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## Constraints Encountered by Beneficiary Farmers and Extension Personnel of Agro Service Centres in Kerala and Suggestions for Improvement

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### ABSTRACT

*The present study was conducted among the beneficiary farmers and extension personnel of Agro Service Centres (ASCs) in Kerala, India during the year 2018-19. The sample of the study comprised 120 farmers from purposively selected 26 Agro Service Centres and 60 Extension agents. Based on the detailed analysis and interpretation of different constraints faced by farmers and extension personnel, it was found that lack of subsidy for farm inputs was the major constraint faced by the beneficiary farmers and the discontinuance of service providers of Agro Service Centres for better jobs was the major constraint faced by the extension personnel working in Agro Service Centres. Better coordination among different extension agencies, periodic monitoring and evaluation of the activities of ASCs by government officials, and improvement in the basic infrastructural facilities are considered some of the ways to improve the functioning of existing Agro Service Centres in the state of Kerala.*

**Keywords:** Agro Service Centre; Constraints; Farmers; Extension personnel; Services delivery; Kerala

### INTRODUCTION

Kerala, the land of spices, also blessed with all natural resources, has a great future in the agricultural sector. Agricultural production in Kerala has declined significantly in the last few decades due to the labour shortage and inadequate remuneration of farmers' products. Farmers and other stakeholders in the agricultural sector are also facing different constraints in accessing farming inputs and other related services. Time-bound diagnostic and advisory services from agriculture domain experts are also required to reduce the decline in production. Agro Service Centres (ASCs) were established in Kerala as a concerted effort of the department of agriculture with other

stakeholders in agriculture to promote farm mechanization, delivery of technical knowledge, availability of quality inputs and planting materials through a single-window system. (GoK, 2016).

Constraints faced by beneficiary farmers and extension personnel of ASCs are various hurdles that block the smooth flow of information and services to those who are in need. The proper functioning of the Agro service Centres depends on different factors such as cooperation between farmers and extension agents, timely availability of inputs and services, reliability and affordability of services, quality constraints, etc. Understanding of these types of constraints faced by beneficiary

farmers in getting services from ASCs and extension agents in delivering services is very essential in bridging the gap between resource poor farmers and the agricultural extension system (Meethal, 2019). The study is intended to elicit the problems encountered by Agro Service Centres in providing services to farmers and examine the problems faced by the beneficiary farmers in getting advisory and support services from Agro Service Centres. The results of the study will be useful to increase the performance effectiveness of existing Agro Service Centres and also be useful for implementing agencies to make corrections in the implementation of the Agro Service Centre scheme, as it will provide an idea about the constraints faced while running the centres and will also help in formulating solutions for the problems identified.

## METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in three districts of Kerala, India with the highest number of Agro Service Centers viz., Kottayam in the southern region, Thrissur in the central region, and Kannur in the northern region. The respondent groups of the study comprised beneficiary farmers and extension personnel from 26 Agro Service Centres from the selected districts. The number of farmers from the selected districts was determined in proportion to the total number of Agro Service Centres in each district. A total of 120 farmers with a sample size of 30, 45, and 45 farmers were randomly selected from the southern, central, and northern regions respectively. Apart from farmers, a sample of 60 extension personnel associated with Agro Service Centres from all three districts of study were selected.

Constraint analysis of respondents is required to understand the actual performance effectiveness of Agro Service Centres. Techniques of constraint identification include a detailed pilot study and data collection through questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions, and a detailed survey. A pilot study was conducted to identify the major constraints that affect the performance of Agro Service Centres.

The methods followed in the constraint analysis of the respondents included identification of major constraints faced by beneficiary farmers and extension personnel through questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions, etc., followed by enlisting the identified constraints and subjecting them to evaluation by experts from Agro Service Centres. The final selection of major constraints that affect the performance of Agro Service Centres is carried out based on the perceptions of experts, extension agents, and beneficiary farmers, followed by the enlistment of the selected constraints one by one for ranking by the respondents based on their perception and experience. A total of nine statements were selected for final ranking in the constraint analysis of both farmers and extension personnel. Calculate the weighted mean (WM) of each statement based on the respondents' rankings and arrange the statements in descending order. The weighted mean (WM) score was calculated in such a way that the highest value of 9 was given for rank 1 and the lowest value of 1 for rank 9. The statement with the highest weighted mean was identified as the number one constraint faced by the respondents, and the statement with the lowest weighted mean is the least affected constraint.

Weighted Mean (WM) of each statement was calculated using the formula

**Weighted Mean (WM<sub>n</sub>) =**

$$\frac{\text{No. of responses for rank 1} \times 9 + \text{No. of responses for rank 2} \times 8 + \text{No. of responses for rank 3} \times 7 + \dots + \text{No. of responses for rank 9} \times 1}{\text{Total number of respondents}}$$

n-statement number

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Constraints are various hurdles that block the smooth flow of information and services to those people who are in need. Constraint analysis of respondents is required to understand the actual performance effectiveness of Agro Service Centres. There is a need to know the obstacles confronted by the extension personnel while delivering services to the farmers as well as the problems encountered by the farmers in getting the services.

## Constraints faced by Beneficiaries of Agro Service Centre

Constraint analysis of farmers was done based on their responses to the enlisted constraints. The beneficiary farmers were asked to rank the constraints and based on which weighted mean score was estimated to recognize the most relevant constraints.

**Table 1. Constraints faced by the Beneficiaries of Agro Service Centres**

Sl. No.	Statements	Weighted mean	Rank
1	There is no subsidy for farming inputs from ASC	7.03	1
2	Service from Agro Service Centre is not received when required.	6.79	2
3	Poor response from ASC for repair and other services of machinery.	6.48	3
4	Poor delivery of agro services by the service providers due to their inefficiency in doing work	6.03	4
5	Lack of basic infrastructural facilities for the proper functioning of ASC	5.46	5
6	The absence of storage and marketing facilities at ASC	4.83	6
7	Accessibility to services from ASC is difficult	3.51	7
8	ASC guidelines are not matching with the existing need of farmers	2.69	8
9	Availing benefits from ASC involves difficult procedures		9

From Table 1, it is clear that the most important problem encountered by the farmers in getting the services was a lack of subsidy. Agro Service Centre render all inputs and certain services at a fixed price and the farmers do not receive any reduction in price or any

subsidy. So the major problem in their view was lack of subsidy. Chittem (2010) made a similar observation, stating that lack of subsidy was the major constraint in the operation of Eruvaka Kendras in the Rayalaseema region of Andhra Pradesh. The other major problem encountered

by the farmers was the non-availability of services from the Agro Service Centre on time. According to Paul (2017), poor time management skills and absence of coordination among service providers while delivering services might be the reasons for the non-availability of information and services on time. Poor response to repair the machinery and the inefficiency of service providers in delivering the services were the other two constraints faced by the beneficiary farmers. This might be due to the unavailability of skilled service providers in the centre. According to Ganiger (2012), lack of diagnostic skills and inadequate professional qualification of extension agents are the reasons for the inefficiency of service providers and their poor response while rendering services to farmers.

Lack of basic infrastructural facilities for the proper functioning of ASCs and the absence of storage and marketing facilities at ASCs were also

identified as constraints faced by the farmers. Similar observations were made by Neethi (2013) in her study on district agricultural advisory and transfer of technology centre services in Andhra Pradesh. Difficulty in accessing the services, failure of the ASCs guidelines in meeting the needs of farmers, and difficult procedures in getting services from ASCs were also identified as constraints faced by the beneficiary farmers. All these give an indication that the functioning of ASCs needs improvement especially with respect to their service delivery mechanisms.

### Constraints faced by the Extension Personnel of Agro Service Centres

Nine major constraints faced by the extension personnel of ASCs in providing services to farmers were identified. Constraint analysis of extension agents was done based on their responses and constraints were ranked based on weighted mean score.

**Table 2: Constraints faced by the Extension personnel of Agro Service Centres**

Sl. No.	Statements	Weighted mean	Rank
1	Service provider of Agro Service Centres discontinues and opt other jobs.	7.37	1
2	No permanent job or salary can be ensured in ASCs	7.25	2
3	The absence of land and building to keep the seedlings and farm machinery	6.73	3
4	Lack of adequate experienced service personnel because the work nature is not constant	6.47	4
5	Non-availability of vehicles in ASC for transport of machinery and agricultural tools to the work site	5.08	5
6	Facility for complaint redressal with respect to ASC services are absent	4.58	6
7	Funds under government schemes are not adequate	2.75	7
8	Funds from the government are not timely	2.68	8
9	Implementation of different crop development schemes by ASC is difficult	2.13	9

From Table 2 it is clear that the major obstacle in the function of ASCs was the discontinuance of service providers in search of better jobs. This is mainly because the service providers of most of the Agro Service Centres does not get work on regular basis. According to Chittem (2010), lack of enough extension personnel in the centre and the heavy workload of existing extension personnel were the two major reasons leading to the discontinuance of extension agents. The proper functioning of most of the centres was affected by the absence of land and other basic infrastructure facilities like machinery yard, nurseery etc. The majority of the Agro Service Centres were functioning by paying the rent for land and building. Similar observations were made by Bhaurao (2014) in his study regarding the performance of agro-service centers.

Lack of experienced service personnel was found to be a major constraint faced by the extension agents working in ASCs. A similar finding was made by Deepika (2017), where the absence of an experienced extension agent was also a major constraint. This might be due to a lack of trained workers, a lack of time due to increased documentation work, inadequate technical knowledge, and a lack of skill-based training programmes for extension agents on advanced technologies. Non-availability of vehicles, unavailability of adequate funding on time, and difficulty in implementing crop development schemes were other obstacles faced by the extension personnel of ASCs.

### **Suggestions to Improve the Performance of ASCs**

Relevant Suggestions are essential for any studies in order to succeed and mitigate the barriers faced by the respondents. Opinions are required for further growth and development of the service delivery systems. Extension personnel gave their suggestions for the smooth functioning

of the centre and also for delivering the services effectively to the needy farmers. Farmers shared their views and needs for availing better services from ASCs.

Beneficiary farmers made their suggestions to improve the performance and efficiency of ASCs. According to them, the provision of subsidies for farming inputs, the availability of quality services as and when required by farmers, the provision of adequate training programmes on the operation of machineries and for skill development in farming, ensuring the availability of basic infrastructure like land buildings, storage facilities, and the like, the provision of support for the marketing of farmers' produce, the removal of all physical and other barriers to accessing services, the preparation of guidelines for operation in line with farmers' needs, making the service delivery system of ASCs simple and easy to follow for everyone, etc. are all required to improve the performance of existing ASCs in their area.

Extension agents from ASCs recommend their suggestions for boosting the efficiency of ASCs based on their experiences. They opined that the performance of ASCs can be enhanced through coordination of the activities of different extension agencies, regular monitoring and inspection by the officials of the concerned department, ensuring the availability of basic infrastructural facilities in the centre by considering the needs of both employees and farmers, including vehicle and transport facilities, ensuring the availability of adequate funds on time, etc. They also suggest offering them better remuneration, reducing their work load in ASCs by appointing more labourers, and providing training programmes for them to acquire new skills in farming to prevent service providers from leaving ASCs. Other suggestions from farmers and extension agents, such as the

provision of inputs and services for practising integrated farm management, the arrangement of more training programmes for farmers to acquire new skills in farming, proper marketing and storage facilities for ensuring a better price for farmers' products, the introduction of the latest farming technologies and practises to save time and resources, and providing support for the development of entrepreneurship among the poor farmers, are also required to improve the performance and effectiveness of Agro Service Centres.

## CONCLUSION

Constraints are various impediments that prevent Agro Service Centers from providing their services to farmers. Periodic constraint analysis of stakeholders in Agro Service Centers is essential for realizing the relevance, importance, and need of ASCs in the farming sector. Discontinuance of service providers for better jobs, insecurities related to permanent job or salary and absence of land and other basic infrastructure facilities were the three major constraints faced by the extension personnel of ASCs while delivering services to the farmers. The most important problems encountered by the farmers in getting the services were lack of subsidy, non-availability of services in time and poor response to repair the machinery.

Suggestions by the farmers and extension personnel to strengthen the service delivery aspects of the ASCs include ensuring the availability of basic infrastructural facilities, vehicles, and transport facilities; providing marketing and storage facilities for ensuring a better price for the farmers' products; providing subsidies to inputs to reduce the cost of cultivation; ensuring the availability of adequate funds on time; and better remuneration and training programmes for service providers; periodic monitoring and evaluation of activities; linking the ASCs with labour banks in the nearby area to ensure labour availability; and the

dissemination of the latest technologies to save time and energy for farmers.

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