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## Comparative Livelihood Security of IFS Beneficiaries and Non-Beneficiaries: Evidence from Government Extension Interventions

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Indian agriculture is increasingly evaluated not only by crop yields but by its ability to ensure secure and sustainable livelihoods for farming households. Small and marginal farmers, who constitute a major share of the farming community, often face income instability, seasonal unemployment, and food insecurity when dependent on single-crop systems. In response, government extension programmes have promoted Integrated Farming Systems (IFS) as a holistic approach to strengthen livelihood security. A comparative assessment of IFS beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries clearly demonstrates the transformative role of extension-led interventions, particularly under structured programmes such as the Farmer FIRST Programme.

### Livelihood Security: A Shift from Production to People

Livelihood security is a multidimensional concept encompassing economic security, food and nutritional security, employment security, social participation, and asset creation. Field-based studies indicate that farmers dependent on mono-cropping often remain vulnerable to climatic and market shocks, while diversified farming systems provide greater resilience. Empirical evidence shows that a majority of IFS beneficiary households fall under the medium to high livelihood security categories, whereas non-beneficiaries are largely concentrated in the low to medium category. This distribution itself reflects the cumulative advantage of diversified enterprises supported by extension services.

### IFS Beneficiaries versus Non-Beneficiaries: A Comparative Picture

Comparative analysis between IFS beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries reveals significant differences across all livelihood dimensions. Beneficiary farmers, who receive regular technical guidance and exposure, generally practice two or more integrated enterprises, while non-beneficiaries mostly rely on crop production alone. Data from extension impact studies show that IFS beneficiaries earn 15–30 per cent higher annual income compared to non-beneficiaries. This increase is largely attributed to income from allied enterprises such as dairy, poultry, and vegetable cultivation, which provide regular cash flow in addition to seasonal crop income.

### Employment Security through Diversification

Employment generation is another critical indicator of livelihood security. Non-beneficiary households often face seasonal unemployment during the lean agricultural period. In contrast, IFS beneficiaries report 30–60 additional employment days per year, generated through livestock management, fodder cultivation, compost preparation, and value-added activities. This continuous engagement not only enhances household income but also reduces distress migration, particularly among small and marginal farmers. Women and elderly family

members also find productive engagement within IFS enterprises, contributing to inclusive livelihood improvement.

### **Food and Nutritional Security Gains**

Food security outcomes show a clear advantage for IFS beneficiaries. Survey data indicate that beneficiary households have year-round access to milk and vegetables, while non-beneficiaries depend largely on market purchases. Kitchen gardening and backyard livestock units alone meet 30–50 per cent of household nutritional requirements among IFS adopters. Such access to diversified food sources improves dietary quality and reduces household expenditure on food, indirectly strengthening economic security.

### **Role of the Farmer FIRST Programme**

Among various government initiatives, the Farmer FIRST Programme (FFP) stands out for its farmer-centric and participatory approach. Unlike conventional extension models, FFP actively involves farmers in problem identification, on-farm experimentation, and refinement of technologies. Evaluation data from programme areas indicate that a substantial proportion of participating farmers adopted new IFS enterprise combinations after programme intervention. Beneficiaries under FFP demonstrate significantly higher livelihood security scores compared to non-beneficiaries from the same villages.

### **Effectiveness of FFP in Enhancing Income**

Income analysis before and after FFP intervention shows a moderate to substantial increase in annual farm income among beneficiary households. On average, income from allied enterprises contributes 25–40 per cent of total household income under IFS models promoted by the programme. Non-beneficiary farmers, in contrast, record only marginal income growth, largely influenced by seasonal crop performance. This highlights the role of structured extension support in translating diversification into tangible income gains.

### **Employment and Labour Utilization under FFP**

FFP interventions have also demonstrated a strong impact on employment generation. Beneficiary farmers report higher labour utilization throughout the year, particularly in livestock and horticulture-based enterprises. Time-use data suggest that farm families under FFP gain an additional one to two months of productive employment annually. This improvement in employment security has contributed to better livelihood stability and reduced dependence on off-farm wage labour.

### **Food Security Outcomes of Programme Interventions**

Food security assessments reveal that FFP beneficiaries experience improved availability, accessibility, and utilization of food. A higher percentage of beneficiary households report consumption of milk, eggs, and vegetables on a regular basis compared to non-beneficiaries. Such improvements are particularly significant for women and children, as nutritional diversity at the household level directly influences health outcomes.

### **Why Non-Beneficiaries Lag Behind**

Despite being located in similar agro-ecological conditions, non-beneficiary farmers often lag behind due to limited extension contact, lack of technical confidence, and higher risk perception. Their adoption of IFS components remains partial, resulting in lower livelihood gains. This contrast underscores that access to land or resources alone does not guarantee livelihood security—institutional support and extension engagement are equally critical.

### **Policy and Extension Implications**

The comparative evidence strongly supports the scaling up of IFS through government extension programmes. Strengthening initiatives like FFP, expanding beneficiary coverage, and ensuring continuous follow-up can significantly enhance livelihood outcomes. Targeted support for small and marginal farmers, women-centric enterprises, and enterprise-specific credit and market linkages will further amplify programme impact.

## Way Forward

Future extension strategies should focus on impact-oriented implementation, using livelihood security indicators as key performance measures. Monitoring beneficiary–non-beneficiary differences can help refine programme design and prioritize interventions where livelihood gaps are highest. Integrating digital advisory services with field-level extension can also improve outreach and adoption consistency.

## Conclusion

Comparative analysis clearly demonstrates that IFS beneficiaries under government extension programmes enjoy higher income, better employment security, improved food availability, and stronger overall livelihood security than non-beneficiaries. The effectiveness of the Farmer FIRST Programme highlights the power of participatory, farmer-centric extension in transforming farming from a survival activity into a sustainable livelihood strategy. Strengthening and scaling such interventions is essential for achieving inclusive and resilient agricultural development.

## About the Author

Mukul Kirar is a postgraduate scholar in the Department of Agricultural Extension, RVSKVV, Gwalior (Madhya Pradesh, India). His research interests include Integrated Farming Systems, livelihood security assessment, and extension strategies for sustainable and resilient rural development.