SCALING UP INNOVATIVE EXTENSION APPROACHES IN EAST AFRICA: ACTIONS FOR EFFECTIVE YOUTH AND PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT

Policy Brief

Event organizers
Introduction

Agricultural extension is an important enabler for agricultural productivity, food security and income for millions. Effective extension enables farmers to make better choices that can increase productivity and returns, leading to better agricultural performance. The important role of extension in transforming rural economies has been recognized in the African Union’s Agenda 2063, STISA 2024, and the Sustainable Development Goals. However, the effectiveness of agricultural extension in transforming East African agriculture has been curtailed due to the high extension staff: farmer ratio that exceeds the recommended 1:800, inadequate access and high cost of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and low digital literacy. Furthermore, extension systems in East Africa have not fully utilized the considerable capacity of private sector firms and youth engaging in agribusiness.

Extension service providers have been operating in absence of effective coordination and regulatory frameworks. Weakness in extension services presents major vulnerability to the agriculture sector in the region. There is therefore need to mobilize diverse institutions and stakeholders, in particular engaging the youth and private sector as service providers and clients/benefactors to support effective upscaling of innovative extension approaches. These policy recommendations draw from the key messages and lessons from a series of online events organized in Aug-Sept 2020 by the Feed the Future Developing Local Extension Capacity (DLEC) project, African Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services (AFAAS), E. Africa Field Schools Support Hub (EAFSS) and Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services – Kenya (KeFAAS) on the theme ‘Engaging youth and the private sector in extension and agricultural advisory services’.

Summary of key messages

• A large number of organizations with different motivations and interests are active in extension service delivery in different value chains, but there is currently no mechanism for effective coordination and regulation of extension services and providers.
• Capacity and quality of extension service delivery can be increased by enabling the participation of additional, diverse organizations including expanded roles for producer associations, private sector, civil society, and researchers, among others.
• Private sector firms are playing significant roles in innovating and delivering extension and advisory services to farmers. These firms have significant additional capacity that should be tapped in development and upscaling of innovative extension approaches.
• Demand-driven extension service delivery model is preferred, being more effective and sustainable. However, governments should retain key facilitative, regulatory and coordinating roles, in addition to ensure public funding for extension support to under-served regions and to poor farmers lacking the means to pay for services.
• Field Schools are a promising approach in upscaling innovative extension approaches, and the East Africa Field Schools Support Hub can be a suitable regional platform for improving quality control, accrediting and validating trainers, and improving monitoring and evaluation.
• ICTs are key in availing and upscaling innovations for extension service delivery; however, measures are needed to mitigate the risk of digital divide further entrenching disparities in access to extension services, especially in rural areas.
• Youth are a major resource and have significant potential to contribute to the development and scaling up of extension innovations. However, youth need to be facilitated with friendly financing mechanisms, mentorship, business skills development, ICT infrastructure and stronger linkages within value chains.
Policy recommendations

1. Implement effective regulatory frameworks for extension and advisory services with mechanisms for certification and registration of service providers and standards for services. This will address supply chain integrity issues, enhance quality assurance, professionalize and improve coordination of actors, and harmonize approaches in extension service delivery.

2. Foster the development of pluralistic extension with participation of diverse actors in an inclusive, collaborative and coordinated manner, bringing together farmer organizations, private sector, youth, public extension service systems, NGOs, and civil society for harmonized extension agenda.

3. Address financial obstacles to development and successful upscaling of innovative extension approaches through innovative and sustainable financing that addresses the unique needs of agribusinesses, including youth friendly funding mechanism to support innovations for extension services delivery and growth of youth led agribusinesses.

4. Improve access to formal and informal training and skills development focused on extension service providers targeting innovators, youth in agribusiness, and value chain actors at the frontline including extension personnel, inputs suppliers and stockists, village agents, agribusiness owners, and farmer organizations.

5. Tackle the existing digital divide particularly in rural areas by increasing access to technologies, ICT infrastructure, cost reduction measures, increased internet bandwidth, improving digital literacy and access to expertise to support extension services provision, through tax incentives, subsidies and other mechanisms that accelerate digital transformation in agribusiness.

6. Increase involvement of youth in developing and implementing innovations to bolster extension services, with mechanisms to support their entry and success in agribusiness, including accessible financing, business skills development, mentorship, incubation, and linking them to other actors in value chains.