



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations



Coordinating pluralism in extension and advisory services

Why the need to coordinate?

Since the 1980s, investments in public sector extension have declined, while new challenges and opportunities faced by producers have dramatically increased the need for diversified services, around topics such as sustainable production, climate change adaptation, links to markets and entrepreneurship, community mobilization, nutrition-sensitive agriculture and much more.

Consequently, a whole host of new extension and advisory services (EAS) providers have emerged, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), input suppliers, private consultants, producer organizations (POs), donor-funded projects etc. The landscape of EAS has thus become more pluralistic. This is a welcome development since no single provider can accommodate the changing and complex needs of heterogeneous rural producers.

However, such pluralism raises a number of challenges. The emergence of new providers may increase the competition for resources and decrease information and experience sharing. Multiple uncoordinated EAS providers often result in gaps and duplication of efforts, power imbalances, contradictory messages, and a failure to address the needs of certain producers.

Without coordination, pluralism merely entails the presence of different providers in a country with no functional linkages among them (Christoplos, 2010). Coordination is thus key to harmonizing programmes and investments and to responding more efficiently and effectively to the demands of different producers (FAO, 2020).

In such a landscape, the existing public extension agency needs to redefine its role and become more of a neutral arbiter with coordinating, regulatory and quality assurance functions. Many countries do not have a quality assurance and certification mechanism for EASs, but this is critical to ensuring that the diverse services and support provided to producers are of the right standard.

What does coordination mean in practice?

- EAS actors collaborate to ensure synergy in their services towards common goals.
- An EAS system with a collective capacity, governance, joint planning and M&E; efficient use of resources and inclusive service provision, leaving no one behind.
- Rural producers of different types have access to diverse services according to their heterogeneous needs and preferences to improve their production and livelihoods sustainably.

Pre-conditions for success:

While any strategy to strengthen EAS needs to be context-specific, some basic conditions apply:

Existence of diverse EAS stakeholders

Common core goals and values

Making it happen

There is no prescribed order for the actions suggested below, as they are often interdependent and may occur simultaneously. Priorities may vary depending on the local context.

Building trust and raising awareness on the importance of coordination

Building trust and reinforcing relations among the stakeholders and actors of EAS is fundamental to working together in a coordinated manner.

- Identify and map various types of EAS providers, including formal and informal, state and non-state actors. This helps rural producers to know what services are available, where, when and at what cost, and to be able to make informed decisions.
- Generate data and evidence on their services and performance, through periodic assessments, monitoring systems, and registration schemes. Understanding the EAS landscape and the comparative advantage of different actors is fundamental for well-coordinated, efficient and effective service system as whole.
- Raise awareness of the benefits of collaboration: access to information and knowledge, new opportunities and clients, more coverage, and collective action for greater impact.
- Facilitate and organize regular gatherings of stakeholders and EAS actors for exchange and learning, develop common understanding and shared objective, and build trust.



Example

The coordination process for raspberry producers in southern Chile started with a participatory phase in which the producers drafted a work plan for and with EAS, to increase productivity, the quality and safety required by the industry, and to satisfy the needs of processing plants for higher quality and safety.

Research institutions focused on generating new varieties, irrigation systems and safety protocols; public extension coordinated its agencies and aligned the work plan with the territorial plan; input dealers diversified their supply as demand became more complex and producers were better informed.

After eight years, a stable, mature and dynamic raspberry industry emerged; the institutions gained prestige, and the producers improved their income with notable innovations such as varietal change, modernization in irrigation, and the use of demanding protocols in safety and quality. Above all the case proved that pluralism and coordination are crucial to change and innovation.

Establish and strengthen an appropriate coordination mechanism

EAS coordination goes beyond one-off collaborations and involves active efforts by organizations to align, integrate and synchronize services, target groups, methods and approaches.

- Establish new or strengthen existing mechanisms and platforms for coordination with a clear mandate (e.g. joint planning, information sharing, advocacy, M&E). Depending on the context, coordination may take different forms, such as country forum, innovation platform, inter-sectorial working group or committee, online space, informal club, etc.
- Replicate coordination mechanisms at various levels: national, regional, district and local. This can also be organized along value chains. Active participation by all actors. The composition of any coordination mechanism should reflect the diversity of the stakeholders (public, private, NGOs, producers and their organizations, value chain actors, non-formal groups and associations, etc.).
- Identify requirements for coordinated action at various levels, which is vital for joint programmes where the roles of service providers are agreed and clearly defined.
- Ensure sustainable funding: the cost of coordination itself must be borne either by each EAS actor involved (e.g. membership fee), or by budgeting it into the programme cost. Donor support should be focused on institutional strengthening.
- Adopt a common M&E and learning approach to enable joint reflection among actors.

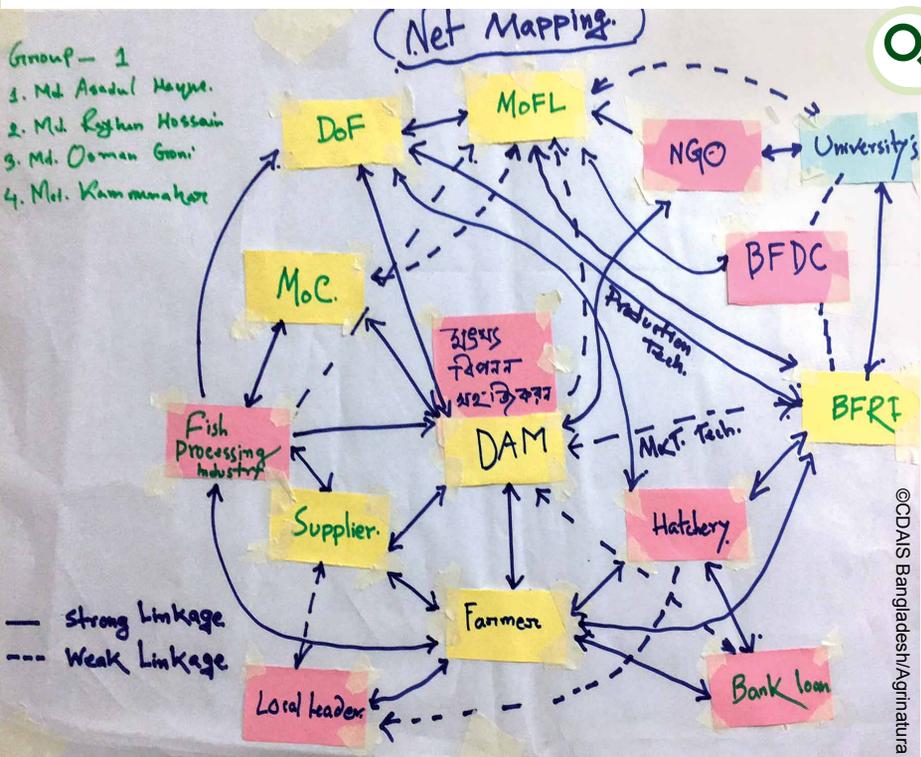


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Remember!

- > Effective coordination may be challenged by a rigid social hierarchy, intercommunity conflicts, or physical barriers. This may be overcome by awareness raising, use of digital technologies, ICTs, etc.
- > Pluralism often means competition for financial resources. It may therefore require the setting up jointly funded activities or programmes that support more than one EAS provider.



Example

The African Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services (AFAAS) guidelines on establishing EAS country fora (CF) aim to provide a coordination mechanism for EAS actors, including producers. The guide emphasizes ownership by all actors and the driving role played by CF participants. It also highlights the potential function and role of the CF in facilitating coordination of national activities, providing a forum for learning; strengthened lobbying and advocacy for EAS investments and policies, and fostering learning and exchange at the national level and beyond.

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Creating a conducive environment for coordinating pluralism in EAS

It is crucial to ensure that policies and regulations involve and engage different service providers from the private sector, NGOs, POs, etc. However, for pluralism to function well, it is vital to create conditions for different actors to work together and provide incentives to collaborate.

- Develop a shared vision and strategic orientations for EAS based on producers' demands.
- Develop, agree and communicate quality standards for EAS and other service providers.
- Strengthen the public sector for greater coordination, regulatory and quality assurance.
- Put in place incentives such as co-funding, certification and accreditation schemes.



Remember!

- > Quality assurance processes should be feasible for small local providers, farmer leaders, informal services, etc. Their design and application must be participatory to ensure that they are reasonable, inclusive and do not crowd out certain actors.
- > Ensure laws and regulations concerning POs, cooperatives and associations do not limit the potential of such organizations to grow and engage in profit-generating activities.



Example

The Uganda National Agricultural Extension Policy (2016) was developed through a multi-actor consultative process to set strategic direction for the pluralistic extension system. The Uganda Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services (UFAAS) was contracted with support of the Feed for Future USAID programme to develop Extension Guidelines and Standards to measure performance of EAS providers. This led to the Ethical Code of Conduct for EAS providers and procedures for registration and accreditation of providers. A broad membership base of the UFAAS (key EAS actors from all the sectors) helped ensure the participatory nature of the process and validation of the guidelines, code of conduct and procedures by the diverse actors.



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Useful resources

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