

Health of Ethiopian Animals for Rural Development (HEARD)

Livestock extension message development guidelines



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International Livestock Research Institute

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Contents

Summary	v
Introduction	1
Overview of communication process	2
Checklist for good communication practices	3
Developing livestock extension messages	4
What are key extension messages and why are they important?	4
Attributes of good extension messages	5
Formulating key extension messages	6
Developing livestock extension materials	7
What are extension materials and why are they important?	7
Designing extension materials	7
Step-by-step extension material design process	8
Creating a storyline	8
Developing messages	9
Pre-testing and revising messages	9
Putting it together	10
Further reading	11

Summary

Communication of information and knowledge with farmers and pastoralists is key to creating awareness about challenges and opportunities and inducing behaviour change. Extension services are the main vehicle for providing information, knowledge and advisory services to rural people. Thus, frontline extension agents are the primary advisers and information providers to women and men community members on agriculture, livestock, environment, animal and human health issues.

Extension advisors require skill sets that include situation analysis, planning, message development, communication skills and cultural competence. Clarity on why, what, how, when and to whom to communicate messages is vital in providing extension advice.

This document provides guidelines for extension (including livestock extension) agents on good communication practices and attributes of good extension messages, including how to develop effective extension messages and materials that can apply to different sectors, such as agriculture, livestock, environment and animal and human health. It is vital for extension agents to understand the benefits and characteristics of good extension messages as one of the components of the communication process.

Introduction

Agricultural and rural extension is a knowledge transfer intervention for rural people and their families that enables them to improve their wellbeing and develops their capacity to take responsibility for their own future development. It is an educational process which has as its goal the communication of information and knowledge related to agriculture, livestock and other sectors to help people learn how to build a better life for themselves, their families and their communities.

Multiple actors provide extension services in different sectors using different communication channels and methods. Frontline extension agents advise and communicate messages to women and men farmers and pastoralists using a variety of communication methods and channels. The purpose of any extension activity (be it in agriculture, livestock, environment or animal or human health) is to communicate key messages (awareness and behaviour change) about a technology or practice that women and men community members are convinced and willing to implement.

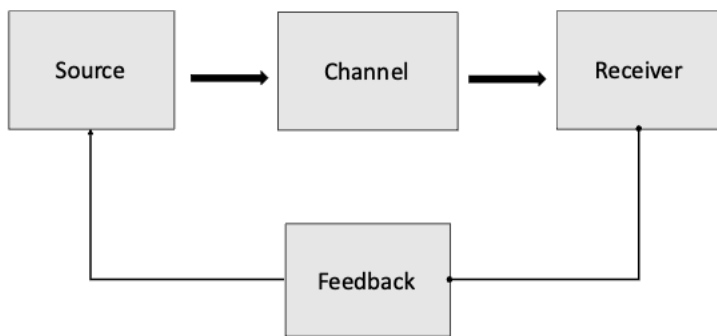
It is important for extension agents working for different sectors to develop skills in developing extension messages for different users (including women and men farmers and pastoralists). They should have foundational knowledge about the communication process and attributes of good extension messages and materials.

This document aims to provide extension agents (particularly livestock extension agents) with job aids for developing extension messages and materials that address the needs of women and men livestock producers. Checklists of design principles and attributes of good extension messages and materials (which are also applicable to livestock and animal health extension) are provided, drawn from different sources so that extension agents can check if the extension messages and materials they have developed and planned are in line with 'best practices'. The document can also be useful to project teams and partners in documenting and analysing project experiences and lessons.

Overview of communication process

Extension agents are communicators, advisors, mentors and trainers of women and men farmers and pastoralists and their household members. Thus, it is essential for them to master the development and communication of extension messages for different groups using various extension methods. To communicate effectively with their target audience, it is also important for extension agents to have a basic understanding of the communication process and what factors influence this process (Figure 1).

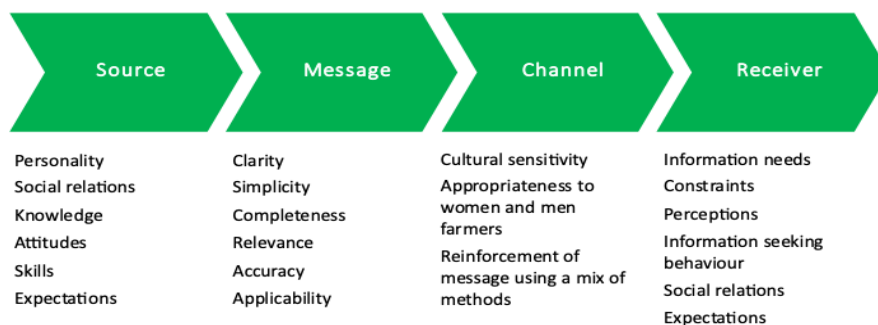
Figure 1. Overview of communication process.



Communication is the process by which a source sends a message to a receiver by means of some channel to produce a response in accordance with a certain intention. Thus, the basic components of a communication process are the source, message, channel and receiver. Characteristics of these components influence the process (Figure 2).

Feedback plays a key role in communication. The extension agent must find out how women and men farmers and pastoralists received and understood extension messages. Depending on their constraints, needs or priorities, recipients process information and interpret it in different ways. Therefore, understanding of extension messages can be influenced by experiences, thoughts, feelings, needs, expectations and self-concepts of the audience or user.

Figure 2. Basic elements of communication process.



Effective communication involves listening to find out what women and men farmers and pastoralists want to know and what they know already, to develop relationships of mutual respect, and to identify and clear up misunderstandings. A mix of methods such as demonstration, practical instruction and individual advice should be used to reinforce the message so that it is understood and used. Women and men farmers and pastoralists may have different preferences and abilities to learn and use information. Often, using different communication channels and methods ensures that the same message delivered in different ways reaches more 'receivers' or users.

Checklist for good communication practices

Extension agents (including livestock and animal health extension advisors) can use the checklist below to review their extension communication and advice plan (Table 1).

Table 1. Checklist for good communication practices.

Characteristics	Yes	No
The objective of the message to be delivered is clear.		
It is clear to whom the message is targeted (women or men farmers).		
The message is localized to reflect women and men farmers' perspectives, needs, and thinking frames.		
The message is complete and supported by facts and examples.		
The message is short and easy to understand.		
The message is illustrated to aid understanding.		
The message is pre-tested with women and men farmers.		
There is specific and timely feedback from women and men farmers and pastoralists on the message communicated.		
Different channels and methods are used to communicate and reinforce the message.		

Developing livestock extension messages

The message is one of the components of the communication process. As shown in Figure 2, message characteristics influence the communication process. Therefore, it is important for extension agents to understand the attributes of good extension messages.

What are key extension messages and why are they important?

Key extension messages are carefully chosen words that are compelling and have the power to inspire action. They are the main points of information extension agents want to convey, which demonstrate how an extension activity adds value to the lives of their target audience.

Key extension messages are the main points of information that extension agents want women and men farmers and pastoralists to hear, understand, remember and act upon (Figure 3).

Think of an extension agent who plans to organize a field day, technology demonstration or community meeting. To be successful, they will have to carefully plan what they will do before, during and after these extension activities.

One of the things they will have to plan carefully is the purpose or objective of the extension activity. The extension agent needs to ask themselves questions like:

- What is the objective of the extension activity?
- What is expected to happen because of the extension activity?
- What will women and men farmers and pastoralists change due to the extension activity?

Such questions help extension agents define the purpose of extension activities and formulate key information that women and men farmers and pastoralists need to learn and act upon.

Key extension messages create **purpose, meaning** and **focus** for the communication efforts of extension agents, headline the issues they want to discuss and put their points across. They motivate and compel women and men farmers and pastoralists to act and make a change.

Figure 3. Definitions of key extension messages.



Through the power of key messages, extension agents can connect with their target audience, hold their attention and motivate them to action (Figure 4). Developing key extension messages helps control communication and relationships with women and men farmers and pastoralists. It helps get the attention, interest or support of the audience (farmers, pastoralists and other users).

Figure 4. Benefits of key messages.



Whether in a demonstration, community meeting, group discussion, farm or home visit, extension agents must clearly articulate key extension messages in focused way to ensure they meet their communication objectives and influence women and men farmers and pastoralists. Key extension messages outline the essential information about a solution (technology, service or product) that is then packaged to deliver the message to women and men farmers, pastoralists or other users.

Key extension messages help extension agents clearly articulate the essence or core purpose of their communication activity and develop and communicate focused, consistent and action-oriented messages that best fit the core purpose. By doing this, they can manage the communication activity, stay focused and relevant in their communication, and measure the effectiveness of the communication activity. Key messages help development agents clearly define and formulate essential information needed to influence and engage women and men users in action.

Attributes of good extension messages

Extension agents can use the following checklists to review the quality of the extension messages they have formulated for their communication activity (Table 2).

Table 2. Characteristics of good extension messages.

Characteristics	Yes	No
The extension message is specific and simple with only the most important information.		
There are three key messages per topic, with one to three sentences for each key message.		
The extension message is relevant and customized for women and men users (farmers, pastoralists or other users).		
The extension message differentiates benefits for women and men users.		
The extension message is supported with facts and evidence to stimulate action.		
The extension message is appealing to women and men users and is easy to recall and repeat.		

Formulating key extension messages

What extension agents communicate may not always be heard or interpreted by women and men farmers and pastoralists in the same way. Influencing perceptions of women and men users is not an easy task but developing key extension messages that are clear, concise and consistent will help extension agents control their communication and influence women and men farmers and pastoralists in the most effective way.

Extension agents need to keep their messaging clear, concise and compelling to gain the attention and interest of women and men users. By so doing, they will have more control over the message they want to put across.

Think of an extension agent who plans to organize a technology demonstration. To be successful, the extension agent will have to formulate key messages that they want women and men farmers and pastoralists to accept and act. To do this, they will have to ask themselves questions to create relevant, positive and consistent extension messages that convince and influence women and men users to act (Table 3).

Table 3. Guiding questions for formulating livestock extension messages.

Elements	Questions
Audience characteristics	Who is the target audience? What are the objectives, challenges or priorities of women and men farmers?
	What do women and men farmers already know or what do they still need to know about the technology or practice? What do they need and want to hear from the technology demonstration?
Outcome	What are women and men farmers expected to do because of the technology demonstration?
Messaging	How can messaging be tailored to different women and men community members?
	What main points (critical or essential elements) of information should be communicated to influence and compel women and men farmers and pastoralists to adopt the technology?
	What essential requirements do women and men farmers and pastoralists need to apply correctly to adopt the technology?
	What benefits and potential risks of the technology or practice should women and men farmers and pastoralists know?
	What facts and evidence should be used to support extension messages?

Concise answers to these questions will help extension agents develop ideas, statements and arguments that will be used to create key extension messages. In the case of technology demonstration, the key extension messages outline what women and men farmers and pastoralists need to know and be convinced to use the technology appropriately.

In a group event, extension agents can brainstorm explanations, words and phrases and develop them into statements. Finally, they can package the statements into compelling key extension messages, which must be focused and clear for different women and men farmers and pastoralists.

Developing livestock extension materials

What are extension materials and why are they important?

Extension materials are designed to inform and educate women and men farmers and pastoralists. They include a range of materials such as posters, leaflets, brochures and audio-visuals and aim to communicate messages, influence and motivate a change of behaviour. When considering change, women and men farmers and pastoralists will usually try a technology or practice on a small scale. Once they are convinced of the benefits, they will typically adopt the technology or practice more widely.

Designing extension materials

Extension agents can use the following checklist to check if the extension materials they have designed are in line with good practices (Table 4).

Table 4. Attributes of good extension materials.

Characteristics	Yes	No
The extension material is supported with evidence and provides actionable information.		
The extension material is logically ordered, which enables women and men farmers and pastoralists to understand the value of the message.		
The extension material motivates women and men farmers and pastoralists to act by explaining the benefits of a technology or practice.		
The extension material is appropriate for the culture and literacy of women and men farmers and pastoralists.		
The extension material is illustrated with pictures to attract and aid the understanding of women and men farmers and pastoralists.		
The extension material contains only necessary or valuable information that reflects the needs of women and men farmers and pastoralists.		
The extension material is customized to fit the cultural, educational or economic situation of women and men farmers and pastoralists.		

To develop structured and focused extension materials (Figure 5), extension agents need to find precise answers to the below basic design questions (Table 5).

Step-by-step extension material design process

To develop structured and focused extension materials (Figure 5), extension agents need to find precise answers to the below basic design questions (Table 5).

Figure 5. Key steps in developing extension materials.

Creating a storyline	Message development	Pre-testing and revising
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrative structure • Local context • Story flow • Emotional connection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sketch a rough structure • Key points and pictures • Attractive and easy to understand • Appropriate language for women and men farmers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural sensitivity • Perceptions of women and men farmers • Ease of understanding • Relevance and sensibility

Table 5. Guiding design questions.

Elements	Design questions
Purpose	What do the extension agents want to accomplish (to inform, promote, persuade, influence or motivate women and men farmers)?
	How does this define the content and form of extension materials?
Audience	Who is the extension material targeted at (women and men farmers)?
Problem	What are the women and men farmers' needs or priorities?
Benefits	What evidence of benefits persuades women and men farmers and pastoralists to be interested in and take away the message?
Content	What do women and men farmers and pastoralists need to know to act?
Context	What social, cultural and economic situation can influence the ability of women and men farmers and pastoralists to receive and act upon the message?
Action	What are women and men farmers and pastoralists expected to do?

Creating a storyline

A storyline is the sequence of points, arguments or facts that make up your extension material.

The storyline typically includes the following elements (Table 6).

Table 6. Creating a storyline for extension material development.

Elements	Description
Title	Identify a striking, powerful, attention-capturing, action-calling title using short and concise words.
Problem	Identify key constraints and describe why/how they affect women and men farmers and pastoralists.
Solution	Identify the appropriate technology or practice for women and men farmers and pastoralists to address the problem and describe key elements of the technology or practice.
Benefits	Identify convincing or compelling reasons for women and men farmers and pastoralists to apply the solution or technology.
Risks	Identify the expected risks for women and men farmers and pastoralists and how to mitigate/minimize such risks.
Action	Identify the actions or procedures required for women and men farmers and pastoralists to benefit from the solution or technology.

Developing messages

Based on the storyline developed, extension agents need to sketch a rough structure of the extension material before writing sentences, taking photos or preparing graphics. They should consider using different text and graphic layouts to create an easy flow of information and to make the extension material attractive and understandable. Some information can be expressed well in words and some in graphics.

Pre-testing and revising messages

Pre-testing allows extension agents to check and/or improve ideas, communication content and organization of information with a small group that represents the target population. Extension materials need to be piloted or pre-tested with women and men farmers and pastoralists to check ease of understanding and perception.

Putting it together

- Key messages are the main points of information you want your audience to hear, understand, and remember.
- They are bite-sized summations that articulate what you do, why you do it, and what value you bring to the audience or users.
- Key messages clarify meaning and provide the takeaway headline of the issue you want to communicate.

Effective key messages are:

- Concise: Focus on three to five key messages per topic; one to three sentences for each key message.
- Strategic: Define, differentiate, and address benefits.
- Relevant: Balance what you need to communicate with what your audience needs to know.
- Compelling: Design meaningful information to stimulate action.
- Simple: Use easy-to-understand language.
- Memorable: Ensure that messages are easy to recall and repeat; avoid long, run-on sentences.
- Tailored: Communicate effectively with different target audiences by adapting language and depth of information.

Further reading

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