

On-line communities support extension professionals

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Sanna M. Kallioranta

Ph.D. Candidate (top photo)



Richard P. Vlosky

Director, Professor and Extension Specialist
Louisiana Forest Products Development Center
(middle photo)



Scott Leavengood

Director and Associate Professor
Oregon Wood Innovation Center (bottom photo)

Extension has a powerful partner: the Internet. The Internet facilitates information and knowledge sharing. Internet-based technologies offer numerous applications to distribute information. In addition to well-known business applications, the Internet has led to the development of on-line communities. These communities can be a significant tool for extension practitioners in supporting their clients.

The authors, Forest Products Extension Specialists at Oregon State University and the Louisiana State University Agricultural Center (pictured left) have developed state-level forest sector web-based communities for their respective states. In this article we describe some basic concepts about on-line communities and share experiences regarding the communities we developed.

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- Participation Motivation

What is an on-line community?

A community can be described as a group of people who share social interactions and links between themselves and the other group members, and who occupy the same area for some time (Bellini & Vargas, 2003.) Wellman (2001) believes that the Internet can facilitate the creation of networks and sustain community ties thus forming meaningful and supportive relationships.

On-line communities are social networks that use computer support and the Internet to communicate on a topic of interest among members (Andrews, Preece & Turoff, 2002; Bellini & Vargas, 2003.) They are designed to facilitate interaction and collaboration among people who share common interests and needs without barriers of time and place.

On-line communities can be private or open to the public. “Virtual community” is often used as a synonym for an on-line community. In essence, an on-line community can be described as a “self-defined electronic network of interactive communication organized around a shared interest or purpose” (Castelle in Marshall, 2000.)

On-line communities are unique in that they do not require spatial proximity for members. People can have numerous reasons for seeking an on-line community involvement including a shared interest, a desire to interact and/or cooperate with like-minded people regardless of proximity, an opportunity to conduct discussions with experts, educational interests, entertainment, and conducting commercial transactions (Bellini & Vargas, 2003.)

On-line communities must create and maintain tangible reasons for people to join, stay, and be active in the community. It is important that an on-line community provide information-rich content on the specific issues of interest to the community members (Andrews et al., 2002.)

The Seven Pillars of On-line Communities

There are seven basic foundation elements of on-line communities. These are 1) mission and focus, 2) content, 3) sociability, 4) roles, 5) technology and usability, 6) trust and 7) participation motivation. Following is a brief discussion of each.

Mission and Focus: An on-line community's mission and purpose need to closely parallel the needs of the targeted demographic group (Andrews et al., 2002; Bellini & Vargas, 2003; Williams, 1999a.) The first steps toward establishing an on-line community should be to identify the reasons and audience for its existence, define the mission, and develop an identity (Bellini & Vargas, 2003.)

Content: Andrews et al. (2002) emphasize the importance of providing information-rich content on the specific issues of interest to the community members. Community members want access to relevant information, discussions, and expertise. Content should be updated frequently.

Sociability: Sociability is defined by Andrews et al. (2002) as social interaction that occurs in an on-line community. They argue that sociability creates a culture where people feel comfortable communicating and interacting with other on-line community members. On-line communities often use anonymity as a way to help members to feel comfortable contributing their ideas (Cothrel & Williams, 1999) although Andrews et al. (2002) report that prior studies indicate that knowledge of other member identities positively influences sociability.

Roles: On-line community interaction is guided by tacit and explicit policies and roles to support and mediate the social interaction (Andrews et al., 2002.) Assuming that on-line communities will rapidly evolve to be self-sustaining is a common misperception; most online communities require a significant investment of time and effort to maintain (Williams, 1999a.) Thus, on-line communities require active organizers, moderators, and contributors.

Technology and Usability: Any web-based community should be easy to navigate and invoke on browsers and accommodate the wide breadth of bandwidths and communication infrastructures. Technology employed must be aligned with the users' needs and level of technology sophistication and willingness to use different tools. (Bellini & Vargas, 2003.)

Trust: Trust in virtual communities is based on the community norms, policies, and behavior (Andrews et al., 2002.) One definition of trust that they offer in this context is "an individual's ability to feel comfortable with the web-site and on-line community owner's ability to protect users' personal safety and privacy."

Participation Motivation: In order for an on-line community to be successful, sustained participation is necessary. The demographic cluster of interest must be thoroughly researched in order to identify needs, value desired, and prerequisites for participation.

On-line communities and extension

On-line communities allow extension faculty to better focus their educational efforts. For example, in the absence of readily-available, up-to-date, and sector-specific directories, extension faculty often spend a fair portion of their time responding to requests for buyers and/or sellers of specific raw materials or products. By investing their efforts in on-line communities, extension faculty can better fulfill their role of providing unbiased, research-based technical information.

At the same time, web-based communities are a means by which extension faculty can promote economic development as private entities can establish business connections. Further, interactive (e.g., those that allow members to log-in and update their own information) web-based communities shift the burden of keeping track of detailed data (for perhaps thousands of individuals and companies) from Extension to the firms and individuals themselves.

Forest-sector On-line Communities in Oregon and Louisiana

The Oregon Forest Industry Directory: www.orforestdirectory.com

The Oregon Forest Industry Directory (OFID) is a collaborative effort of the Oregon State University Extension Service, Oregon Small Woodlands Association, and the Northwest Wood Products Association. There were a number of motivating factors for developing the site.

First was the change in Oregon's primary processing infrastructure due to a loss of markets for private landowners for large diameter logs. This created a strategic transition at the state-level to manufacturing wood products from small logs and an increased emphasis on the state's value-added secondary wood products sector which includes furniture, flooring, cabinets and other consumer products.

Second, there was a lack of information on infrastructure (e.g., firms with sawing and drying capabilities) for 'underutilized species' (e.g., western hardwoods). Third, there was, in general, a lack of information for Oregon wood producing manufacturers regarding potential raw material suppliers and markets and finally, the state need a tool to promote Oregon forest-sector products and foster market development.

The OFID is not simply an electronic web-accessible wood products manufacturer directory. In the spirit of creating a community, the website emphasizes information dissemination and promotes networking and interaction between industry members. Community members are companies that sign-up on the site with a secure username and password which allows them to edit corporate information.

As a driver for industry development and transactions, the site's directory enables visitors to search for potential buyers or suppliers of Oregon forest products. A key element is a 'request for proposal' (RFP) function that allows members to post specific products they wish to sell at any given time. In its first 6 months since

By investing their efforts in on-line communities, extension faculty can better fulfill their role of providing unbiased, research-based technical information.

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Online communities and extension

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With a common set of objectives and set of interests, communities can help Extension professionals to disseminate timely information and weave members together in a more closely knit arrangement.

launching the OCID, over 2,000 searches were conducted and 45 firms have signed up. It is expected that usage will increase dramatically following formal and concentrated efforts to promote the site.

The Louisiana Forest Products Community : www.laforestproducts.org

The Louisiana Forest Products Community (LFPC), launched in 2004, facilitates business exchange and promotes forest-sector economic development in the Louisiana. Through the LFPC, for the first time, wood products buyers anywhere in the world can search online for Louisiana manufacturers that meet their unique purchase needs.

The Community is a collaborative effort of key institutions in industry, government, not-for-profit development organizations, and academia. Funding for website development was provided by the Louisiana Department of Economic Development and the Louisiana Forest Products Development Center, part of the Louisiana State University Agricultural Center. Programming for the LFPC was outsourced but is maintained by an Extension Specialist at the Louisiana Forest Products Development Center.

The process of website conceptualization, planning, development and operationalization took 8 months before the LFPC was launched. The site is segmented into five sectors:

- 1) Primary Wood Products
- 2) Secondary (value-added) Wood Products
- 3) Engineered Wood Products
- 4) Equipment Manufacturers and Distributors, and
- 5) Logging and Harvesting.

In addition, there is a section that offers business development information for existing companies that want to expand and potentially new companies that could be started in Louisiana. This section is also useful for companies that are considering relocating to the state and as a recruiting tool for state government.

Each segment is a stand-alone sub-community. For example, each has its own request for proposal (RFP) function that facilitates targeted product buying and selling. There are 300 company site members and the site had over 12,000 visits in 2005 from five continents.

Summary

The Internet offers a unique infrastructure for communication and community development that transcends geographic constraints. The scope and desired outcomes of a web-based community can be macro (geographic, industry-level market development, economic development) or micro (transaction, new business, enterprise level)

With a common set of objectives and set of interests, communities can help Extension professionals to disseminate timely information and weave members together in a more closely knit arrangement. Success requires member participation, which in turn, is generated through receipt of value and the establishment of trust to participate.

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Ed sez ...

- Christine King



First, apologies for the fact this edition is late getting to you. We've had a change of editors and the change over has been longer than anticipated. As you may have read in the last edition of ExtensionNet, Darren Schmidt has retired from Ed sez... This edition, to say the least, has been a bit of a team effort with Darren and Roe Currie, while we make the transition to myself as new ed. Thanks for being patient.

So what's in this edition? I suggest you go straight to the interesting pics from the 2006 International APEN Conference in Beechworth, Victoria. Jess Connor from the conference organising committee also sums up the conference and you can find out how attendees rated this event!

A few weeks ago, in the latest Journal of Extension (JOE), I found an interesting article about on-line communities. Upon request, the authors (Sanna, Richard and Scott from Forests Products Extension Specialists, Oregon State University and the Louisiana State University Agricultural Centre) have been kind enough to put together a 'summary'

version just for ExtensionNet. Read about the Seven Pillars of On-line Communities!

To keep at the cutting edge of the latest research in Extension and to also promote APEN to our student population, we plan to have a regular contribution from students across Australia in ExtensionNet. In this edition we hear from Gomathy Palaniappan (UQ) who provides a personal account on 'Building the capacity of farmers to make transitions towards sustainability'. If you know any students conducting research that you think will be interesting to APEN members, let us know.

APEN membership just keeps expanding. Meet some of our new members, Ilean Russell, Stuart Pearson and Kamal Kaj Gaire. Watch out Kamal – I may be contacting you for our next student segment!

That's about it from me. As I am new at all of this....please do not hesitate to drop me an e-mail with any suggestions for future editions (christine.king@uq.edu.au). I am looking forward to the future challenges of ExtensionNet!



Students' Segment

This edition – Gomathy Palaniappan (The University of Queensland)

Hi! My name is Gomathy and I am currently undertaking PhD research on 'Enhancing Farmers' capacity in transition towards sustainability' at The University of Queensland, Australia. I graduated in agriculture science at Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, India. My interest in social science has led me along a path specializing in agricultural extension and rural sociology. I began my career as a rural development officer in a Non Government Organization (Professional Assistance for Development Action) working with rural women for a Self Help Group initiative. I learned to build rapport with the community and learned and practiced PRA (participatory rural appraisal) techniques. I joined the National Agricultural Technology Project in The Tamil Nadu Agriculture University.

With my experiences in the field I was

able to observe agricultural research advancing from a discipline that based itself on controlling nature to a great extent and I witnessed a number of horrifying impacts on farming communities. I knew many Indian farmers who gave up agriculture because the ecological balance was devastated and they felt that nothing could be done to revive their lands. (In India, 'conventional' agriculture is synonymous with 'organic' agriculture, where farmers have been farming organically for generations. It is a way of life; a culture. Only farmers that were well off could afford the chemicals introduced through the green revolution, and it is these farmers that are now having difficulty making the transition back to organic agriculture because of a depleted resource base). These experiences led me to think deeply about what could be



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APEN International Conference 2006

LaTrobe at Beechworth, Victoria, Australia

The conference committee's intent for the 2006 APEN conference was to genuinely explore the theme "Practice change for sustainable communities: Exploring footprints, pathways and possibilities", and the streams that emerged from the abstracts submitted by delegates that made explicit the various facets of our work.

The conference attracted 255 delegates representing 15 countries; 13% of delegates were international guests.

The program included; keynote speakers, concurrent sessions, an extension expo, facilitated workshops, conference dinner, a possibilities café and pre- and post conference tours.

The **conference evaluation** found that the average score allocated by delegates to the conference was 8 out of 10 (range 4 to 10). Participants ranked some of the most valuable activities as keynote presentations, networking, concurrent sessions and the facilitated workshops. Over 95% of delegates were motivated to use ideas from this conference and many delegates said they would follow up contacts made as a result of the conference.

The conference committee identified and agreed on a set of values to underpin our work together and endeavoured to practise our conference values, to guide behaviour and decision making, both as a committee and in creating a conference experience for all participants. The conference values were: Integrity, Community, Sustainability, Pushing the edge, and Integration. The formal evaluation results and informal feedback received have been very positive. Although the evaluation did not formally provide feedback against each of the values, many of the delegates' comments were clearly related to conference values.

The conference committee were committed to "walking the talk" of our values and practising the art and discipline of our extension practice. We felt that the conference gathering significantly pushed our own thinking and practice.

We conclude that this conference has positively contributed to new footprints, pathways and possibilities in areas of practice change that will influence the future sustainability of our communities.

The program, refereed papers and outcomes from the conference can be viewed in the proceedings at: www.apen.org.au

Practice change for sustainable communities: Exploring footprints, pathways and possibilities

Department of Primary Industries
Department of Sustainability
& Environment



Postscript:

APEN was able to counteract the environmental damage footprint of the conference by donating to the *Greenfleet* tree planting program.

Thanks to all who attended, the sponsors, and the organising committee.

The 2006 APEN Awards for Excellence in Extension -

Proudly sponsored by Dairy Australia



At the Conference Dinner – Tuesday March 7th at 7.30pm, the Experienced and Young Professional Awards were introduced by Dairy Australia's Principal Research Fellow (Innovation and Change Management), Dr Mark Paine and presented by the Victorian Minister for Agriculture, Mr Bob Cameron.

Laura Schibrowski was presented this year's Young Professional award.

APEN Management Committee members Drs Jeff Coutts and Neels Botha comprised the selection panel and selected Laura for the DA/APEN 2006 Young Professional award as she demonstrated strength in the knowledge and understanding of good extension theory and principles in her work as well as evidencing that she had applied these in practice. She also demonstrated excellence in evaluating the results of her project.

Laura's project "The Effectiveness of the MIA EnviroWise Approach to Community Engagement" is designed to assess whether the approach by the current Land and Water Management Plan (LWMP) implemented by Murrumbidgee Irrigation (MI) is effective in engaging the community of the region and bringing about real and sustained environmental change. Currently the LWMP is a five year old community negotiated plan and part of MI's statutory obligation.

The project has had three key objectives,

1. To assess and facilitate social change at three levels – the MI Board, MI staff level and the community of the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area (MIA).
2. To test (via a pilot study) a range of practical techniques to gain

basic values, needs, aspirations and viewpoints of rural and urban residents of the MIA.

3. To implement a full scale study across the region using improved tools, installing a protocol for future studies of the community.

The significance of this project lies in both the techniques used and the institutional and social frameworks in which it is being undertaken. The technique used a mixture of surveys, structured discussion and scenario workshops in a relaxed atmosphere around a "kitchen table". The context is one of major, rapid and unpredictable change in the water industry with a community looking for contact, reassurance and support. The technique provides an opportunity to voice concerns and know that their opinions may influence MI.

The process of the study has resulted in the MI Board and staff developing a skill set to work more effectively with the community, to actively listen and to use rigorous tools for surveying community perspectives and profiles. The methodology uses a technique called VKAP (an acronym for Values, Knowledge, Aspirations and Perceptions) a technique designed for use in developing countries and the rural sector by Dr D Woodside (2000) and is enhanced by the complementary engagement tools.

For the first time MI can confidently design a program based on a rigorous data set of the community's key values, their knowledge levels and match incentives to the communities personal and regional aspirations.

This project was commissioned by MI and served as a research project for Masters of Environmental Management at the University of New South Wales. It is supervised by Dr Dedee Woodside

Pictured Below:

Victorian Minister for Agriculture, Bob Cameron; Dairy Australia's Principal Research Fellow, Dr. Mark Paine; Laura Schibrowski; Neale Price; APEN Vice President, Jess Jennings.



(Corporate & Community Sustainability International, Sydney & MI Board, Griffith) and Dr Robert Gale (Institute of Environmental Management, UNSW, Sydney).

Laura can be contacted for more information at:

I_schibrowski@aapt.net.au.

Neale Price was presented the award for the category of Experienced Professional. Neale was chosen because of a very significant contribution to extension theory and impact – especially in overseeing the roll-out of an extensive and rigorous training model for rural and regional Australia.

This project was developed by a national team lead by DPI Victoria in partnership with Meat and Livestock Australia. The award winner showed remarkable vision and drive in promoting the Meat and Livestock Australia, Victorian Department of Primary Industry, EDGENetwork project to every state in Australia through vigorous networking. As a result the project has impacted on many producers and deliverers of extension services.

The EDGENetwork project is a nationwide structured learning program now comprising more than 50 workshops whose development was based upon some key extension principles including: -

- Applying the various adult learning styles of the end user audience
- Based on the action learning cycle
- Including scientists, educationalists, extensionists and farmers/ graziers in workshop development.
- Providing a suggested delivery structure to all trainers with each workshop accompanied by exercises and other training tools.
- Piloting workshops with a group of producers and subject to independent evaluations with a greater than 75% success rate required before going to market
- Selection processes in place for engagement of deliverers (trainers)
- Development of a network of delivery organisations to capitalise upon local knowledge and contacts, as well as

accessing funding support from both FarmBIS and the educational training sector.

- Aligning the desired outcomes of producers in these workshops with the objectives and outcomes of Vocational Education and Training sector guidelines.
- Offering a range of workshops from ½ day through to the 3 year (10 times per annum) option.
- Using market research in selection of modules/packages to be developed.
- Using Continuous Improvement and Innovation concepts in developing new workshops and revising others. This involves input from the latest R&D outcomes to ensure recency and relevance to the participants.
- Including field work, role plays, interactive activities, case studies in addition to the “lecture” style of using PowerPoint or other overhead projections to illustrate points
- Inviting participants to present their own views through responses to questions, from both solicited and spontaneous perspectives.

The project has proved to be very successful with more than 10,000 producers attending at least one workshop to date. A recent survey indicated that 75% of participants changed management practices as a direct result of attending workshops, 52% claimed increased productivity, 19% better resource management and 14% increased profitability. Early results from the 2005/06 financial year indicate that attendance is 20% greater than at the same time last year. Other farming industries are applying the principles used in this project.

Neale also has a broader role in extension. He has been a representative on the Cooperative Venture for Capacity Building and on other committees and initiatives in related areas. This, along with being recently elected APEN President, underlines that his contribution is very worthy of the award for excellence in extension in the open category. Neale's email addresses are:

nealeprice@bigpond.com or apenpresident@bigpond.com



Laura demonstrated strength in the knowledge and understanding of good extension theory and principles in her work

Neale gave a very significant contribution to extension theory and impact... and has been a representative on committees and initiatives in related areas.

Students' Segment

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Even if farmers want to change to more sustainable options there appears to be many complexities in this transition (many of which seem beyond an individual farmer's control).

done and I became interested in how farmers could make the transition towards an ecologically friendly farming system.

As you can see from my background, I have much experience with farmers in India. When I came to Australia to begin my PhD study, I realized I had much to learn about Australian farmers, and have now spent much of my first year immersing myself in the Australian farming culture, attending many workshops, field days, and farmer-based conferences. I have also tried to identify the variety of farming systems based on different management practices and see the 'reality' of farming systems practiced in the field. For example, I attended a one day soil workshop in Toowoomba and interviewed a variety of farmers, learning that the process of transition is not just changing from one system to another (eg. conventional to conservation farming), but may occur in parts, or as a series of steps, where farmers may go back and forth practicing different farming systems during different seasons. Here I learnt that it may not be possible to place farmers into rigid categories based on different systems (eg. biodynamics, organics).

My exposure to the Organic world was through the Organic Conference (IFOAM) in Adelaide in 2005 which helped me to design my research to a great extent. I realized that with globalization, organics is moving towards being industrialized itself. This may be a great challenge. There was a range of research activities across the disciplines to either improve or prove that organics was on par with (or better) than conventional systems. Regulations to certify products by various institutions globally seems to be growing rapidly leading to commercialization. (This is a challenge in India, where farmers who have been farming organically for generations are now being asked by 'outsiders' to certify their produce, primarily for the EU market. This can be a costly enterprise for small farmers. Farming organically is a deeply embedded cultural concept and sometimes I feel that asking

farmers to become organically certified in India is a bit like asking someone to certify their religion!).

To understand institutions' and farmers' views I also participated in the Pest and Weed show at Clifton. It was an educational field day showcasing the pest and weed management that affects rural and urban dwellers organized by Landcare (Central Downs) where exhibitors represented many institutions (eg. government departments, private companies, Biological Farmers Australia and Landcare). I observed that most of the private companies and government agencies focused on rational use of chemicals, safety measures, alternative management practices and protection of the environment. In spite of all these efforts to protect the natural resources it appeared to me that farmers are still skeptical about organic farming.

I also participated in the conference on enhancing sustainable agriculture which was organized by the environment protection agency at Cooloom with the Queensland farmers' federation (QFF) as part of a project on enhancing sustainable agriculture. I observed that sustainability is perceived as conservation of water and reduced use of chemicals, and genetically modified crops were seen to be the next advancement to chemical reduction. I wondered whether organics had been considered as an alternative option.

Over the past year, I have come to the conclusion that in spite of problems in industrialized agriculture, there are still few farmers practicing sustainable farm management. Even if farmers want to change to more sustainable options there appears to be many complexities in this transition (many of which seem beyond an individual farmer's control). I hope over the next phase of my research I will be able to identify ways in which transition is possible!

Gomathy Palaniappan
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If you are a student undertaking research in the area of extension, participatory research or rural community development, and would like to share your story in a future edition of Extension Net, please contact APEN. Your story can provide APEN members with an idea of the current research taking place in Australia and Internationally.

New APEN members

If you've recently joined APEN, welcome! You'll reap plenty of professional and personal rewards. If you've been in

APEN for a few seasons now, be sure to say hello to the new members.

lean Russell - resource economics lecturer, Uni of Qld

lean Russell is a lecturer working in the School of Natural and Rural Systems Management at the University of Queensland. He teaches applied economics, natural and agri-food systems and research methodologies. His research interests include development management, agricultural extension and education, with projects in various countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Prior work experience includes teaching extension at the Fiji College of Agriculture and a stint in Cambodia working on the re-establishment of the national extension service.



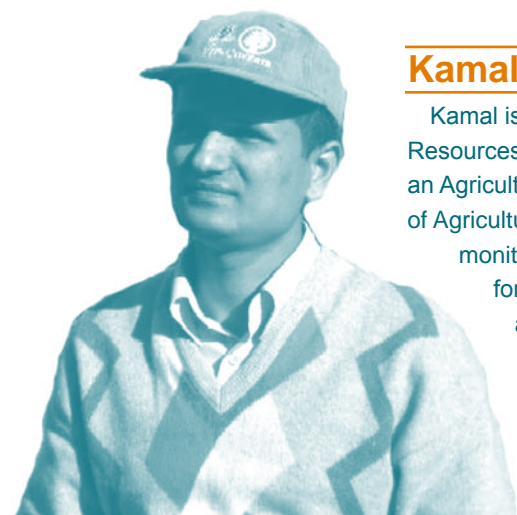
Dr Stuart Pearson - senior knowledge broker

Stuart has just spent 10 years at University of Newcastle teaching Geography and Environmental Science and researching long-term environmental change in arid areas. Now he is working as a knowledge broker between the researchers and the problem solvers: "It's a natural extension from learning environments I created for students ... creating the right context for learning and then delivery of resources at the point of need is my favoured approach. I am working with researchers to ensure the knowledge needs are made clear at the start and that the existing or new knowledge will make it into practice." Stuart is working on improving the capture of learning and transfers of knowledge through trials with advisors, researchers, NGOs and consultants.



Welcome to these new members who have joined since last edition. There's lots!

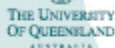
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Ian Bamford NSW
Bron Walsh QLD
Mark Alchin WA



Kamal Raj Gaire - student, Uni of Melbourne

Kamal is studying for his Masters degree at the Faculty of Land and Food Resources at the University of Melbourne. Before that, however, he was working as an Agricultural Economist in the Gender and Environment Division of the Ministry of Agriculture and Co-operatives, Nepal. There, he was responsible for planning, monitoring and evaluation of agricultural extension programs mainly targeted for women farmers. Before that, Kamal worked as a Planning Officer at the District Agriculture Development Office, Siraha. He had major responsibilities working with grassroots farmers group to formulate district level agriculture development programs and monitoring of district level agricultural extension programs and helping Junior Technical Assistants (JTAs) in implementing theses programs.

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Guidelines and deadlines

Submissions should be made in MS Word 6.0 with minimal formatting. A portrait photograph of the author is required. All photographs, figures and/or tables ought to be provided as separate files (preferably TIF or JPEG; photos scanned at 300 dpi). Feature articles should be around 1000 words and minor articles 500 words. The editor reserves the right to edit submitted material to meet space restrictions. Letters to the editor or general items of news of interest to the network are welcome. Articles should be submitted at least four weeks prior to publication.

Preference is given to articles that are grounded in some form of project or event.

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