

Community-Based Extension Models: Lessons from Rural Areas

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INTRODUCTION

Extension systems in agriculture are critical in bridging the gap between science in laboratories and practice in the fields. For many decades, extension practices largely employed a top-down strategy in which specialists developed programs and farmers were mere recipients of information. These extension systems normally neglected local needs, dismissed indigenous knowledge, and did not reach the marginalized communities. There has been a shift in paradigm in recent years to community-based extension models where farmers are put at the core of the process. Rather than perceiving farmers as beneficiaries, these models deal with them as partners and as innovators. Rural communities are promoted to recognize problems, conceptualize solutions, and learn from each other. Community-based extension is therefore not only a technology transfer process but also a process of social learning and empowerment, constructing lasting rural societal resilience.



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2. Concept and Principles of Community-Based Extension Models

Community-based extension models (CBEMs) are decentralized, participatory agricultural systems that engage local communities in planning, implementation, and evaluation of agricultural programs. Their success hinges on some fundamental principles:

1. Participation: Farmers are actively engaged in determining their own needs and formulating local solutions.

2. Ownership: Local communities own and are responsible for managing and maintaining extension activity.

3. Inclusivity: There is an attempt made to include women, youth, and disadvantaged groups.

4. Capacity Building: Farmer facilitators and local leaders are trained to conduct demonstrations and provide information.

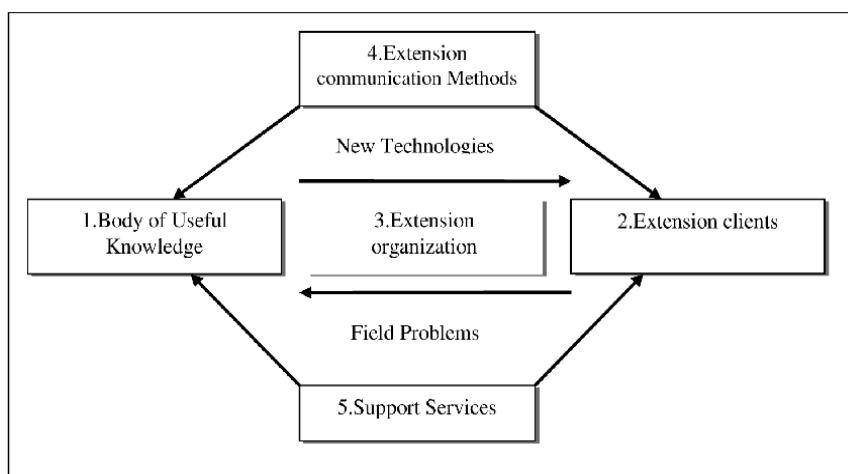
5. Partnerships: Partnership between public institutions, NGOs, private enterprises, and farmer groups increases resource exchange and innovation.

Through marrying these principles, CBEMs ensure that extension activities are socially embedded, sustainable, and context-specific.

3. Prominent Community-Based Extension Models in Practice

3.1 Farmer Field Schools (FFS)

Designed by the FAO, Farmer Field Schools focus on "learning by doing." Farmers come together periodically to observe, analyze, and experiment on their own farms. Schooling entails experiential learning, pest management, and integrated crop management. FFS has been effectively introduced in rice, pulse, and vegetable cultivation schemes in India.



3.2 Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and Farmer Interest Groups (FIGs)

Self-Help Groups, usually women, are local forums for exchange of knowledge, savings, and credit. Combined with Farmer Interest Groups, they reinforce joint marketing and decision-making. Initiatives such as NABARD's SHG-Bank Linkage Scheme and ATMA's farmer groups have made rural livelihoods much better.

3.3 Village Resource Centers (VRCs)

Aided by ISRO and ICAR, Village Resource Centers offer satellite-based real-time agro-advisories, weather updates, and training. They link rural communities with scientific institutions and equip them with new knowledge and digital technologies.

3.4 Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs)

FPOs function as collective ventures that combine production, value addition, and marketing. With the assistance of NABARD, SFAC, and ICAR, FPOs make it possible for smallholders to enter input and output markets,

command improved prices, and adopt sustainable technologies.

3.5 Participatory Technology Development (PTD)

Under this model, farmers and researchers collaborate on testing new technologies. PTD acknowledges local knowledge and complements it with scientific innovations, making sure that solutions are technically viable and socially acceptable.

4. Advantages and Effect of Community-Based Extension Models

4.1 Increased Technology Adoption

Direct engagement of farmers by CBEMs raises the adoption of improved varieties, integrated pest management, practices for soil health, and water-saving technologies. Locally proven outcomes are more trusted by farmers than outside advice.

4.2 Improved Social Capital

Community-based approaches create networks of cooperation, trust, and collective action. Such

social ties enable farmers to share risks, pool resources, and participate in group marketing.

4.3 Empowerment and Inclusivity

Women and youth acquire leadership positions in decision-making. Models such as SHGs in community have proved to be incredibly successful in gender empowerment, enhancing income and social status.

4.4 Enhanced Livelihoods and Income Security

Farmers acquire access to credit, insurance, and improved markets through collective action. For example, several FPOs in India have enhanced farmers' net returns by 15–25% with direct marketing and value addition.

4.5 Sustainable Agriculture Practices

CBEMs promote conservation agriculture, organic farming, and integrated nutrient management. Communities collectively manage resources like water and soil, enhancing environmental sustainability.

5. Lessons from Successful Rural Experiences

Several lessons emerge from rural initiatives across India and other developing nations:

1. **Localization Matters:** Successful models are those adapted to local agro-ecological and socio-economic conditions. A one-size-fits-all approach fails.
2. **Capacity Building is Central:** Training local facilitators ensures long-term sustainability beyond project periods.
3. **Inclusivity Sparks Success:** Gender-insensitive strategies increase participation and results.
4. **Institutional Interconnections are Key:** Interactions with research centers and extension organizations facilitate access to quality information and innovation.
5. **Digital Means Optimize Reach:** ICT-based extension platforms such as e-Krishi, m-Kisan, and AgriStack supplement community activities and enhance the flow of communications.

A notable one is Andhra Pradesh's Community Managed Natural Farming (APCNF) program, which brings together women's SHGs, Farmer Field Schools, and online learning platforms to encourage chemical-free farming.

6. Challenges in Scaling Up Community-Based Models

In spite of established advantages, various challenges undermine the scalability of CBEMs:

- **Limited Institutional Support:** Several programs rely on short-term funding and have no long-term institutional support.

- **Capacity Gaps:** Trained facilitators as well as community leaders are frequently lacking.
- **Gender Barriers:** Social norms or workload may limit women's participation.
- **Market Access Issues:** As production enhances, market linkages for value-added products remain weak.
- **Coordination Challenges:** Poor coordination between government departments, NGOs, and private actors decreases efficiency.

These need to be addressed through the incorporation of CBEMs into national extension policies at the systemic level, as well as through the provision of finance and digital inclusion interventions.

7. Policy Implications and Future Directions

To leverage the potential of community-based extension models, institutions and policymakers must prioritize:

- **Institutionalization of CBEMs:** Incorporate participatory extension into national programs such as ATMA, Krishi Vigyan Kendra's (KVKs), and ICAR projects.
- **Capacity Development:** Set up training institutes for community facilitators, particularly women and youth leaders.
- **Digital Integration:** Integrate traditional participatory approaches with contemporary ICT platforms for greater outreach.
- **Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs):** Facilitate partnerships among government agencies, agribusiness, and NGOs in order to leverage scalability and sustainability.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation Frameworks:** Establish community-driven evaluation frameworks to measure outcomes and learning.

CONCLUSION

Community-based extension models are a revolutionary rural development approach. Through the appreciation of local knowledge, promotion of participation, and building collective action, they redefine the farmer-institution relationship. Implications from effective rural experiences show that when farmers become co-producers of knowledge instead of mere consumers, technology uptake increases, and livelihood is enhanced, and communities become resilient. In the digital and climate-smart era of agriculture, community-based approaches remain crucial. Bridging them with new communication tools, digital platforms, and policy frameworks will provide equal access

to knowledge, innovation, and opportunity for all farmers, no matter where they are or what resources they have. The future of sustainable agriculture does not lie merely in technology but in empowered societies collaborating towards common development.

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