

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Constraints faced by Block Level Extension Functionaries in facilitating Commodity Interest Groups and Farm Schools under ATMA in NE Indian states

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Abstract

A study was conducted in eight North-East (NE) Indian states including Assam, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Sikkim, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh on constraints faced by block level extension functionaries in facilitating CIGs and farm schools under ATMA. Data were collected through questionnaire and statistical methods such as percentage, frequency and ranking was used for analyzing the data. A total of 10 constraints were reported by the block level extension functionaries operating in different parts of the NE region. It was found that majority of the extension personnel (75%) reported the constraints of 'Inadequate financial support under the ATMA Scheme' followed by 'Involvement of ATMA functionaries in the schemes other than ATMA' (70.8%), 'Lack of external trainer in close proximity' (67.5%), 'Un time release of fund' (60.0%), 'Lack of delegation of authority to the block level functionaries' (55.8%) and 'Voice of extension functionaries have been often neglected' (52.5%).

Keywords: North-East Indian states, constraints, farm schools, extension functionaries, ATMA.

Introduction

Most of the poverty alleviation programmes implemented by Govt. of India in the past could not succeed to the desirable extent as these programmes did not consider the needs and interest of the peoples at the grass root level. It has been realized that the public sector extension system on its own is not capable enough to meet the ever increasing and multi-faceted demands of the farming community. So, it was felt that extension system should be made broad based and holistic by utilizing a farming system approach and involving various stakeholders. To address the situation, the Government of India (GOI) and the World Bank pilot-tested a new, decentralized, market-driven extension model under the National Agricultural Technology Project (NATP).

The Key institution in implementing this new approach was the agricultural technology management agency which was responsible for facilitating and coordinating "farmer-led" extension activities within each district. The main purpose behind the "farmer-led" extension approaches are to facilitate and promote Commodity Interest Group (CIGs), Women Interest Groups (WIGs) and farm schools which will strengthen the farming community by pooling the existing resources in an integrated manner. When the small farmers are facilitated to organize groups, trained and guided properly, they can attain tremendous development goal which would eventually make the group self-reliant and self-sufficient. Farm School is a way of disseminating technical information based on a participatory and interactive learning approach.

Farm schools provide participatory platforms for improving decision-making capacity and stimulating local innovation for sustainable agriculture. Farm schools offer community-based non-formal education to groups of 20 to 25 farmers. Discovery-based learning is related to agro-ecological principles in a participatory learning process throughout a crop cycle (Braun *et al.*, 2000). Farm school focuses on identifying concrete solutions for local problems by means of increasing the capacity of individuals and local groups for critical analysis and decision-making. A CIG is a self-managed, independent group of farmers with a shared goal and interest. The members work together to achieve one common goal by pooling their existing resources, gaining better access to other resources and to share in the resulting benefits. The establishment of CIGs, Farmer's Interest Groups (FIGs) and farmer's federation helps in gaining the confidence of farmers to fix price for their produce (Singh and Srinivasan, 1998).

Agricultural Technology Management Agency (ATMA) calls for integrated approach wherein different stakeholders come closer to plan, organize and execute the activities to take full advantage of the technologies demonstrated in the operational area (Kumar *et al.*, 2011). Block Technology Manager (BTM) and Subject Matter Specialists (SMSs) are playing an important role at the grass root level in facilitating and promoting group formation. Therefore, it is important to investigate the constraints faced by these block level extension functionaries in facilitating and promoting group formations.

The critical analysis of constraints faced by the extension functionaries at various levels in facilitating farmer's organizations is important for successful implementation of this programme. Keeping the importance of the study in view, the present investigation was conducted in NE states to elicit the constraints faced by the block level extension in facilitating CIGs and farm schools.

Materials and methods

Study area: The study was conducted in 8 NE Indian including Assam, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Sikkim, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh. Questionnaire was prepared based on the objectives of the study and sent by post to P.D, ATMA of selected states of NE.

Experimental design: Purposive random sampling design had been taken for the investigation. Responses were obtained only from 30 numbers of P.D, ATMA of different NE states. Data were collected from a total of 120 numbers of Block Technology Manager operating in 30 numbers of ATMA districts in NE states. The responses were obtained from 5 districts of Assam, 6 districts of Nagaland, 7 districts of Arunachal Pradesh, 6 districts of Mizoram and 2 districts each from Manipur, Sikkim and Meghalaya.

Statistical analysis: The collected data were tabulated, analyzed and interpreted in accordance with the objectives by using appropriate statistical techniques like percentage and frequency.

Results and discussion

Ten different constraints faced by the extension personnel in promoting CIGs and farm schools were reported in the study. The percentage and frequency distribution relating to the constraints are tabulated in Table 1 and the explanations on each of the constraints are presented thereof.

The constraints reported are:

1. Inadequate financial support under the ATMA scheme.
2. Unavailability of production inputs at the farmer's doorsteps.
3. Involvement of ATMA functionaries in the schemes other than ATMA.
4. Lack of external trainer in close proximity.
5. Un-time release of fund.
6. Lack of delegation of authority to the block level functionaries.
7. Voices of extension functionaries have been often neglected.
8. Inadequate conveyance allowances.
9. Farmers showing lack of interest in attending farm school.
10. Political hindrance affecting the selection of beneficiaries.

The data presented in the Table 1 reveals that the majority of the extension personnel (75%) reported the constraints of 'Inadequate financial support under the ATMA scheme' followed by 'Involvement of ATMA functionaries in the schemes other than ATMA' (70.8%), 'Lack of external trainer in close proximity' (67.5%), 'Un-time release of fund' (60.0%), 'Lack of delegation of authority to the block level functionaries' (55.8%) and 'Voice of extension functionaries have been often neglected' (52.5%). The least (23.3%) constraints faced by the extension functionaries were 'Political hindrance affecting the selection of beneficiaries' followed by 'Farmers showing lack of interest in attending farm school' (33.3%), 'Inadequate conveyance allowances' (40.0%) and 'Unavailability of production inputs at the farmer's doorsteps' (45.0%).

1. **Inadequate financial support under the ATMA Scheme:** It was reported that the cost norms provision under the head of 'Mobilizing Farmer's Groups' as per the 'ATMA Cafeteria' is less and inadequate to meet the required expenses. The provision of cost norms of Rs. 5000 per group per year for 'capacity building, skill development and support services' was reported as inadequate for organizing and promoting CIGs. The provisions of honorarium for external trainer at Rs. 250 per visit for farm schools is quite inadequate and make it difficult to manage external trainer from distant places. It also induces lack of interest to act as trainer in farm school in most of the cases. Moreover, the food expenses at Rs. 30 per participant of farm school are not adequate to facilitate one day training session on the scheduled date.
2. **Involvement of ATMA functionaries in the schemes other than ATMA:** The BTT conveners are still working as drawing and disbursing officers at block level ATMA activities. It was reported that they had to carry out multifarious responsibilities of a number of departmental schemes in addition to ATMA scheme. Further, they have to involved in the activities like flood relief, election etc which often delays the formation of CIGs and their proper functioning.
3. **Lack of external trainer in close proximity:** It was reported that resource persons/external trainers for all the subject areas are not available nearby area particularly in dairy and fishery sectors. Further, it was reported that the nominal rate of travel expenses in the ATMA cafeteria restricted the hiring of external trainer from the distant places. It creates problem in upgrading the skills and knowledge of achiever farmers and often leads to the selection of limited area of subject matters.
4. **Un-time release of fund:** It was reported that delay in releasing fund hampers in formation and promotion of CIGs and farm schools.

Table 1. Percentage distribution of constraints in facilitating CIGs and farm schools (N=120).

S. No.	Constraints	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
1.	Inadequate financial support under the ATMA scheme	90	75.0	I
2.	Involvement of ATMA functionaries in the schemes other than ATMA	85	70.8	II
3.	Lack of external trainer in close proximity	81	67.5	III
4.	Un-time release of fund	72	60.0	IV
5.	Lack of delegation of authority to the block level functionaries	67	55.8	V
6.	Voice of extension functionaries have been often neglected	63	52.5	VI
7.	Unavailability of production inputs at the farmer's doorsteps	54	45.0	VII
8.	Inadequate conveyance allowances	48	40.0	VIII
9.	Farmers showing lack of interest in attending farm school	40	33.3	IX
10.	Political hindrance affecting the selection of beneficiaries	28	23.3	X

The delay can be observed in releasing fund for seed money, capacity building, skill development and support services. The approval for establishing CIGs and farm schools are made by ATMA Governing body which delay the process of formation of such groups. By the time, it gets approved by ATMA, season gets over which adversely affect the scheduling of farmer's visit. It ultimately adversely affect the success of establishing farmer's organization particularly Farm school.

5. *Lack of delegation of authority to the block level functionaries:* Block level extension functionaries like Block Technology Manager (BTM) and Subject Matter Specialists (SMSs) felt that they are not delegated with adequate authority to make decisions regarding the types and number of farmer's organization to be formed. The formation of CIGs and Farm Schools are need to be approved by ATMA GB which takes time and sometimes act as de motivating factors for the block level extension functionaries.

6. *Voice of extension functionaries has been often neglected:* It was reported that voices of most of the block level extension functionaries often ignored in Block Technology Team (BTT) meeting. Block Technology Managers (BTM) acts as Member Secretary in Block Farmer's Advisory Committee (BFAC) meeting where farmer's feedbacks are placed by different farmer's representatives acting on different sectors. These feedbacks comprises of farmer's need, problem, interest and suggestion which needs to be addressed immediately in the BTT meeting. BTMs are supposed to bring these feedbacks under notice of BTT members to take timely and appropriate decisions. The negligence of voice of the extension functionaries in BTT meeting means the negligence of farmer's voice which will reduce the effectiveness of the overall programmes.

7. *Unavailability of production inputs at the farmer's doorsteps:* It was reported that CIGs involved in 'Agri-Horti' crops under the ATMA finding it difficult to continue their production avenues due to lack of critical inputs like quality seeds, fertilizer and technical guidance in their doorsteps at appropriate time.

Most of the CIGs and farm school could not continue with their cultivation practices due to the lack of these inputs.

8. *Inadequate conveyance allowances:* It was reported that the financial provision for conveyance is very limited and it is difficult for the extension personnel to work in the hilly regions. The quantum of money (Rs. 5000 for BTM and Rs. 3500 for SMS) is not sufficient for the contractual employees like BTM and SMS working in the grass root level. Difficult terrain and bad weather in rainy season raise the travel expenses in hilly area which is difficult to manage within the stipulated cost range. Many of the extension functionaries suggested for different cost norm for different area and situation.

9. *Farmers showing lack of interest in attending farm school:* It was reported that attendance of farmers in farm schools after the first schedule visit decreases which reduces the effectiveness of the programme. Most of the participating farmers show reluctance in attending farm schools due to their engagement in farming activities. Moreover, most of farmers felt the lack of belongingness and lack of negligence since more importance and emphasis are given only to the progressive farmer regarding supply of inputs and other support services.

10. *Political hindrance affecting the selection of beneficiaries:* Political hindrance in selecting project site, beneficiary farmers and in distributing inputs reduces the programmes effectiveness. Because of this, the extension intervention is not creating any visible impact as it is not covering the actual deserving farmers.

Conclusion

The reported constraints affect the CIGs and farm school movements which ultimately affect the usefulness of the ATMA schemes in the NE states. The reported constraints are needed to be addressed seriously for smooth formation and functioning of CIGs and farm schools in the NE region. BTMs and SMSs are the grassroots level extension functionaries who primarily deal with the group formation and promotion.



If the constraints faced by them are not immediately addressed in due course of time, it will affect the overall success of the scheme. Most of the constraints are related to the administration and management aspect and this need to be solved for smooth functioning of the ATMA scheme.

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