



PRIVATISING FARM EXTENSION - NEED FOR A CAUTIOUS APPROACH

Extension services which were mostly public funded world-wide until a decade back are increasingly coming under private domain. The transformation of agriculture in several developed and developing countries from a mere subsistence activity to commercialised agri-business and the associated gradual change of technology from being largely a public good to a private good has provided incentives for commercial agencies to invest in this sector. The increasing inability of the governments to adequately fund its extension machinery was, however, the real force behind the search for alternative approaches such as 'cost sharing' and 'privatisation'. India has also started thinking on these lines recently, emphasising the involvement of NGO's, private sector and farmers' associations in sharing, augmenting and supplementing public sector extension efforts. States such as Maharashtra and Rajasthan have already started taking steps in this regard.

INDIA'S EXTENSION SYSTEM

It comprises mainly the following.

1. National Agricultural Extension Service /Training and Visit System
2. Special Extension Programme on specific crops
3. Rural Development Programme
4. First-Line Extension Education System (ICAR/SAU) and

5. Extension programme of Non-Government Organisations.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India, has the major mandate for transfer of technology for agriculture and rural development (Systems 1,2 and 3). The Commodity Boards under the Ministry of Commerce are also engaged in extension programmes on specific crops. The First-line extension system falling under ICAR and SAUs' has very limited coverage.

The non-governmental organisations engaged in extension activities mostly include voluntary agencies (partly or fully funded by the government for extension activities) producers' co-operatives, input agencies, agricultural processing firms and private consultants. Some of the voluntary agencies are engaged in implementing innovative and farmer participatory approaches of extension but their coverage is restricted to a few blocks/districts of the country. Producers' co-operatives functioning in a few crops /enterprises are normally involved in arranging inputs and marketing their produce. The existing agro-processing firms are interested only to assure a continuous supply of quality produce for processing and marketing. Input agencies are generally interested in promoting sales of production inputs such as seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, farm machinery, animal feeds, veterinary medicine, etc. The input agencies and the agricultural processing firms may not be charging fees directly for their

