



Agricultural Extension in South Asia (AESAS)

**Strengthening Extension & Advisory
Services in South Asia
14-15 January, 2014, Kathmandu, Nepal**



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Meeting Background

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 eradicate poverty and creating conditions for sustainable and equitable growth. 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 farms 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.

Though, South Asian countries have a long history of organising and reforming extension services, much more needs to be done to strengthen their capacities to deal with the rapidly evolving challenges in agriculture. 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. While several new approaches are being tried by varied extension providers in the public, private and NGO sector in different countries, these experiences are not shared across due to lack of a platform for sharing and networking among extension professionals in South Asia.

Agricultural Extension in South Asia (AESA) was formed in response to the demand for a network of all those interested in extension and advisory services articulated in some of the recent global and regional meetings on extension organised by the Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS). It is an attempt to form a network with all those who are interested and involved in agricultural extension and advisory services (from the public, private and civil society sectors) in South Asia.

AESA was established initially as a virtual platform around a website (www.aesa-gfras.net) and a Facebook group named as Agricultural Extension in South Asia. These efforts helped in identifying several key individuals and organisations who are interested in contributing to and strengthening the AESA network. This face-to-face regional meeting was organised to strengthen and formalize this virtual network and to identify its vision, mission, priorities and governance mechanism.

The meeting

The Centre for Research on Science Policy (CRISP), India (<http://www.crispindia.org/>) and the South Asia Institute for Advanced Studies (SIAS), Nepal (<http://www.sias-southasia.org/new/>) organised a two-day meeting on "Strengthening Extension and Advisory Services in South Asia" at Kathmandu, Nepal. This was held on 14th and 15th January, 2014. Rasheed Sulaiman V, Director CRISP and Kamal Devkota, Research Fellow, SIAS welcomed the participants to this meeting.

A total of 28 participants from seven South Asian countries including India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka attended the meeting. (See Annexure 1 for list of participants). The meeting was organised under different sessions as follows:

Session 1: Introduction

This session had three presentations:

Background and objectives of this meeting

Rasheed Sulaiman V, Director, CRISP, and AESA Focal Point briefed the participants on the evolution of AESA during the past 12 months and the objectives of this meeting.

AESA was designed as a network for sharing and learning among those interested in extension in South Asia so as to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of pluralistic extension and advisory provision. While the importance of such a network in South Asia was articulated during the global and regional consultations on extension organised by the GFRAS and APIRAS (Asia Pacific Island Rural Advisory Services) in 2012, lack of resources to convene a meeting and more importantly lack of information on the key actors in extension in different countries in the region, constrained establishment of such a network.



To overcome these challenges, a few of us decided to use social media and a web-portal to identify and link up those who are interested in extension in South Asia. These efforts helped in identifying several key individuals and organisations who are interested in strengthening extension and advisory provision in the region.

On realizing the need for a full time staff and resources to expand the network and to upgrade and maintain the AESA website, a proposal seeking funding was developed and in April 2013, the SDC (Swiss Agency for Development & Cooperation) funded AESA for strengthening its communication and for organizing the first face to face meeting. During the last 12 months, the AESA upgraded its web portal and published 28 blogs, 7 meeting notes, 5 good practices, 2 interviews and 1 book review. More than 2000 individuals joined the AESA Facebook group

during this period and started sharing useful information on extension and discussing issues and new approaches in extension.

However, to further strengthen AESA, it needs to be formalized as a real network in consultation with the key extension stakeholders in this region. This meeting was meant to answer some of these specific questions.

- How to take AESA forward beyond this initial start-up phase?
- What should be the vision and mission of AESA?

- What it should do (beyond the web portal and virtual networking?) to strengthen rural advisory services (RAS) in South Asia?
- How to create more visibility and ownership in the region and outside?
- How it should be governed and how can it raise more resources?
- How can it work with the existing initiatives and add more value?

GFRAS and its regional networks

Kristin Davis, Executive Secretary, GFRAS explicated the vision, mission, functions, and structure of GFRAS.



GFRAS (www.g-fras.org) engages with a wide range of Rural Advisory Service (RAS) stakeholders. Its vision is to promote effective advisory services that contribute to the reduction of hunger and poverty worldwide. Its mission is to provide advocacy and leadership in the provision of pluralistic, demand-driven agricultural advisory services, and in so doing, make significant contributions to the global development agenda.

To achieve the vision and mission, GFRAS works through the three functions below:

- Providing a voice within global policy dialogues and promoting improved investment in RAS
- Supporting the development and synthesis of evidence-based approaches and policies for improving the effectiveness of RAS
- Strengthening actors and forum in RAS through facilitating interaction and networking.

GFRAS works with several regional and sub-regional networks of extension such as AESA and its recent interventions have been in the areas of capacity building; nutrition; gender and youth; producer organizations; private sector; ICTs and extension, policies, monitoring learning and evaluation, risk and curricula reform.

One of its most recent activities has been in articulating the vision of the “New Extensionist”. The new extensionist is a global view of Extension and Advisory Services (EAS) that reinvents and clearly articulates the role of EAS in the rapidly-changing rural context. It argues for an expanded role for EAS within agricultural innovation systems and development of new capacities at the individual, organisational and system level capacities different levels to play this role (www.g-fras.org/new-extensionist).



**The “New Extensionist”:
Roles, Strategies, and Capacities
to Strengthen Extension
and Advisory Services**

Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services
November 2012

Extension Initiatives at the SAARC level

Muhammad Musa, Senior Programme Specialist (Crops), who represented the SAARC Agricultural Centre (SAC) highlighted the efforts of SAC in the area of extension and advisory services.

SAC is engaged in several activities that are aimed at strengthening agriculture research and technology transfer. These include, providing inputs to develop regional policies, strategies and projects; promoting innovative techniques and systems in agriculture production, postharvest and processing; facilitating collaborative studies on all aspects of agriculture; capacity building and information dissemination.



He recalled the attention of the participants to some of the major recommendations from the “Consultative Workshop on National Agricultural Extension Systems in SAARC Countries: An Analysis of Systems Diversity”, organised by SAC with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, Bhutan at Thimphu, Bhutan (23-24 November 2011). The recommendations were as follows:

- Institutionalize research-education-extension-farmers linkages
- Improve extension services delivery mechanism
- Prioritize investment in extension activities, methodologies and approaches
- Promote generation of location-specific and need-based technologies through participation of relevant stakeholders
- Shift from commodity and supply driven to demand and market driven extension
- Use participatory approaches as an alternative to limited number of extension agents
- Emulate One-Geog-Three-Product (OGTP) approach being practiced in Bhutan.
- Invest in ICT and human resource development
- Institute an extension forum under the aegis of SAARC
- Re-visit/frame national extension policy and incorporate coordination mechanism keeping in view the important roles of the private sector in extension services delivery
- Create awareness and understanding on emerging issues so that extension personnel are able to address the global/regional issues locally (climate change, global warming, WTO, organic farm)

Session 2: Vision, Mission, Governance, Functions and Resource Generation

Participants were divided into 4 groups to work on specific issues related to the functioning of AESA. The questions were as follows:

- What could be the vision and mission of AESA?
- What functions it should perform to achieve its vision and mission?
- What could be the ideal organisational structure of AESA and what could be its core ethics and values?
- How can AESA generate more resources to implement its prioritised activities?

Each group came up with the following recommendations which were discussed at the plenary.

Vision

Improving food and nutrition security through efficient and effective extension and advisory services

Mission

Sharing, learning and networking for building effective and efficient extension and advisory services



Functions

- Establish country hubs/chapters
- Document and share good practices
- Influence extension policies
- Contribute to capacity building of extension
- Sharing of knowledge/good practices
- Undertake SWOT analysis of extension systems in member countries
- Support creation of an enabling environment for pluralistic extension systems
- Develop systems for accreditation of extension agents and organisations
- Support development of a directory of extension and advisory service providers

Values

- Operate as a non-profit entity
- Values pluralism and partnerships in extension delivery
- Promote knowledge sharing
- Gender inclusive
- Respect subsidiarity
- Responsive to demand
- Accountable to stakeholders



Governance Structure

AESA General Body: It was proposed to have a 32-member general body comprising 3 members from each South Asian country represented by its country forum and 8 selected by AESA executive committee $[(3 \times 8 = 24) + 8 = 32]$

AESA Governing Board: A 9-member body comprising 8 elected representatives (one representative from each country forum) and the General Secretary AESA will act as the Governing Board of AESA. The Governing Board could invite representatives from GFRAS, outside consultants, donors and others as special invitees. A Chairperson will be elected from the 8-country representatives for a two-year term (on rotation). The General Secretary will continue for 3 years.



AESA Secretariat: CRISP will continue to host the AESA Secretariat for the next two years and Dr Rasheed Sulaiman V will continue to represent AESA in the GFRAS Steering Committee for another two years (till the end of 2015).

Country Forums: All stakeholders dealing with extension and advisory services can become members of AESA country forum

Country Forum Executive Committee: The Executive Committee at the country for a level will have representatives from government extension system (1); government & private universities (2); NGOs (1); farmer associations (1); private sector (2), professional forums (1) and an invited member.

Working Group: It was proposed to create working group comprising at least one member from each country who has participated in this meeting: The following participants were identified as members of the AESA working group:

Bangladesh	: Md Hamidur Rahman
Bhutan	: Bhakta Bahadur Shoangshon
Maldives	: Mohamed Afeef
Nepal	: Niru Dahal Pandey
India	: P Chandrashekara/Mahesh Chander
Pakistan	: Muhammad Ali
Sri Lanka	: R S Wijesekara/W A D P Wanigasundra
SAC	: Abdul Kalam Azad, Director, SAARC Agricultural Centre

These representatives will take a lead in promoting AESA in their respective countries and will act as a link between the AESA Secretariat and the country forum.

Resource Generation

- Undertake a mapping exercise to identify donors, foundations, CSR initiatives interested in supporting extension and advisory services to achieve developmental objectives such as food and nutritional security, poverty reduction, gender sensitive development, environmental management, post-conflict development etc.
- Emphasize the ground level change that extension will accomplish when lobbying for support and adopt evidence based lobbying for funding AESA.
- Identify strategic partners to share resources.
- Enable collaboration among other scientists to understand the context of agricultural extension work and find greater legitimacy and reliance for agricultural extension work.
- Build on the outcomes of this meeting, especially the short term and medium term priorities to be identified, to lobby support for its future work.
- Generate resources to undertake studies using the AESA network.
- Explore the feasibility of raising funds through human resource development/training/certification for persons engaged in agricultural extension/development work. AESA could consider organising a regional system for training senior level extension personnel on the lines of top executive training in the corporate sector.
- Continue work virtually as far as possible using the advances in ICTs and make sure that the structure should follow form/functions.
- Country fora to focus on generating resources for country specific activities.



Session 3: Issues and Challenges in extension and advisory provision



This session had country presentations on extension from 7 countries, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Agricultural sector undoubtedly, remains important for all the South Asian countries and adoption of relevant knowledge, technology and information by producers, intermediaries and other value chain actors therefore, would continue to remain important.



Extension faces challenging times in South Asia. It has been faced with a new set of challenges at a time when public support for its sustenance and growth has been declining. Public sector extension continues to dominate extension provision everywhere. Extension is decentralised 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 organisations, micro-finance institutions, universities and research centres do contribute to extension services. ICTs, especially mobile phones and 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 focussing 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. Extension support is increasingly channelized through farmer groups currently. 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.



Except Bangladesh, every other country lacks an extension policy. Policies related to human resource development as well as certification and standards in extension provision are lacking everywhere.



AESA is the only regional platform available for extension stakeholders to share knowledge and experiences. AESA is also currently acting as a mechanism that is bringing extension stakeholders together. All presentations highlighted the importance of a regional platform like AESA and the need for strengthening it to initiate more activities mainly focussing on evidence based policy advocacy, knowledge sharing, professionalising extension and capacity enhancement.

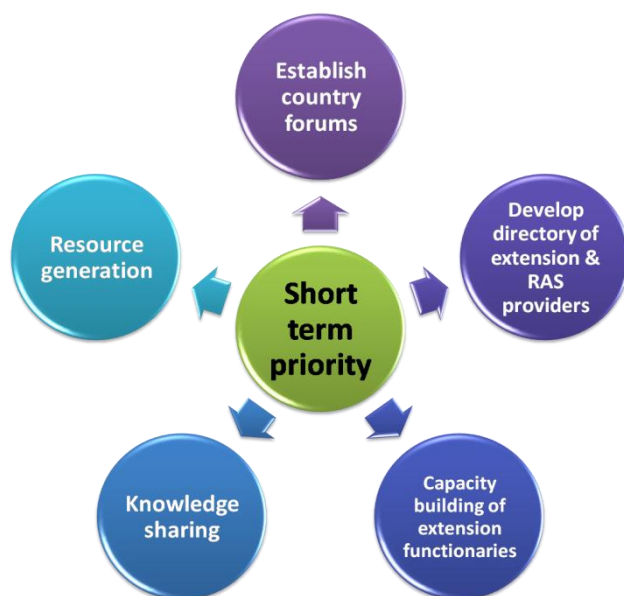


Session 4: Priorities and Ways Forward

Participants were divided into four groups and each group worked on the short term and long term priorities of AESA. The groups presented their findings in the plenary.

Short term priorities

- Establish country forum/hubs by networking all those interested and involved in extension and advisory provision (policy/practice/teaching/research/training) through organizing a meeting at the national level.
- Develop directory (online database) of extension and advisory service providers in the region.
- Enhance capacity of extension and advisory services through organizing training programmes, developing training resource and coaching for senior executives.
- Share information and knowledge (good practices, blogs, publications, information related to training, meetings etc) through web-portal and social media.
- Raise more resources to address short term and long-term priorities of AESA.



Long term priorities

- Undertake capacity needs assessment and review studies on extension situation in member countries.
- Initiate evaluation studies on extension.
- Initiate case studies on innovative extension initiatives in member countries.
- Develop a mechanism for certification of extension providers to support professionalizing extension services.
- Hold annual meetings of country forum and AESA.
- Develop constitution for AESA and standard operating procedures and organize Governing Board meetings to plan and evaluate AESA activities.
- Raise resources to address these priorities and emerging demands



Action Points

- Inform Agricultural Ministry/Department of Agriculture in respective countries about the decisions taken at AESA meeting including the details of members of the working group (**Action: AESA Secretariat**).
- Raise resources through developing proposals and interacting with donors (**Action: AESA Secretariat**).
- Continue knowledge sharing activities through the AESA portal and social media (**Action: AESA Secretariat**).
- Organise a meeting of extension stakeholders at the national level and establish country forums (**Action: Members of the Working Group**).
- Liaise with AESA Secretariat on national and regional events on extension (**Action: Members of the Working Group**).
- Promote AESA in respective countries and share knowledge products for promoting through the AESA network (**All participants**).



Agricultural Extension in South Asia
Strengthening Extension & Advisory Services in South Asia

14-15 January, 2014

Venue: Hotel Grand, Kathmandu, Nepal

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