Capacity Needs of Extension and Advisory Services (EAS) in South Asia

INTRODUCTION

About 80% of South Asia's poor live in rural areas. Most depend on agriculture for their livelihood. Agricultural and rural development is the key to eradicating poverty and creating conditions for sustainable and equitable growth in the region. South Asian agriculture faces several new challenges ranging from deteriorating natural resources base, climate change and increasing de-regulation of trade. Moreover, the sector is dominated by small farmers often with weak bargaining powers and limited political voice.

A pluralistic and demand driven extension provision, that offers a much broader support to rural producers, is critical for agricultural development and poverty reduction in South Asia. Commitment to pluralism is central to the discussion on extension reform as it is now widely accepted that no single actor or agency is best placed to offer the wide range of services required by the rural communities. Though South Asian countries have a long history of organizing and reforming extension services, much more needs to be done to strengthen their capacities to deal with the rapidly evolving challenges in agriculture.

One of the major priorities identified during the first meeting of the AESA (Agricultural Extension in South Asia) network was capacity development of EAS providers. The first step in this direction was to assess the capacity gaps among the EAS through undertaking a capacity needs assessment at the national level in select countries in the region.

CAPACITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF EAS

Undertaking Capacity Needs Assessment (CNA) is critical for organizing appropriate capacity development interventions. Lack of a clearly articulated list of core competencies for EAS adversely affects the recruitment of new staff, professional development of existing staff and also the quality of professional education in extension.

Extension and Advisory Services in South Asia

Public sector extension continues to dominate extension provision everywhere. Extension is decentralized to a large extent in Nepal and Pakistan. Most countries with the exception of Maldives and Bhutan have a pluralistic extension system. NGOs, input companies, agri-business firms, producer organizations, micro-finance institutions, universities and research centers do contribute to extension services. ICTs, especially mobile phones are increasingly used for disseminating information and advice to producers. Extension is relatively weak or non-existent in the livestock and fisheries sector. Five out of the eight countries in this region implemented the Training and Visit (T&V) System of extension during the 1980s. Subsequent reforms focusing mostly on devolution of extension from the national level to lower levels (provinces and districts) weakened extension by way of declining farmer-extension agent ratio, weakening links with research and loss of political and financial support.

Approaches such as market-led extension and public private partnerships are experimented in many countries. Almost every country faces the following set of challenges in extension delivery: lack of adequate number of extension staff, limited funding, weak linkages with research, lack of coordination and collaboration among multiple extension providers, lack of adequate capacities among extension staff and lack of professionalism in extension. Policies related to human resource development as well as certification and standards in extension provision are lacking everywhere (AESA, 2014).

The "New Extensionist"

The Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS) has articulated a new vision for Extension and Advisory Services (EAS) within the Agricultural Innovation Systems (AIS). The motive behind the development of the "New Extensionist" comes from the realisation that the existing EAS need new capacities to respond effectively to the emerging challenges in agricultural development (declining water availability, increasing soil degradation, and changing and uncertain climate and markets). In the past few years, capacities in EAS to perform their traditional roles such as training and communication of technical information have eroded. Meanwhile, the extension landscape has become increasingly pluralistic with greater participation of the private sector. All these warrant new knowledge, skills, and expertise among EAS providers.

The "New Extensionist", argues for an expanded role for EAS within the AIS and development of new capacities at the individual, organisational, and system levels. It recognises that the wide range of skills needed for agricultural innovation and the growing number of actors involved necessitates building new capacities (GFRAS, 2012).

WORKSHOPS ON CAPACITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT (CNA) OF EXTENSION AND ADVISORY SERVICES

AESA organised four workshops on CNA of EAS in India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal with the following objectives.

1. Identify capacity gaps among EAS providers
2. Finalise a methodology for undertaking capacity needs assessment.

Several preparatory activities were undertaken before these workshops.

E-Discussion → Review of Literature → Interaction with Key Stakeholders → Publication of Review Paper → Workshops → Identification of Capacity Needs | Facilitators' Guide on CNA of EAS

Country	Partner	Location
India	ICAR-National Academy of Agricultural Research Management	Hyderabad (October 2015)
Sri Lanka	Sri Lanka Agricultural Extension Association	Peradeniya (February 2016)
Bangladesh	Bangladesh Agricultural Extension Network	Manikgonj (February 2016)
Nepal	Nepal Agriculture Extension Association	Kathmandu (May 2016)

CAPACITY NEEDS

Capacities Required by Field Level EAS Functionaries

The field level EAS functionaries have the most direct engagement/contact with farmers/ rural communities. They need to have sound technical knowledge relevant to crops and enterprises in the specific context and functional skills related to communication (oral and written), mobilization, facilitation and use of ICTs including social media. Capacities for assessing farmers' needs and planning based on these needs and capacities to support farmers in marketing are other priority needs identified during the workshops.

Capacities Required by Middle Level EAS Functionaries

EAS personnel at the middle management level should have more skills related to networking, coordination and partnering. Capacities to build teams, coach and mentor their subordinate staff are also important. They also need to have sound technical knowledge and should possess skills to use ICTs and capacities to plan and design need based programmes.

Table 1: Capacities required by field level EAS functionaries

S No	Field Level	India	Sri Lanka	Bangladesh	Nepal
1	Communication skills including use of ICTs	◉	◉	◉	◉
2	Sound technical knowledge	◉		◉	◉
3	Community mobilization, Farmer organization development and Facilitation skills	◉		◉	◉
4	Need assessment of farmers and planning based on these needs		◉	◉	
5	Capacities to link farmers to markets	◉			

Table 2: Capacities required by middle level EAS functionaries

S No	MiddleLevel	India	Sri Lanka	Bangladesh	Nepal
1	Capacities to network, partner, establish linkages and coordinate actions of different stakeholders and achieve convergence	◉	◉	◉	◉
2	Leadership, Team building, Coaching, Mentoring and Organizing CNA of subordinate staff	◉	◉	◉	◉
3	Planning and designing need based programmes	◉			
4	Technical knowledge				◉
5	ICT skills			◉	

Capacities Required by Senior Level EAS Functionaries

EAS functionaries at the senior management level should have capacities for effective engagement with policy makers and should have leadership and managerial capacities. They also need capacities for visioning to design strategic plans for the varied scenarios that might emerge. Human and Financial resources are the major assets of an organisation and so efficient mobilization of these resources is critical for the success of EAS.

Capacities required at the organisational level

Every EAS should have a clear vision, mission and goals, a system for managing its human resources and an organisational culture that supports collaboration, networking and learning. It should have a system of good governance, a system for knowledge management, resources to achieve its goals and a result based management system in place.

Table 3: Capacities required by senior level EAS functionaries

S No	Senior Level	India	Sri Lanka	Bangladesh	Nepal
1	Policy engagement and policy advocacy including development of relevant policies and generating evidence to influence policy	◉	◉	◉	◉
2	Leadership, Organisational development, Networking, Partnership development, Regulation, Negotiation and Mentoring	◉	◉	◉	◉
3	Visioning, Strategic planning	◉		◉	
4	Resource mobilization				◉

Table 4: Capacities required at the organisational level in EAS

S No	Organisational Level	India	Sri Lanka	Bangladesh	Nepal
1	Clear vision, mission, mandate and goals specifying a broader role for EAS	◉	◉		◉
2	Human Resource Management (well defined job profile, procedures and chain of command)	◉			◉
3	Culture of collaboration, networking and learning in EAS	◉	◉		
4	Good Governance (accountability to clients, transparency, fair rules related to employee placement and promotions)				◉
5	Resource mobilisation			◉	
6	Knowledge management (infrastructure, tools and networking)			◉	
7	Result based management			◉	
8	Recognition of the role of extension as a distinct discipline and profession		◉		

CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT: WAYS FORWARD

Once the capacity gaps are identified, the next step is to find ways of addressing these gaps through capacity development interventions. These interventions must be appropriate to the level at which the staff are employed with focus on the organisational level capacity development at the same time. The workshops came out with a number of methods to strengthen capacities beyond training individuals at different levels which has hitherto been the most frequently used method for capacity development. These are as follows:

1. **Strengthening education and training curricula:** Review existing curricula (both education and training) for capacity development at regular intervals; develop cases and good practices that can be used for training; develop, pilot test and refine training modules; and develop technical manuals, fact sheets and posters.

2. **Organise regular continuous professional development programmes:** Include topics that provide capacities to support application of new technologies and processes in production, processing /value addition and marketing; enhance communication (oral and written), mobilization, and facilitation skills; use ICTs including social media; undertake capacity needs assessment; promote successful networking, collaboration/partnerships and convergence; facilitate project management including monitoring and evaluation; and engage with policy actors.

3. **Organise mentoring programme:** Link staff to work closely with mentors identified for different themes (Mentoring is an important mechanism for capacity

development where an experienced person uses his greater knowledge and expertise to support the personal development of another).
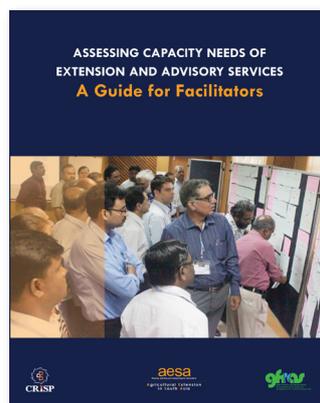
4. **Develop a directory of EAS providers:** Develop a directory of EAS providers working at different levels with contact details, thematic and geographical focus and specialization to help everyone know the different initiatives happening in their region and enhance possibilities for collaboration.

5. **Create platforms for regular consultations:** There should be a platform for EAS providers at different levels for regular consultations with other stakeholders/ partners at different levels. This will help address issues of similar concerns, foster collaborations, prevent duplication of efforts and optimize of resources.

6. **Strengthen Knowledge management:** Establish a web portal for EAS and develop different interest groups using social media applications (e.g.: Facebook, WhatsApp) to promote knowledge sharing.

7. **Digitize work environment and promote ICTs:** Provide modern ICT tools (e.g.: tablets with relevant pre-loaded content, smart phones) to EAS staff with sufficient/ adequate resources to use data cards/data plans.

8. **Visioning and goal setting:** Establish well-articulated vision, mission and goals for the organisation and revisit these say once in five years. Evolve transparent and participatory mechanisms for client interactions as well as for internal process within the organization. Use external consultants to support these processes.

9. **Encourage reflection, learning and feedback:** Organise reflective learning sessions with staff and organise annual retreats to reflect on past performance, and collectively devise strategies for better performance. This would help in team building and strengthening team cohesion.

10. **Promote cross learning within the EAS ecosystem:** Organise training programmes for staff of other EAS providers. For instance, NGOs having experience with community mobilisation can organise training for public sector EAS staff. Similarly public sector research organisations can organise training on technical aspects to private and NGO staff. Also depute staff to participate in exposure visits, workshops, seminars, conferences organised nationally and internationally.

11. **Strengthen strategic management:** Hire consultants and advisors to provide strategic advice on specific areas.

12. **Human Resource Development:** Develop systems and procedures for Human Resource Management and organise sessions on manpower planning.

13. **Fund raising:** Develop a small team for resource mobilization.

14. **Gathering evidence:** Commission studies for evaluation and assessing impact.

15. **Policy engagement/Influencing policy:** Strengthen capacities to develop and use evidence to influence policies that impact EAS and also develop a national extension policy.

FACILITATORS GUIDE

We developed a Facilitators Guide for Assessing Capacity Needs of EAS. This guide builds on the outputs of the four National Workshops held at India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal and it uses a blend of interactive approaches for different sessions with tips for facilitators for effective delivery. This guide is intended to assist facilitators in conducting a workshop with Extension and Advisory Service (EAS) providers for assessing their capacity needs.

This guide can be used as a standalone document / procedure for assessing the capacity needs of the extension and advisory service providers. However, using this guide for CNA has greater value if the outputs of this exercise are linked to a capacity development process. Moreover, this process also needs to be organised from time to time to identify new capacity gaps (AESA, 2016).

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Agriculture Extension in South Asia (AESA) is a network of all those who are interested and involved in EAS in South Asia. CRISP hosts the secretariat of AESA. AESA is part of the Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS).