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How can Extension educators support communities during the COVID-19 pandemic?

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Introduction

Extension educators involve Extension faculties, Extension specialists, Extension agents, Extension assistants, and Extension associates. They play a vital role in enhancing people's and communities' knowledge and supporting them with technical resources and information to improve the quality of their lives. They also strengthen people's livelihood by fostering beneficial communication, promoting economic growth, and working to reduce poverty (Global Forum on Rural Advisory Services, 2019). Extension agents/assistant are among the pioneers in preparing communities for different shocks such as human-, plant-, or animal-based diseases. Extension educators are able to help recovering communities and food systems after crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Extension educators are facing various challenges with their services, and they need long-term commitment from Extension providers to support individuals and communities. Here I discuss how Extension educators can support families and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Acting as a bridge

All groups of Extension educators can act as a link between technical sources of information and stakeholders to prepare communities for negative events. The bridging role has enabled Extension educators to offer value in communities through preparing clientele with the technical sources, information, and strategies to empower their economic livelihood. Extension specialists/associates connect the many actors/stakeholders operating in communities. In the U.S., the Cooperative Extension Program is a cooperation among the USDA, the Land Grant University System, and governments (Grove et al., 2020). This relationship links resources and technical information in higher education to communities (USDA, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Cooperative Extension is valuable not only in terms of financial investment shared by governments, but also organizational cooperation within state Extension and education systems (Grove et al., 2020).

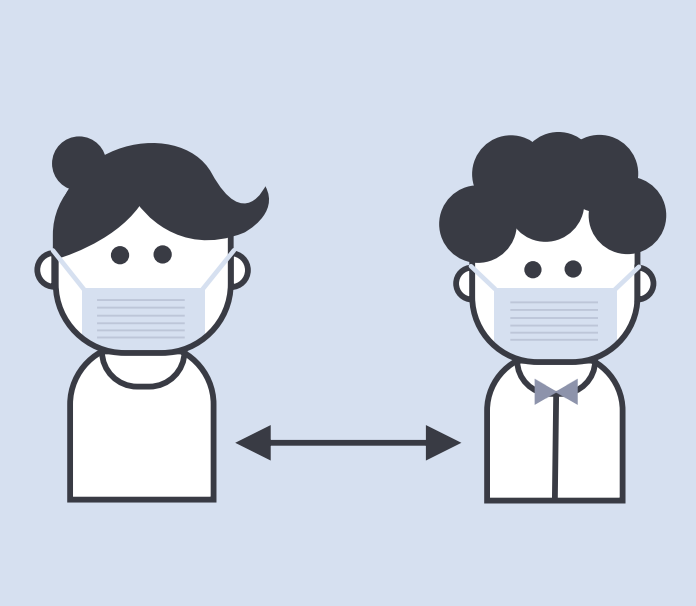
Putting value on being responsible

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Extension educators use their long-standing partnerships in communities to evaluate immediate needs and disseminate necessary information to other responsible organizations. Extension educators can educate communities in terms of the pandemic and advise on immediate precautions. Extension agents/assistants can quickly assess damage or incidence and communicate that to relevant and responsible agencies. They can also recognize supply chain disruptions in collaboration with others. They undertake these activities while being sensitive to socio-economic problems, like

the disproportionate impact on vulnerable communities such as women and children, especially in minority and underserved populations. Considering Extension educators' access to field-level and real-time data, as well

as trusted partnerships, Extension educators are relied upon by state or local governments to prepare objective information used in informing government response (FAO, 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, health care, educational, agricultural, and economic systems may be changed virtually overnight as governments seek to limit transmission. Extension educators can be immediately forced to change how they function as institutions and



organizations. This also includes how they prepare to offer various services to clientele. Extension faculties/specialists can rapidly adapt to offering programming virtually. They can also serve as a link and resource aggregator for clientele. They are responsible to work with local and state stakeholders/partners to prepare services and resources for underserved communities

Focusing on facts

Focusing on facts is necessary to increase general information among communities and encourage them to get vaccinated during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Commonwealth of Kentucky, county health officials shared their perspectives on why some counties appear to be hit harder by the pandemic. One finding is that low vaccination rates continue to lead to higher positive tests. In Spencer County, approximately 43% of the population tested positive for the virus. Only 33% of Spencer County residents are fully vaccinated. This rate trails our northcentral district and many other counties in Kentucky (Mattingly, 2022). Individuals are now more likely to

get tested if they are having symptoms. For example, Hardin County's 41% positivity rate translates to 278 cases per 100,000 people. This is 56 points higher than Kentucky's average. Groups of Extension educators must be cautious against looking at the numbers and jumping to conclusions. Indeed, Extension educators need to look holistically and at various variables and factors in making determinations (Mattingly, 2022).

Helping for recovery of communities

Groups of Extension educators are valued for helping individuals and communities recover and build resilience during the pandemic and for future events. Extension educators play an undeniable role in understanding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pandemics often lead to losses and damages in productivity and reduced output, which affect food availability, reduce incomes, and affect household financial security (Ngegba et al., 2015). During pandemics, food insecurity increases, as buying habits, food production efforts, and marketing channels are disrupted by government restrictions and fear-induced changes in habits (Grove et al., 2020). Following the crisis, investment in agricultural Extension and education is requested to improve food security (Action Against Hunger, 2015). The World Bank views Extension educators as a complement to improved seed and access to agricultural technologies as key to enhancing food security via improving farmer lives and livelihoods (Toure, 2015). Various groups of Extension educators should support local producers throughout the process and in all areas of the value chains; this means they need a broad set of capacities (Chen et al., 2020).

Extension agents/assistants can offer support during uncertainty and sudden changes that come with the pandemic, as well as strategies to bounce back from shocks and enhance resilience. Some markets, such as fruits or vegetables, may disappear when flights are reduced or food export bans are enacted. Extension educators can help

farmers/stakeholders to come up with "Plan B." For example, horticulture farmers may switch to varieties in demand from local consumers rather than outside the state or international markets (Chen et al., 2020).to enhancing the credibility of Extension educators. Using existing media channels such as farm radio, TV, blogs, websites, newspapers, and application of modern technologies, such as smartphones and apps, are important conduits to reach communities with current and relevant information during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chen et al., 2020).

Application of technology

In the days after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, Extension educators responded rapidly to provide COVID-19 information to rural and minority communities and to adapt their regular outreach to the "new normal" of social distancing and noncontact communication. In the pre-COVID-19 world, radio was already a trusted source of information for rural residents. Radio reaches 70% of the world's population and is used by Extension educators to reach rural people with information and advice. Investigations show listening to radio enhances knowledge and leads to adoption of new technologies and practices.

Radio consistently occupies an important informational and community-building function in disasters (Chen et al., 2020).

Most farmers receive information from mass and social media and village posters and public boards. Radio and TV programs are broadcasted several times a week to cover all communities. Extension specialists/associates can use social distancing measures, postponing regular face-to-face contact, and mass media and electronic devices. Extension educators' smartphones allow ubiquitous connection to the national platforms for knowledge sharing,

management, performance appraisal, and data collection. This system requires minimal face-to-face contact between the Extension educators and farmers, a key advantage during the outbreak (Chen et al., 2020).

Final remarks

The role of technology and the unprecedented switch to virtual engagement in all aspects of life during the COVID-19 pandemic warrants further discussion (Grove et al., 2020). The ability of Extension educators to switch course quickly depends on educators' willingness and ability to adapt to new approaches of service provision, such as applying technology platforms. Extension educators report greater comfort in adopting techniques shared by their peers (Narine and Meier, 2020). The impact of changes to Extension program delivery approaches, the effects of those changes on organizational response, and longer-term effects on organizational functioning will require further evaluation to better inform future responses (Grove et al., 2020). Shocks and pandemics affect individuals and communities in different ways, thus the response of Extension educators will have various impacts on recovery. Further, the relative strength of each Extension educator will affect their capability to respond functionally.

Extension services may be affected in the short run by direct feedbacks and disruptions for Extension educators, via diversion or deployment in response to shocks and pandemics. Those disruptions affect the clientele who normally would benefit from their expertise. On the long-term scale, Extension services may be threatened by lack of investment to rebuild services/systems. That disinvestment may spill over and affect engaged stakeholders/ organizations (Babu, 2020).

Extension faculties/specialists prepare necessary resources and information to individuals and communities. Continued investment in Extension services will be needed to ensure Extension educators are resourced and available to proceed vital work and respond in critical conditions. All Extension educators must continue to assess the quality and effectiveness of their methods/programs.

Learning modern and state-of-the-art methods of agricultural technologies will help Extension educators to update their knowledge and be aware of how they can support people and communities with the highest efficiency and satisfaction. Indeed, knowing agricultural and food technologies is key to enhancing the credibility of Extension educators. Using existing media channels such as farm radio, TV, blogs, websites, newspapers, and application of modern technologies, such as smartphones and apps, are important conduits to reach communities with current and relevant information during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chen et al., 2020)

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