

Assessment of Root Causes for Development Agents' Competency Gap: The Case of Wolmeraworeda Oromia Region, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Agriculture is a source of livelihood for more than 80% of the population of Ethiopia. Even though the sector has been given due attention by the government and non-government development practitioners, the level of its growth has not been enough to meet the needs of the majority of the population. Weak agricultural extension systems among others are contributing to the low agricultural growth in the country. This research was carried out in the central part of Ethiopia, Wolmeraworeda (district), Oromia Special Zone. Development Agents (DAs) working in agricultural extension were the focus and unit of analysis for this study. The research looked qualitatively at the root causes that created the low competency of DAs in agricultural extension service. This was done to deeply understand their low competency from the insider point of view. It was revealed that the main root causes of the DAs low competencies were low-quality education/training in Agricultural, Technical, Vocational, Education and Training (ATVET) colleges, political interference, the complication of specialization, and TVET education/training policy problems among many others. The paper recommends that given the need and urgency to improve the existing competency gap, establishing a database at the federal and regional level is necessary where DAs can refer to when the need arises. There is also a need to look into possible policy intervention to give quality training through separation of generalists for public extension service seekers and specialist DAs for private extension service seekers; better training for improving DAs perception about serving; devising policies and securing professional secularism from politics is recommended.

Keywords: Competence, Development Agents, Rural Development, Agricultural Extension, Ethiopia

1. Setting the Scene

The agriculture sector policy and investment plan for the Ethiopian government shows that she is aspiring to achieve a middle-income country status by 2025 and postulated that agricultural services play a significant role in ensuring that she achieves her goals in poverty reduction (Mekbib and Degnet, 2012). Agriculture accounts for over 43 per cent of the GDP, 90 per cent of the total export revenue and employs 85 per cent of the country's labour force (Asres et al., 2013). Ethiopian agriculture is virtually all small-scale and subsistence-oriented while being crucially dependent on rainfall. Subsistence farmers generate 90 percent of the country's agricultural output (EEA, 2006).

One of the challenges facing Ethiopian agriculture is how to achieve high and sustained productivity (Davidet al., 2010). The challenge might be attributed to several reasons; however, chief among them is the absence of a link between research institutes and farmers. Hence, agricultural extension service, which is determined by its institutional effectiveness and the competency of the development agents in the field, has a pivotal role in driving the transformation process. Agricultural extension is aimed at providing farmers with essential knowledge and skills that would assist them in making vital decisions that would ultimately lead to increased production (Tsion et al., 2010). The contribution of committed development agents in knowledge, skill and attitude is a determining factor in addition to the institutions and natural ecology. Both the hard and soft systems of technologies are essential and beneficial in how they supplement each other. The effectiveness of the technology alone does not bring the desired change in the rural areas and partly depends on the capability of the extension workers to properly transfer them to the local populace (Dssalegne, 2014; Gebremedhin et al., 2006). Transformation would be the result of the effectiveness of the extension workers to appropriately transfer the technologies and the quality of the technologies themselves.

The effectiveness of agricultural extension work highly depends on the availability of extension professionals who are qualified, motivated, committed and responsive to the ever-changing social, economic and political environment. In this respect, Anderson and Feder (2003) noted that adoption of technology by farmers can be influenced by educating farmers about such things as cropping techniques, optimal input use, improved varieties, prices and market conditions, more efficient methods of production management, storage, nutrition, etc. Therefore, to accomplish the above-mentioned activities, extension agents should be capable of more than just communicating messages to farmers. Gebrehiwot, et al., (2012) agrees that agricultural extension workers must be able to comprehend an often complex situation, have the technical ability to identify and possibly solve problems, and possess insightful economic management skills in order to counsel on more efficient use of resources.

A lot of studies have been carried out on the challenges that DAs face and their low competencies in delivering agricultural extension service in Ethiopia for example Banmeke and Ajayi (2005) stated that many front-line

extension staff in Africa lack certain competencies such as skills, knowledge, attitude and the behaviour needed to be effective in their work with farmers. In addition, the study carried out in the southern part of Ethiopia illustrates that development agents face different capacity related difficulties in trying to accomplish their regular activities. Such difficulties include determining the options of implementation, defining the priority goals and objectives, identifying the resources needed for implementation, amongst others. In addition, DAs are limited in appropriate extension method selection and utilization (Knife, et al., 2012). Researchers agree that there is a high gap of competence in DAs service delivery. But few studies have been done on the root causes of the problem; why low competency is happening especially in this study area. This paper fills this existing gap in literature by deeply analysing the root causes of low competencies of development agents.

2. Agricultural Productivity in Ethiopia

Available evidence shows that yields of major crops under farmers' management are still far lower than what could be obtained from research managed plots (Belay and Abebaw, 2004). This is a clear indication of the gap that exists between researchers and farmers. The absence of an effective linkage between agricultural research and extension systems has been repeatedly reported as one of the major reasons for the low productivity of Ethiopian agriculture. All forums among policy makers, researchers, development workers and funding organizations have raised this issue (Belay and Abebaw, 2004).

3 Definition of Key Concepts

The following scholarly definitions of some key concepts are adopted by this study.

3.1 Agricultural Extension

This paper adopts Christoplos (2010) description of agricultural extension as “*a system that facilitates the access of farmers, farmer groups and other actors to knowledge, information and technologies; link them with partners in research, education, agri-business, markets and other relevant institutions; and assist them to develop their own technical, organizational and management skills and practices.*” Development Agents in Oromia report to the Ministry of Agriculture at Federal level and at Regional level they report to the Agriculture Bureau.

3.2 Competency

The Global Forum for Rural Advisory Service (GFRAS) Consortium defines competence as, “the sufficiency of knowledge and skills that enable a person to act in a wide variety of situations. Competence is the ability to do something efficiently and effectively i.e. successfully” (Davis, 2015).

3.3 Development Agents

Development agents are professional personnel assigned by government to work as agricultural extensionist at every Kebele¹ of Ethiopia. Development agents are supposed diploma holders. They are usually deployed in a group of 3, one specialised in livestock production, another in crop production and another in natural resource management, and most of which are expected to be graduates of the ATVETs, who are expected to be placed at each Farmers' Training Centre(FTC)(Dagnachew and Parkb, 2014).

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This research used qualitative research methods, so as to ensure a comprehensive and adequate understanding and have the problem. Qualitative research is an approach that seeks for an in-depth understanding of issues of concern (Neuman, 2006). In design, qualitative research is inductive, constructionist and interpretive. It is inductive in that it seeks to generate a theory rather than testing a theory.

This study was an empirical study that means deep information, and observation was needed as evidence to support the theoretical aspect of this study. The study utilized in-depth interviews to draw data from the target population of the DAs, key informants interview from the training delivering college (Holeta agricultural TVET College) and Woreda agricultural office heads for the Woreda. A focus group discussion was also conducted at the DAs training college.

4.2 Study Site

This research was carried out in the central part of Ethiopia, Wolmera Woreda. DAs working in this Woreda were the focus of this study. The study site was selected because of the shorter distance from the capital where I live and the presence of ATVET College. Besides my knowledge of local and regional language that made ease the

¹Kebele is the lowest administrative unit in the country. There are three agricultural extension agents assigned to every Kebele: these are extension agents specialized in plant science, livestock, and natural resource.

analysis of the collected data and also having relatives in the study area reduced additional accommodation cost. Wolmera Woreda is one of the administrative units of Oromia Special Zone Surrounding Finfine/Addis Ababa. Woreda¹ is geographically located between 8°50'N- 9°15'N Latitude and 38°25' – 38°45' Longitude. The Woreda is bounded with Burrayu town to East, Ejere to the West, Sululta and Ada'a Berga in the North, Sebeta Hawas Woreda in the South.

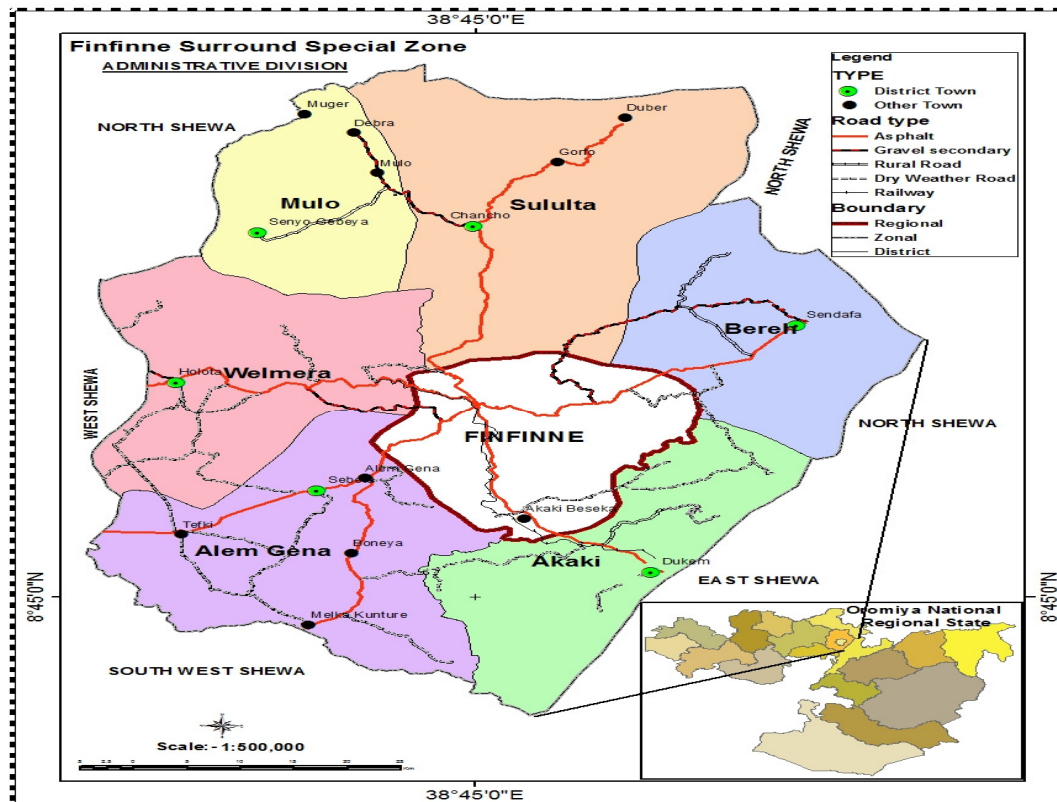


Figure 1: Map of Oromia special zone and Wolmera Woreda

Source: Woreda agricultural and rural development office

4.3 Study Population

This study targeted 20DAs from 10 Kebeles in the Woreda (the total rural kebeles are 23 in the Woreda), who have been working as DAs. They were the primary respondents. In addition, the study obtained information from 3 key informants namely academic Vice Dean of the Holeta ATVET College, Head of Animal Science Department of the college and Vice Head of Woreda agricultural and rural development office. Besides these, one focus group discussion with 8 personnel members was conducted in Holeta Agricultural TVET College that comprised lecturers, department heads and academic vice dean in the agricultural TVET College.

5 The Root Causes of DAs Low Competency in Ethiopia

5.1 Low-Quality Training in the College

The documents from TVET strategy at national level, and the existing DA curricula indicate an ideal theory-to-practice ratio of 30:70, (MOE, 2008). But most officials whom the author interviewed (at Woreda agriculture and rural development officials, college administrators, and department heads) and DAs interviewed confirmed that the style of training in college is predominantly theory-based. Besides, the practical application of the learned theory in the class is limited due to a lack of equipment, labs, tools, practical tasks, and teaching materials. According to the interviews and focus group discussion, the college has poorly equipped laboratories and limited workshop materials. The physical library exists but often with inadequate or irrelevant textbooks. Equipment for practical training is often rudimentary. Demonstrations sites remain poorly developed, preventing student DAs from developing fully into skilled, competent, and efficient agricultural practitioners who can win the confidence of farmers.

It is not difficult to imagine what kind of feeling these DAs have when they are in school they don't prefer

¹Woreda is an administrative division in Ethiopia (managed by a local government), equivalent to a district.

from the beginning but because the economic situation is difficult people end up joining so that they can raise some income that can sustain their families. Any success in any endeavour depends on keen interest at most. The absence of interest from the trainees coupled with the problems of the college mentioned earlier is likely to exert serious quality questions in the extension personnel.

Here it reads like the following from a respondent “AA” in agreeing to the aforementioned point:

“Since no one has the interest to become DA in the first place, it is not normal to expect somebody to focus on the education given in school and do nicely. We don’t dare to read and grasp some knowledge about extension service in particular or agriculture in general because of the fact that we all know that tomorrow we are going to change the discipline and join other sectors like accounting, marketing or something else. There is shortage of books both in the college when we were studying and here at workplace, besides, there are no internet facilities to read and update ourselves at our workplace even if we have moral and interest to do so”.

In line with this, different authors illustrate the importance of the quality of DAs. “The effectiveness of the technology alone does not bring the desired change in the rural areas and partly depends on the capability of the extension workers to properly transfer knowledge to the local populace”, (Dssalegne, 2014; Gebremedhin and et al., 2006).

5.2 Irrelevant curriculum

A closer look at DAs curriculum reveals that there are no extension related subjects they are learning. No communication skill delivered as training. This raises the question of the capacity of DAs in delivering quality extension without the know-how. Therefore, is it possible to expect more from DAs by giving them little? Gebrehiwot, et al., (2012) reported that it is obvious that the poor educational background of extension personnel and the rapid changes occurring in the extension environment necessitate regular in-service training to help extensionist develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to meet an increasing set of diverse demands.

5.3 Lack of practical on farm experience

According to the key informants, most young DAs lack on-farm experience. In other terms they have limited practical skills. The tragedy remains that the hands-on skill and knowledge is the most that is needed to gain the confidence of farmers. In addition, the DAs also lack training in other key areas, such as intensifying or diversifying farming systems, agricultural marketing, and other communication and soft skills, such as how to organize producer groups.

5.4 Lack of institutional linkages between Agricultural Research Institutions and Agricultural Extension Service Institutions in Ethiopia

There is a 50-year-old agricultural research institute in the Woreda. The research institute is responsible for conducting research on agriculture in general and supposed to disseminate results through the existing extension system in the Woreda. But the respondents agree that there is no connection with the institute. The research institute is neither communicating to the extension system in the Woreda nor delivering training on new innovative technologies for DAs.

One DA clearly explains the interaction between the extension system in the Woreda and the research institute. She has served more than 4 years in the system. In her tenure 4 years in the extension service; she see any interaction between the two institutions. Her own words:

Another example why our knowledge is low is that we don’t update the information or knowledge we have since we don’t interact with our research institutes. In our Woreda, we do have an agricultural research institute but we don’t know each other at all. They never communicate with vice-versa and us. The institution may work hard to get new technologies or new varieties of crops/animals etc. but as long as it doesn’t reach the end users, what is its value? It is waste of time, energy, and resource.

In addition, in the Woreda there is no Internet facility for DAs. In their Kebeles it is same. In addition, there is no public library where they can read and update their knowledge and skill. This contributes to competence.

5.5 Political Interference

All of the development agents interviewed alleged that the ruling party interferes with their daily routine and prefers political affiliation. Party cadres are authorised to assign non-professional tasks to DAs that in turn contributed much to low competency of DAs. One DA “AF” who has been in the sector for more than 5 years in his own words reads as follows:

It is not what you do that matters; it is what you talk and support. If somebody is loyal to government/party and talks what the government/party wants to hear, even though he/she is not doing anything, it is that person who shall be promoted and benefits, therefore, doing the right thing for your country doesn't matter much these days, talking and being affiliated is what matters the most. When you see such thing happening in front of your eyes, it really hurts. If you say no, they will evaluate and study you from your back, and sometimes you will be branded as 'anti-government and anti-development', this is going to be your destiny now. You will never get either professional upgrading or long-term education.

All the interviewees agree with this point the other interviewee "AG" who has served in the sector for two years adds by saying:

What we learn in the college and what we do in the fieldwork is quite different. Mostly, we serve the interest of government/politics here, not the demand and the interest of the farmers we serve. The other thing is the attitude and deeds of government itself that is we hear a lot of rhetoric in the media about the emphasis given to the agricultural sector by the government and its partners but the reality on the ground shows the opposite. Agriculture in general and extension, in particular, is not supported. Our profession is not respected.

Political interference is not only affecting DAs' day-to-day work but also the confidences of farmers. In addition, it's causing the high turnover of professionals working in the extension services.

It was revealed during the study that farmers are reluctant to comply and obey DAs advice and training. There is inferiority complex from the Kebele¹ leaders; and the DAs feel superior since they are more educated than their counterparts. This causes a rift between the two groups hence there is no respect and cooperation between the two groups. Even the cadres have a low regard towards the professionalism of the DAs. Political leaders/cadres perceive the DAs as if they were their subordinates.

The above points clearly reflect the complexity of social relation in the system. DAs consider themselves as 'educated' citizens and demand to be treated accordingly. Nevertheless, the people guiding and directing them according to the respondents are not 'educated' as such the DAs do not hold in honour the cadres and the Kebele leaders. There is no respect from the ruling party cadres and Kebele leaders to the DAs and vice-versa. As a result government policies concerning agriculture are not executed by DAs and if executed professional recommendations of DAs are not welcomed either ruling party cadres or Kebele leaders. In the end agricultural production in general and the extension system, in particular, are affected. The biggest loser from this rift is the local farmer who is denied professional agricultural extension knowledge.

5.6 Complication of Specialization

The TVET strategy, in general, emphasizes the importance of specialization of disciplines delivered in the ATVET colleges. This is due to the government's ambition to respond to the demands of job market from the industries and large-scale direct investments of mechanized agriculture. It is clearly stated on the strategic documents that, graduates of any TVET colleges or universities should not wait to be hired by public sectors but to be job creators. That is the motive of the specialization in general. By itself, this doesn't create any problem to the extension systems the DAs are in. Nevertheless, the problem arises when the farmers/pastoralists demand to be assisted with general knowledge by the DAs.

To see the complication emanating from specialization, one needs to understand the characteristics of smallholding farming in Ethiopia. Kassa and Abebaw (2004) summarize it as follows, "Agriculture in Ethiopia is characterized by mixed farming systems of crop and livestock production. The majority of smallholder farms depend on the livestock subsector for power, cultivation, and transport of goods; it also makes a significant contribution to the food supply in terms of meat and dairy products, as well as to export in terms of hides and skins, which make up the second major export category". Therefore, this mixed nature of Ethiopian farming makes it difficult to address the problems farmers face from a specialization mind-set. Specialization might be good for investors or individuals engaged in mono-crop agricultural. However, in the case of local Ethiopian farmers where mixed farming is the modality of farming style, it might be ideal to use generalist professionals. Coming up with other options like establishing a database for DAs where the specialist DA can refer when farmers require support the DA may not possess.

In addition Kristin, et al. (2010) elaborate that DAs need to be a generalists rather than specialists, currently the training is structured to produce specialists. In the old system, before the ATVETs were established, trained DAs were generalists who were expected to serve farmers on all issues raised. Within the Ethiopian mixed farming complexes, cereal crops account for about 75% of the cultivated area, while the remaining planted area is devoted to the production of other annual and perennial crops such as coffee, oil crops and pulses. As farmers tend to intensify and/or diversify their farming systems, DAs must understand more fully how these different crops and livestock systems are integrated. Currently, training does not develop DA skills in high-value crops or products and thus fails to prepare them to effectively serve farmers in the diversified and mixing farming system.

¹Kabele is smallest administrative unit, and when I refer to it I am referring to the people working there

A development agent worker “AH” in the Woreda expressed his concern in his own words:

Let us say you have graduated with ‘Animal production and marketing management’ level 4 and during your level 3 you specialized with poultry, but when you go to the farmers as a DA, you have to help them in dairy, beef, poultry sheep, and goats. I mean a generalist approach is required in the real workplace. However, you specialized in something specific, in the mean time you are expected to serve as a generalist in the field, what the hell is this really? I am not saying specialization is a bad thing, but to whom is this specialization important? Is to farmers, or private investors, myself, to whom?

5.7 Working Conditions and Remuneration

Several studies revealed that effectiveness of development agents is challenged by job dissatisfaction; the existence of poor communication, poor formal linkage among farmers, development agents and researchers; and lack of motivation for development agents to fully serve the community. Poor knowledge and skill of development agents in why, when what, and how to use and select combined extension methods, approaches, media and lack of infrastructural facilities are the main hindrance factors while communicating with farmers (Gebrehiwot, et al., 2012).

One respondent “AJ” summarize this situation like the following:

Our salary is so little compared to what we are doing. We don’t deserve what we are getting as a monthly salary. Our homes, where we are living, our transportation access and workload are all our challenges. Nobody cares about us, they just gives us many programs without improving our remuneration.

Kristin, et al. (2010) highlight that DA performance incentives are very low in some regions and most of the DAs seek alternative career opportunities due to low job satisfaction. As the DA program was being initiated progress was made in developing incentive programs for DAs, including upgrading their educational status at university through scholarships and regional and national DA rewards. These efforts represented a good initial step toward the creation of a remarkable DAs remuneration system. However, the lack of a clear professional career path that includes incentives, salary increases, awards, and other professional opportunities for the agricultural extension field staff remains a major constraint. Some regions and Woredas have implemented successful incentive programs including offering university scholarships and small incentives in pay based on performance, but most have not implemented sufficient incentive structures yet.

DAs at the Woreda cite both lack of incentives and a lack of clarity in THE reward system as drivers of low job satisfaction. Opportunities for increasing education, named by DAs as one of the most appealing incentives, are often very limited, with most DAs feeling they have very limited chances of ever being selected for one of the scholarships. Additional opportunities to enhance their expertise, improve their extension services to farmers, and move up professionally within the extension system are non-existent on merit grounds in the Woreda. This is mentioned under political interference, why DAs have lost their hope on the incentives of upgrading their professionalism and expertise.

In developing countries in general and Ethiopia in particular, most DAs work under difficult and disadvantageous situations. Knife et.al. (2012) Indicate that fieldwork in many developing countries is characterized by conditions that foster low morale, lack of mobility, virtually no equipment and extremely low salaries. These difficulties contribute to high turnover rate; those who remain in extension are typically people with few employment opportunities elsewhere. The annual labor turnover is 5 percent for the DAs which is slightly higher compared to 2% for other employees who work in the Ministry of Agriculture.

5.8 Conclusion

It is now known that it is not easy to be a DA in Ethiopia, let alone to execute the duties in a manner that can uplift the knowledge of local farmers’ hence increasing agricultural production. We recommend that politics must be separated from DAs professional assignment. This includes leading or guiding the sector by professionals, not only by just political cadres, professional services must be free of politics. In addition, the ATVET system (Ministry of Agriculture) should set up its own university where its instructors/teachers can graduate with enough theoretical and practical skills so that they can adequately equip their students practically. Furthermore, the 30% theory and 70% practical training principle has to be practically applied. In addition, the specialization and generalist paradox has to be settled (it is possible to adopt two systems where generalist can be trained for public service delivery and specialists for private sectors). There is also need to establish expertise centre at the federal and regional level with a comprehensive database where DAs can consult when they face difficulties in addressing farmers’ needs.

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