

Agriculture Extension Service Delivery in Federal Nepal: Emerging Challenges and Way Forward

INTRODUCTION

The new Constitution of Nepal (2015) has initiated federal, provincial, and local governments in Nepal, each bestowed with respective rights, responsibilities, power and authority. While developing the new mechanism of governance, the Constitution has given immense authority as well as responsibility to local governments, which is unprecedented and has never been experienced before in the history of Nepal. Along with the restructuring of the state, the institutional mechanism of the agriculture sector has also been restructured. The agricultural extension service delivery system is currently trying to adjust to the changing institutional and policy context introduced by the new federal structure.

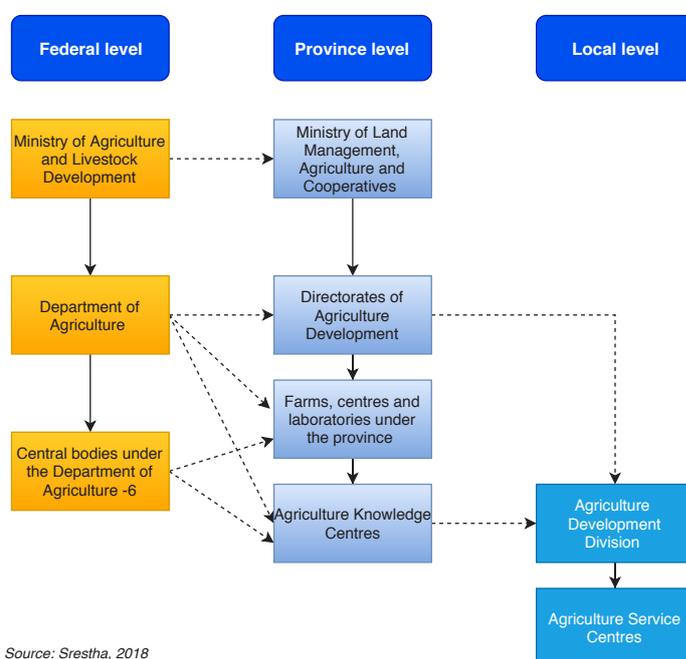
This brief discusses some of the challenges before Extension and Advisory Services (EAS) in Nepal as it tries to adjust to the new governance structure and proposes potential ways forward to strengthen EAS delivery. It also draws heavily on the outputs of the policy dialogue entitled "Agricultural Extension System in Federal Nepal" jointly organized by the Agricultural Extension in South Asia (AESA), the South Asia Institute of Advanced Studies (SIAS) and the Nepal Policy Research Network (NPRN) on 9 April, 2019, at Kathmandu.

FEDERALISM IN NEPAL

Under the new Constitution, the erstwhile development regions, zones, municipalities and village development committees have been dismantled and restructured into seven provinces and 753 local government units that include six metropolitan cities, 11 sub-metropolitan cities, 276 municipalities, and 460 rural municipalities. The number of districts has increased from 75 to 77. However, the districts remain administratively the same but with significant curtailment in power and authority. Along with this administrative restructuring, the governing mechanism has been changed as well.

One of the most notable changes in agricultural institutional reform has been the establishment of the Ministry of Land Management, Agriculture and Cooperatives in each province. Similarly, an Agriculture Knowledge Centre has replaced the District Agriculture Development Office (DADO)

and District Livestock Service Offices (DLSO) with significant reduction in their roles and responsibilities. Within each local government office, an Agriculture Development Division has been established. The current agriculture institutional mechanism in Nepal is illustrated in Figure 1.



Source: Srestha, 2018

Though farmers expected enhanced access to extension services and its better delivery, lack of clarity on the power, authority as well as roles and responsibilities at different levels has adversely affected the reach and impact of extension service delivery. This transitional stage has also thrown up multiple challenges in achieving the agricultural development goals envisioned in the Agriculture Development Strategy 2015.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Inconsistent Institutional Structure with Poor Communication Mechanism

The Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development (MOAD), which is the apex body for agriculture development has been split and then merged time and again. Many previous units have been dismantled, merged, or restricted in their roles and responsibilities.

Currently, MOAD is comprised of three central departments, central laboratories, and commodity development centers and national priority projects, such as the Prime Minister Agriculture Modernization Project (PMAMP). There are nine central agencies, three under MOAD, and six under departments. At the province level, the Ministry of Land Management, Agriculture and Cooperatives have been established. This ministry operates the agriculture and livestock development-related directorates, province-level laboratories, and Agriculture Knowledge Centres (AKC), Veterinary Hospital and Livestock Expert Centres at the district level. There are 51 AKCs under the Provincial Directorate of Agriculture Development, which are authorized to acquire and disseminate innovative and essential technologies and provide related support services to producers and agribusinesses. Agriculture Service Centres (ASCs) under local government were raised from 378 to 753 to cover all at the local level.

However, there are poor functional linkages amidst agricultural entities at central, provincial and local level, with interruptions in previously existent direct vertical linkages and technical lines of command. With the lack of formal mechanisms for direct communication and coordination between extension units at different levels of government, implementation of national policies and programs have become uncertain and have also been negatively affected. For instance, coordination and communication issues were seen problematic between PMAMP Super Zones and Zones Implementation Units as well as in the extension units under provincial governments (Shrestha 2019).

As per the new Constitution, district level agriculture organizations including DADO and DLSO, were supposed to transfer into the local government offices. It was expected that farmers could get expert services near their residence. But these district offices remain within the district under different names (AKCs) and slightly changed mandates and authorities. This has massed together a large pool of agriculture extension officers at the district level, ultimately leading to services with questionable quality provided through ASCs. Also, ASCs have poor linkage mechanisms to provincial-level agriculture development offices and AKCs.

Thus, it seems that the ongoing practices of institutional restructuring of agricultural services in federal system is inconsistent with the spirit of the Constitution, which envisages delivery of quick, quality and adequate services to people at the local level.

Overlapping Power, Authority, and Jurisdiction

Article 51 of the Constitution of Nepal established the policies on agriculture and land reform. It aims at scientific land reform by ending dual ownership of land, and promoting the rights and interests of farmers. It has prioritized the preferential right of the local community to protect, promote, and make environment friendly and

sustainable use of natural resources available in the country. Similarly, the constitution has guaranteed the right of farmers to have access to lands for agricultural activities, select and protect local seeds and biodiversity that have been used and pursued traditionally, in accordance with the law. The ultimate objective is to enhance production and productivity. For the implementation of these provisions, clear roles, responsibilities, power, and authority at different levels of government is needed.

Schedule 8 of the Constitution of Nepal provisioned two extension-related rights, namely, 'agriculture production management' and 'management, provision and regulation of agricultural extension' at the local level. This was earlier practiced from central and district level organizations. Currently, agriculture is under the concurrent right of all levels of government – federal, province, and local. Agriculture and livestock has been placed under the authority of the province government, whereas local governments are responsible for agriculture and animal husbandry, agro-products management, animal health, and cooperatives. Farmers can avail of services from all three tiers of government. In some cases, provincial governments have been found to be more inclined towards program implementation rather than in formulating appropriate policy and support framework to tackle present day challenges in the farm sector and farmers' welfare (Shrestha 2019).

There is no clear demarcation regarding the power, authority and jurisdiction among the different levels of government. For instance, ADS 2015 has emphasized that land-related tension should be resolved prior to its implementation; however, there is no clear mandate in provincial and local government to resolve pre-existing land-related tension seen in Nepal. Currently restructured agriculture entities are operating under short-term working guidelines that are yet to be finalized vis-à-vis their terms of reference so as to avoid duplications of programmes and services.

Also, the federal government in general, seems unwilling to delegate power and authority to lower levels of government. For instance, district-based DADO and DLSO were supposed to dissolve and merge into the local governments, however, AKCs were recently established in the district by replacing DADO and DLSO. This indicates that the agriculture extension service provider will remain at district headquarters. This contradicts the federal notion of providing services at the local level. This has further created confusion in mandates and sharing of authority.

Weak Human Resource Capacity

People have high expectations from the newly elected representatives with regard to development and provision of services, and the elected officials have already been feeling intense pressure. However, newly established institutions not only lack experience and expertise on

agriculture service delivery, they also experience shortages of human resources with the necessary technical expertise, communication skills, and ICT knowledge required for quality service delivery (AESAs 2016). The competent middle and senior level agriculture extension officers are not willing to join local government offices and offer their services there as they do not see better career opportunities and financial incentives.

This has created multiple challenges on extension service delivery at the local level. For instance, Pokhara metropolitan city allocated more than one million dollars in the current fiscal year for the agriculture sector, but the actual expenditure of the budget seems meager. Furthermore, there is less chance that all the allocated budget can be spent in the current fiscal year as well. This is largely because of the lack of human resources in the metropolitan office.

Currently, provincial and local level programs are heavily loaded with distribution of subsidies, with little or no emphasis on providing knowledge and advisory support to farmers. Even political representatives are more interested in subsidies. It is widely accepted that this situation has come due to shortage of human resources in these offices. Besides, the extension agents working in those sections have limited technical expertise with poor linkage mechanisms with the provincial level agriculture development office. For instance, most of the frontline extension service providers do not have academic degrees in agriculture, rather they have only attended short term technical training courses. Hence it must be said that the limited human resources with poor technical capacity available at the local government level have been impeding the expected agriculture extension service delivery in the changed context. This also means that there is the danger of providing either incomplete or wrong information to the farmers.

Shifting Policy Regime

Nepal's agriculture policy regime has been shifting from one to another with different extension approaches. The conventional project-based approach of the agriculture extension system didn't support the upscaling of commodity-specific agricultural production in Nepal. With cut-off of subsidy and priority after certain intervals, farmers were often compelled to switch to other crops. Farmers look for continuous commitment of government and stable policy provisions to continue and upscale their farm production (Thapa 2016).

Agriculture Development Strategy 2015 - the main guiding document that presents the overall strategy including action plan and roadmap of the agricultural sector in Nepal - was prepared under top-down planning of the earlier administrative structure through a central control and coordination system. It was supposed to support the implementation of the Local Self-Governance Act of 1999, which has now been replaced with the Local Government

Operation Act 2017. This strategy was formulated keeping in mind the harmony that would derive from the principles of decentralization, local self-governance, and participatory planning, which would work well even in the future. The federal governance structure was not envisaged in the strategy. However, after the execution of the federal democratic structure, ADS 2015 seems paralyzed. It has envisioned a Community Agriculture Extension Service Centre (CAESC), which itself is an innovative and pluralistic approach of the extension system.

Several provisions of ADS need to be amended in the new administrative structure. For instance, since the strategy perceived DADO and DLSO based in districts as the key extension service providers, it provisioned their capacity building mechanism. Now, the DADO and DLSO are both not in operation. There are many such provisions affected by the federal structure. This has called for a bridging document/policy for ADS in the new federal context. This should be done with active participation and stakeholders' consensus in the formulation of policy, so that it becomes beneficial for them.

Weak Linkages among Research, Education and Extension

The Nepal Agriculture Research Council (NARC) leads agriculture-related research in Nepal. NARC's researches are more focused on technical aspects and are commodity based. The Institute of Agriculture and Animal Sciences under Tribhuvan University has been engaged in research on agriculture. The research conducted by their students are specifically targeted only towards acquiring an academic degree. Some research institutes in the non-governmental sector also conduct research (often supported by donor agencies) but they have a more individual and fragmented approach.

While there is a lack of credible and longer-term research in the agriculture sector in Nepal, there are no linkages of extension services with whatever research and knowledge is available (Devkota et al. 2016). Within the government system, NARC and MOAD operates in different domains as NARC was established as an autonomous body under its own Act. There is no clear mechanism for NARC and MOAD and other provincial and local organizations to interact with each other. Also the coordination mechanism between research and extension has been plagued with bureaucratic complexities and political interference (Parajuli 2017). In the new federal context, there are opportunities for creating linkages among research, extension, and educational institutions. Recently, NARC has proposed an agricultural research, extension and education linkages model in federal Nepal (NARC 2018). This model proposed a vertical and horizontal interaction mechanism among multiple institutions. Again, this is just a proposal and needs further efforts for its implementation.

WAY FORWARD

The policy dialogue identified the following measures necessary to address the current constraints in extension delivery.

- a) Establishment of functional linkage – A strong coordination and collaboration mechanism and a trustworthy environment among three tiers of the government and within different agriculture entities should be established so as to effectively complement each other.
- b) Clarification of roles and jurisdiction – A clearly demarcated power structure with authorities, jurisdictions, roles, and responsibilities for different tiers of the government with regard to the agriculture sector is necessary so as to avoid confusion, overlaps and duplication of work.
- c) Capacity building at the local level – Front line extension officers should be prioritized for capacity building so as to provide effective services to the farmers. Opportunities for career growth, financial incentives to reward better performance, exposure to national and regional extension events, further study plans, social security, etc., to these officials will go a long way towards retaining them at the local level, and thereby ensure continuous service to the farmers.
- d) Local policy for extension services – As the local governments are entitled to formulate their own policies, they can make certain plans in line with wider extension policies and implement them. For this, NGOs and academic institutions in the agriculture sector can contribute by supporting local policy and capacity building of frontline extension workers.
- e) Strengthening CAESC in local level – Local institutions, such as CAESC envisioned in ADS 2015, should be prioritized and put into practice for the agricultural extensions system. CAESC should be fully owned and managed by communities and supported and monitored by local governments.
- f) Re-orient and redefine Nepal's agriculture extension system – Agriculture extension and advisory services demanded reorientation and a new definition in line with the changed political context. Extension is not only the vertical flow of knowledge and inputs from the centre, but it is more about demand-based interaction of agriculture actors along with a process for better

communication and coordination. Hence, a mechanism for vertical and horizontal interaction among multiple extension actors for mutual sharing and learning needs to be established.

- g) Bridging ADS policy – Finally, a bridging policy provision for ADS in the new federal context should be prepared with the active engagement of multiple actors in linking it with new structures in the federal system.

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This Policy Brief was developed by AESA under the project funded by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) titled 'Supporting Smallholder Farmers in Asia and Pacific Islands Region through Strengthened Agricultural Advisory Services (SAAS)'.