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Growers to Agripreneurs: Unlocking Farmer Potential through Market-Led Extension

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India's agricultural extension system, the world's largest, has played a pivotal role in transforming the country from a food-deficient nation to one that is self-sufficient in food grain production. Over the last five decades, food grain output surged from 51 million tonnes in the early 1950s to over 235 million tonnes by 2010, thanks to focused efforts on transferring production technologies from laboratories to the land (Kumar *et al* 2012). However, despite these achievements, one critical gap remains unresolved: farmers still struggle to earn fair prices for their produce. The success of production has not translated into profitability for smallholder farmers. The globalized market, WTO dynamics, and the shift in consumer preferences have pushed farmers into unfamiliar economic territory. While Indian extension services have excelled in improving production efficiency, they have done little to strengthen farmers' capabilities in marketing their output (Rout *et al* 2022). This is where the concept of market-led extension (MLE) becomes vital- reorienting the extension system to support not just what farmers grow, but how, where, and to whom they sell.

The Shift to Market-Led Extension

The market-led extension marks a shift in perspective. It views the farmer not just as a cultivator but as an entrepreneur- an *agripreneur*- who manages farming as a business enterprise. Unlike traditional extension, which focuses on input and yield, MLE emphasizes economic returns. It empowers farmers with knowledge to make decisions such as what to produce, when to sell, how to price, and how to manage risks. In short, the goal is to help farmers maximize returns on their efforts, not just improve output (Krishna *et al* 2019).

This shift also requires a major change in the role of extension workers. They are no longer just advisors on seeds and fertilizers, they must now guide farmers through the complex web of markets, pricing trends, consumer demands, and post-harvest practices.

The Role of Market Intelligence

Accurate, timely, and accessible market intelligence is the backbone of any successful market-led approach. Farmers require up-to-date information on prices, arrivals, demand trends, and market conditions to make smart decisions. Platforms like AGMARKNET and private services such as Reuters Market Light are already stepping in, delivering real-time updates through mobile phones and apps. This kind of information gives farmers a competitive edge—especially when deciding where and when to sell perishable commodities like fruits and vegetables (Krishna *et al* 2019). However, collecting and disseminating relevant market data is a massive undertaking. Extension systems need to be retooled and digital literacy among farmers must be improved to ensure that information translates into action on the ground. Reducing Market Distance: Direct Selling, Cooperatives, FPOs, and State-Level Innovations. One of the most transformative innovations in market-led extension has been the expansion of direct marketing models. Across India, platforms such as Rythu Bazaars in Andhra Pradesh, Apni Mandis in Punjab and Haryana, Krushak Bazaars in Odisha, and Shetkari Bazaars in Maharashtra have helped eliminate intermediaries and connect

farmers directly with consumers. These models significantly reduce the price spread; enhance the farmer's share in the consumer rupee by 15–40%, and offer fresher, more affordable produce to buyers (Krishna *et al* 2019).

In Punjab, the Apni-Mandi system plays a pivotal role in strengthening farm-to-market linkages. Managed by the Punjab Mandi Board, these *mandis* function in urban and peri-urban areas, allowing farmers to bypass commission agents and sell directly to consumers. They provide basic infrastructure, space allocation, and minimal market fees, making it easier for small and marginal farmers to participate. These efforts reduce transaction costs and stabilize horticultural prices (Kumar *et al* 2012). Alongside direct selling, Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) have emerged as critical institutional mechanisms, especially in Punjab. These member-owned bodies enable collective marketing, bulk procurement of inputs, and negotiation with buyers, thereby improving farmers' market power and profitability. Supported by NABARD, SFAC and various state schemes, FPOs in Punjab are active in sectors such as fruits, vegetables, and dairy. Many have begun integrating with e-NAM platforms, enabling farmers to access digital markets and national-level price discovery mechanisms (Rout *et al* 2022). Importantly, the integration of digital tools has significantly enhanced the operational efficiency of Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs). As highlighted by Khatri *et al* (2024), ICT tools like mobile apps, SMS-based advisories, digital marketplaces, and cloud platforms are revolutionizing how FPOs operate—facilitating real-time communication, price tracking, logistics, and value chain coordination. For example, Punjab-based FPOs using digital dashboards and farmer databases have improved produce aggregation, resulting in better price realization and reduced spoilage.

Moreover, cooperatives such as Mahagrapes and Mahabanana from Maharashtra offer replicable models. These entities have successfully used collective branding, export linkages, post-harvest management, and processing infrastructure to elevate smallholder incomes. In the Punjab context, there is growing policy support for helping FPOs and cooperatives emulate similar strategies for horticulture, Basmati rice, and dairy— a move that aligns with efforts to diversify from the dominant wheat-paddy cycle. These institutions are not just market intermediaries— they are complements to the public extension system, filling a vital role where traditional extension often ends: at the farm gate. While public extension services continue to support farmers in terms of productivity and inputs, cooperatives and FPOs translate that productivity into profitability through better marketing, technology use, and risk mitigation (Khatri *et al* 2024; Krishna *et al* 2019).

The New Role of Extension Services

To make market-led extension effective, the role of extension personnel must be redefined. Traditionally focused on disseminating production technologies, extension workers must now evolve into market facilitators, helping farmers engage with markets, understand demand, and earn better returns (Kumar *et al* 2012). Market-led extension emphasizes building farmer's business expertise. Extension professionals must support farmers not only in "what" and "how" to produce, but also when, where, and in what form to sell their produce. This includes guiding them in conducting SWOT analyses, understanding demand patterns, pricing trends, and enabling value addition through proper post-harvest practices such as grading, packaging, certification, and storage (Krishna *et al* 2019).

As Krishna *et al* (2019) highlight, extension workers must facilitate:

- Formation of Farmer Interest Groups (FIGs) for collective marketing;
- Agro-processing and private sector linkages;
- Direct marketing initiatives like Rythu Bazaars and Apni Mandis;
- Use of ICT tools such as AGMARKNET, mobile apps, and digital dashboards for real-time market intelligence;
- Capacity building in entrepreneurship, negotiation, and export-readiness.

Moreover, as Kumar *et al* (2012) assert, reorganizing extension structures, including integration with marketing departments and increasing public-private collaboration is essential to make extension responsive to market demands. Creating agribusiness cooperative

centres at the village level and training village-level volunteers to manage them can decentralize services and improve reach. In this new paradigm, extension services must not only deliver information but enable transformation, from subsistence farming to profitable agri-enterprise.

Toward a Demand-Driven Agricultural Future

India's agriculture must now move from being **supply-driven** to **demand-driven**. Instead of growing what's traditionally been grown, farmers must align with consumer needs, both domestic and international. This shift doesn't just promise better income, it ensures resilience in a changing economic and climatic environment. Market-led extension is not a quick fix, but a systemic transformation. It demands collaboration across government departments, private players, cooperatives, and civil society. With the right blend of technology, institutional support, and policy innovation, India's farmers can break through long-standing barriers and step confidently into markets that reward their work fairly.

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