

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

My dear readers of Journal of Extension Education,

The COVID-19 pandemic, considered as the biggest challenge to humankind since World War-II has affected the extension services globally, to a great extent. Advisory services to those living in rural areas have been hampered and linking the farmers to markets & farm inputs had been extremely difficult during the lockdowns.

The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), a specialized agency of the United Nations, has developed the following mechanisms to continue providing extension services, even while adhering to the government regulations during this crisis (IFAD, 2020).

1. Identifying and tracking farmers' needs via social media

In the absence of physical coordination mechanisms, the IFAD India country team has embraced WhatsApp and email groups as ways to stay connected with partners and to ensure that the farmers' concerns are raised on a regular basis. The EG5 (Empowered Group) set up by the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India to look in to supply chain logistics for all essential commodities, including food and agriculture-related items shares information about agri-logistics issues faced by the farmers on the ground and on good practices that could be quickly replicated across the country.

2. ICT tools provide e-advisory services to farmers

Development projects are making extensive use of ICTs, solutions built on the integration of mobile phones and other digital media, to expand farmers' access to the information and knowledge they need during the pandemic. In Meghalaya, the Directorate of Agriculture had set up an integrated cloud platform that serves as an Agri-Response Centre (ARC) connecting farmers with subject matter specialists and suppliers, providing a toll-free number that farmer can call with their queries, while supporting farmers in transporting their produce.

3. Remote capacity-building of lead farmers and grassroots organizations

As not all farmers can directly use ICT, and many prefer to learn from a trusted contact, it is crucial to also use decentralized outreach systems and peer networks to bridge the digital divide. In India, when the movement of project staff and government extension agents was restricted, IFAD-funded projects enhanced the remote backstopping of lead farmers by preparing pre-recorded videos and picture-based materials to provide quality training to those who may not have access to ICT-based services. Cases of using local agro input dealers to distribute extension materials and critical messages to their farmer customers have also been found successful.

By utilizing these mechanisms depending on local conditions, extension agencies could continue providing extension support to the smallholder farmers whenever/wherever it is difficult to reach them in person.

This issue of JEE contains papers on topics such as communication strategies, occupational aspirations and women empowerment schemes. I hope, readers would find them interesting and useful.

Do send your feedback on these papers to editorextension@gmail.com.