



# EXTENSION SERVICES IN TIMES OF COVID-19: THE CASE OF AGRICULTURE

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**Introduction:** The Corona virus disease commonly called as COVID-19 is showing no signs of decline. Every passing day is witnessing a spike in the total no. of corona related cases in the country as well as across the globe. The number of infected cases over the world till date (April 23, 2020) has crossed 25 lakhs and in our county the no. of corona infected cases have crossed the 20,000 mark. Alone in the United States of America more than 20,000 peoples have died due to this virus. Although the timely measures such as social distancing and complete lockdown; aggressive tracing and increased testing; quarantine and isolation announced by our Hon'ble Prime minister has paid us, but still things are not going the right way. States like Maharashtra and Punjab are showing an upward drift in the no. of infected cases and states like Goa, Manipur, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim are largely free of this pandemic. This pandemic has thrown life out of gear. As everything is locked down, the economy of the country is the worst to be hit. With government revenue going down and the expenditure mounting upwards coming time are going to definitely affect the financial health of the country.

The rural areas in the country have to fight on two fronts. First is their poverty and the second is the lack of information regarding the disease and health services. This has put them under severe health crisis. Most of these are working in the fields. Their condition is such that they cannot wait for the present situation to be over to start agricultural operation. The agriculture sector is at the core of the country's economy. Pt. J. L. Nehru had once remarked, 'Everything can wait, but agriculture cannot'. Any disruption in this sector directly disrupts the other sectors and ultimately the economic scenario of the country. This outbreak has come at a time when the farming community in the country was to start harvest of the *Rabi* crops and prepare for the next *Zaid* or *Kharif* crops. Agriculture sector relies on new innovations and farm specific technologies. The new technologies developed in the research institutes are to be carried to their ultimate end users. The technology dissemination is largely been the work of agricultural extension professionals. They are the ones who are entrusted with the task of reaching out to the farming community and to ensure last mile delivery of agriculture and other extension services. The COVID-19 has made agriculture sector more vulnerable. The changed scenario under the



threat of this pandemic has put more responsibility on their shoulders. The extension professionals have to keep agriculture going. The agriculture extension services are indispensable in this pandemic and have to be put in as the frontline warrior responding to this pandemic more in the rural areas by changing their ways of operating. Agriculture extension service providers are the change agents that can help the communities in the following ways:

**Raising awareness regarding COVID-19:** In the villages these change agents can raise awareness among the peoples regarding the spread of this virus and the control measures to adopt. They can motivate the villagers to follow social distancing and to stay safe at home, use hand sanitizers to wash their hands frequently. The rural areas are the mines of various indigenous plants having medicinal and antibiotic properties. The villagers can teach them how to prepare sanitizers from these trees and keep away from the spread of this infection.

**Ensuring Food Security:** World is already facing the challenge of feeding the poors. Millions of peoples across the globe suffer from hunger and malnutrition. The COVID-19 challenge is expected to push an additional 548 million peoples below the poverty line (FAO). This indeed is a huge threat. Under such a scenario, the food security of the peoples living in remote villagers can be ensured by asking them to go for kitchen gardening to have home grown vegetables, rural backyard poultry and growing underutilized and neglected crops. Local food value chains and local markets also ensure that the produce instead of going waste is at least giving some income to the farmers.

**Promoting Resource Conserving Technologies (RCTs):** The situation also demand efficient use of available resources and going for the resource conserving technologies like water harvesting, mechanized farming with drills and planters, use of manures in place of chemical fertilizers. Reduce, Reuse and Recycling should be done. This is where the extensional professional has to give inputs to the farming community about various region specific RCTs.

**Community Action:** The present is peak harvesting season in some parts and sowing season in some others. Farmers have to harvest their standing wheat crop. Any delay at this point gets reflected as yield loss. As the interstate borders have been sealed and there is no transport facility, the labourers from Bihar, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh have not come. As such the states like Jammu Kashmir, Punjab and Haryana are facing acute labour shortage and this is effecting the harvest operations. The extension professionals can take the help of local elected representatives and ask the farming community to go for community harvesting in which farmers should harvest each others' crops. Similarly sowing and other operations can also be



done through community action. All this has to be done while maintaining social distancing and not violating the lock down period.

**Contribute to a Cleaner Environment:** The farmers can also be motivated not to burn wheat residue and contribute towards cleaner environment. States like Punjab and Haryana which record maximum no. of crop residue burning cases can be persuaded to adopt a zero residue burning approach. This will not only improve the quality of air but also improve soil health and that of water bodies.

**Mobilizing Community Based Organizations:** The community based organizations like self help groups, Farmer Interest groups, Farmer Associations can be mobilized to feed the needy, prepare food packs and personal protection equipments like masks and hand sanitizers for distribution among the common masses. A recent news item published in 'The Tribune' lauded the role of women Self Help Groups in Haryana. These groups prepared more than 17 lakh protective face covers and masks, 12, 849 personal protection Equipments (PPE) kits, 225 protective kits and 35,000 sanitizers of 100 ml each. By this they also earned income for themselves.

**Providing Technical information:** The extension providers have to provide all the technical information related to harvest, storage of the produce, weather, Minimum Support Price (MSP) and market price of the crops. It is not necessary to call all the farmers to gather at a place. The desired information can be provided through their smart phones, by creating Whatsapp groups, we chats, Interactive Video Recordings (IVR). Farming community has to plan for the next season crops. They can be supported by providing the necessary information regarding from where they can get seed and other inputs. Promotion of village level seed banks can also be explored in these testing times.

**Ensuring DBT of PMGKY:** Hon'ble Primeminister has also announced a relief package of rupees 1.70 lakh crores for the poors and needy under Primeminister Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY). Under this package about 80 crore poor people will get 5 kg wheat or rice and 1 kg of preferred pulses for free every month for next three months; 25 crore women Jandhan account holders will get rupees 500 per month for next three months; increase in MGNREGA wage to rupees 202 per day from rupees 182 per day to benefit 133.62 crore families, about 8.7 crore farmers to be paid the first installment of rupees 2000 of 2010-21, the women folk registered under Ujjwala Yojana will be provided with cooking gas free of cost for next three months. The extension professionals have to ensure that the amount granted reaches to the needy through DBT.



**Coordination:** The extension service providers have also to coordinate with various other public and private agencies, the members of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), the NGOs and all other stakeholders so as to use them to the best possible advantage for the farming community.

**Building Partnerships:** Building partnerships at the grass root levels is also very important at this crucial time. These partnerships should be for marketing that would help the farmers in marketing of the produce more so of perishable commodities like fruits and vegetables; partnerships with input suppliers that should provide different inputs well in advance of time; partnerships with financial institutions to meet the credit needs of farming community, partnerships with crop insurance agencies to get the farmers compensated immediately for their crop failure, if any; partnerships with allied departments like animal husbandry to take care of the livestock needs of the farming communities. The government of India has also launched the ‘Kissan Rath’ app to address to the marketing needs of the farming community.

**Address emerging social issues:** This pandemic has brought with it disruptions in the social structure too. Human ethics and values are at cross roads. There have been reports of the family members refusing to perform the last rites of the member who lost life due to Corona virus. This pandemic has taken the shape of untouchability and became more of a social stigma. Unfortunately there is a social boycott of the family whose member is found positive for this infection. This has sometimes lead to inter and intra community conflicts. The extension professionals have to take this challenge head on. This degradation of social values can devastate the whole social set up. They have to aware and motivate the peoples that there is nothing like that. With taking proper care and following the set protocol while performing last rites, there is no chance of any other person getting infected.

**Impact assessment:** Being at the grass root levels and working with the rural populace, the extension workers can make an assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on various aspects of crop production and on rural population. By this they will also be able to identify the specific needs of the farmers. A SWOT (S: Strength, W: Weakness, O: Opportunity, T: Threats) analysis carried out in such a situation will help them to give a road map to the authorities to immediately respond to such threats in future.