opportunities. They should ensure that their services meet farm women’s requirements. Therefore extension workers must be sensitised on gender issue.

2.4. Extension Workers as Facilitator

As a facilitator, extension workers should ensure that the farmers’ groups work as a productive unit. 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 problem, and help to resolve conflict among the members etc. For that purpose they have to act as 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 under T&V system. It demands appropriate in-service training for extension workers to perform the role of facilitator.

2.5. Skills of Facilitator

From the above discussion it is clear that for performing the role of a group facilitator, extension workers should possess a different set of skills. A facilitator should develop the skill of questioning, paraphrasing, summarizing, conflict management, observing, recording, problem solving etc (Lawson, 1996). The facilitator should be skilled in distinguishing process from content. The facilitator should be skillful in evoking participation and creativity. Facilitation often involves the softer side of human emotion, psychology, and relationship. It means that a facilitator must understand the human relation skill. One critical facilitation 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 behaviours (Hawkins, nd). According to Thiagi Group (1999) effective facilitators are flexible, adaptive, proactive, responsive and resilient. Besides these there are some other skills for facilitation which can be needed for extension workers while dealing with farmers’ groups.
2.6. Professionalism for Extension Worker

"Professional" included those who were qualified to pursue a vocation. Extension service also requires professed knowledge, skills, shared values and wisdom. In a top-down approach like T&V system technical knowledge was most important for the extension worker and during their formal education they also develop those professional knowledge and skills. But under group approach of extension, besides technical knowledge they have to develop the knowledge and skills of facilitators. These knowledge and skills are specialised in nature and often requiring scientific principles. The extension workers by education may not be considered as pure professional but by nature a job extension worker he/she shall hold paramount the development of farming community. It is clear that the extension reforms demand many new skills required for extension workers. Therefore extension workers should be developed professionally to serve the farmers.

2.7. Capacity Building of Extension Workers

Capacity building of extension workers is a thrust area under ATMA. Till date extension workers are trained in the technical subject matter but no effort has been made to develop the soft skill like facilitation skills. Therefore extension workers need sound foundation of those skills. Otherwise the new approach will not be effective. In this context training has a great role to play.

Under ATMA block level extension workers from various line departments will work in group called BTT to serve the farmers. They have their own profession like agriculture, veterinary, fishery, sericulture etc. In such situation developing professionalism among them as facilitator is self is a challenging job. They have already worked under T&V system for many years. They have worked as expert under T&V system. Therefore we need quality trainer to train them as facilitators. If the trainer is not a good facilitator than entire effort will not produce any fruitful result. But the value of training as well as trainer is yet to be fully acknowledged in the agricultural development. In reality while selecting the trainers no emphasis are given on their quality as trainer. Training can not necessarily lead to change unless due care is taken to bring desirable change (Kumar and Hansara, 1999). Therefore training of trainers will plays vital role in this regards. Besides there is need to orient all levels of training organisation to create a climate of facilitative learning It is also necessary to introduce grading system for trainers based on their quality. Potential person will come to training profession particularly in the field of extension education once training receives due attention and status from all corners of the system.

2.8. Need for New Curriculum and Teaching Approach

It is already mentioned that our university curriculum is not up to date to cope up with the changing scenario. No course is taught in under graduate or post graduate level on facilitation. In that situation we cannot develop future generation of facilitator for extension service. Therefore necessary adjustments in the curricula of formal education in agricultural extension will also be needed (Qamar, 2002) to build the capacity of agricultural graduate as facilitator. At the same time it is equally important to change the teaching methodology on extension education at the higher institute like university. The pedagogical approach is not suitable for teaching extension education at university level. The learning should be self directed and experiential. Therefore teacher should adopt andragogical approach of teaching.

3. CONCLUSION

The whole extension process is dependent upon the extension workers, which is the critical element in all extension activities. Indeed, the effectiveness of the extension workers can often determine the success or failure of an extension programme (Oakley and Garforth, 1985). From very beginning the extension system has been subject to a number of studies. It is observed that most of studies did not systematically analyse the facilitation aspects of the extension workers. The Policy Framework for Agricultural Extension mentions that a long-term training plan for extension workers should be developed by each state based on a thorough skill gap analysis. A massive campaign will need to be launched for skill up gradation and capacity building of extension functionaries by using resources of all training institutes. Time is ripe now to design "facilitation development programme" by various training institutes for providing training to extension personnel on facilitation so that they can effectively work under group approach of extension. All out effort has to be given to build the extension worker as facilitators. It is equally important to develop the body of knowledge on facilitation skills for extension workers under group approach of extension.

REFERENCE