



Video-Based Extension: How Short-Form and Vernacular Video Content is Reshaping Farmer Learning

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Introduction

For decades, agricultural extension in India and much of the developing world has leaned on a familiar toolkit such as field demonstrations, printed pamphlets, radio broadcasts and the physical visit of an extension officer. Each of these channels carries a hidden assumption that the farmer receiving the message can read a leaflet, understands the language of a bulletin drafted in a state or national tongue or is fortunate enough to fall within the working radius of an already overstretched extension worker. With India's farmer-to-extension-worker ratio remaining heavily skewed and functional literacy uneven across rural belts, text-based advisories have long struggled to reach the very audience they are designed for. Over the past decade and a half, video has quietly emerged as the channel that sidesteps both constraints at once. Whether through the deliberately engineered peer-video model pioneered by Digital Green (Gandhi *et al.*, 2009) or the organic explosion of farmer-run YouTube channels and Instagram reels, moving images narrated in a farmer friendly language are proving to be a more inclusive and more trusted medium than the printed word ever was.

The Limits of Text-Based Advisory and the Turn to Video

Text-based extension material, however well researched, carries a built-in filter, it privileges the literate, the fluent and those with the leisure to sit and read. For a farmer juggling irrigation schedules, livestock and market visits, a dense advisory bulletin is rarely the first thing opened. Video collapses this filter. A two- or three-minute clip that shows, rather than tells, how to space a nursery bed or identify an early blight symptom communicates in a register that does not depend on reading ability. When that clip is also narrated in the farmer's own language and



features people who look and speak like the audience, it does something a pamphlet cannot, it builds credibility through familiarity rather than authority.

The Digital Green Model: Engineering Trust Through Peer Video

Digital Green, founded in the mid-2000s, built its entire extension philosophy around this insight (Gandhi et al., 2009). Rather than filming subject-matter experts, the organisation trains local farmers to script, act in and narrate short instructional videos that are then screened to small groups by community facilitators, followed by structured discussion. The model rests on four pillars: participatory content production, a locally generated video library, human-mediated screening rather than passive broadcast and a sequenced roll-out into new communities.

The evidence base behind this approach is unusually strong for an extension intervention. An early proof-of-concept trial across sixteen villages found that Digital Green style dissemination lifted adoption of promoted practices by roughly six to seven times over a conventional training-and-visit approach, at close to a tenth of the cost per adoption. A subsequent two-year randomised trial conducted by the International Food Policy Research Institute in Ethiopia found that the video-enabled approach reached about a quarter more farmers than the standard public extension system and produced up to 44 per cent higher uptake of the practices being promoted, with adoption spilling over even to farmers who had not directly viewed a screening (Abate *et al.*, 2023). A separate randomised evaluation in Bihar, conducted with Innovations for Poverty Action (J-PAL, 2025), recorded a 50 per cent gain in adoption of system-of-rice-intensification practices alongside a 21 per cent increase in paddy output relative to the state's own rural livelihoods programme. More recent work BY Baul *et al.*, 2024, has continued to find that supplementing conventional extension with repeated video viewing among women farmers produces adoption gains of a similar order, even though the videos add no live human interaction beyond the original session. Taken together, these studies converge on a common mechanism: extension agents who use video appear to visit farms more often and follow up more diligently than those relying on lecture-style training alone and farmers consistently report greater trust in advice delivered by a recognisable peer than by an unfamiliar official.

Farmer-YouTubers and the Reels Economy: Peer Influence Without a Programme Budget

What Digital Green engineered deliberately, India's social media landscape has since produced organically. A new generation of farmer-creators now runs YouTube channels with



subscriber counts that rival national broadcasters, channels built by working farmers documenting their own fields, machinery reviews and troubleshooting rather than by institutions. Channels such as Farming Leader, My Kisan Dost and Pramod's Life have each drawn subscriber bases in the millions, built entirely on the same currency that made Digital Green effective: a presenter the audience recognises as one of their own, speaking in a shared dialect about problems the viewer is actually facing. Short-form Reels and YouTube Shorts have compressed this further, turning a single sowing tip or pest-identification trick into content that spreads through WhatsApp groups and family networks as readily as a forwarded photograph (Tan, 2024).

Recent scholarship on India's evolving digital extension landscape frames this as part of a broader shift in which platforms such as WhatsApp and YouTube have become genuine sites of farmer-to-farmer knowledge exchange, with the rise of agri-influencers and peer communication accelerating the spread of new ideas even as it raises fresh concerns about misinformation and the need for stronger digital literacy and verification support (Coggins *et al.*, 2022). Unlike Digital Green's curated library, this content is unmediated: there is no facilitator guiding discussion, no participatory scripting process, and no institutional quality check before a video reaches a farmer's feed. Its reach and relatability are real, but so is its vulnerability to unverified or commercially motivated claims.

Why Vernacular, Visual Content Succeeds Where Text Advisories Fall Short

A recent scoping review of video-mediated extension studies across Africa, covering more than forty peer-reviewed evaluations, found that video content delivered in local languages and accompanied by facilitator-led discussion was consistently associated with stronger knowledge retention and higher rates of practice adoption than video viewed without such support and that group viewing further strengthened social learning and community engagement (Kimaro *et al.*, 2026). This lines up with what the Digital Green and farmer-influencer evidence shows separately: it is not video as a format that drives the effect, but the combination of vernacular narration, a relatable presenter, and, where possible, a social viewing or discussion context that text-based leaflets have never been able to replicate.

The distribution layer matters just as much as the content itself. A study examining how extension workers in Bihar circulated wheat agronomy videos found that WhatsApp accounted for the great majority of video sharing between extension workers and farmers, precisely because the platform was already deeply embedded in the daily social fabric of these communities (Sharma *et*



al., 2024). Video advisory, in other words, does not merely replace the printed pamphlet with a screen; it rides on pre-existing networks of trust, family groups, village circles, and peer contacts, that a mailed or posted bulletin never had access to in the first place.

Persistent Gaps and the Road Ahead

None of the above mentioned facts makes video a complete substitute for structured extension. Smartphone ownership, data affordability and digital literacy remain uneven across gender and geography and women farmers in particular continue to report lower rates of independent extension contact even where video content is locally available. The unmediated nature of influencer-driven content also means that accurate, evidence-based advice circulates alongside unverified or promotional claims, with no editorial process to separate the two. The way forward is unlikely to be a simple choice between institutional video programmes and organic social media content; the stronger evidence base points to blended models that pair vernacular, peer-presented video with human facilitation, whether from a trained community resource person or a moderated WhatsApp group, so that the trust video builds is matched with the accuracy that structured extension is meant to guarantee.

Conclusion

Whether deliberately produced by an organisation like Digital Green or independently built by a farmer with a smartphone and a YouTube channel, video-based extension succeeds for the same underlying reason: it replaces the anonymous authority of a printed advisory with the recognisable voice of a peer, delivered in a language the viewer actually speaks. As short-form and vernacular video content continues to reshape how farmers learn, the task ahead for extension planners is not to choose between the engineered and the organic model, but to borrow the credibility of both while restoring the quality safeguards that only structured facilitation can provide.

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