

A report on establishing community of practice for partners in Menz Mama District

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Introduction

In Ethiopia, small ruminants are an important resource for livelihood and food security. They serve as sources of meat and milk (goats), high liquidity, a store of wealth and fertilizer (manure). The main small ruminant production challenges are poor technology supply, inadequate veterinary service with a limited supply of veterinary drugs and equipment, and feed supply shortages. The main marketing challenges are inadequate market infrastructure, limited access to market information, and weak market-orientation of the livestock production system.

In partnership with research and development partners, the CGIAR Research Program on Livestock (CRP Livestock) in Ethiopia works to address livestock production and marketing challenges and to improve the livelihoods of rural communities through integrated technical and institutional innovations. In 2019, the Livestock CRP adopted an integrated approach to support integrated delivery of already-identified 'best bet' interventions across the five flagship areas and associated cross-cutting themes. The 'community conversation' approach has been used to facilitate implementation integration at the community level. This community-based collaborative learning and action approach brings together community members and local partners to discuss a range of livestock management issues and act in an integrated way (Lemma et al. 2021). Different mandated local partners have been engaged in community conversations and have committed to provide coaching support to communities and to monitor implementation of the community actions.

However, it was necessary to bring the local partners together as a community of practice (CoP) to strengthen coordination, peer learning and joint action among the partners and to address implementation issues. It is expected that a complementary application of community conversations and communities of practice as practice methods will develop partnering and engagement capacity of partners to improve service delivery.

CoPs have been used in the field of education for promoting best practices in learning and teaching and fostering interdisciplinary networks (Jimenez-Silva and Olsen 2012). The Livestock CRP in Ethiopia adapted CoPs in the context of livestock development to foster coordination, collective learning and action among small ruminant value chain actors. In this context, a CoP is a mechanism for strengthening coordination, collaborative action, and learning among key stakeholders for problem-solving, planning and delivering integrated solutions to improve small ruminant production and marketing. It brings a group of key small ruminant value chain actors together to share, learn and work together with a clear purpose and focus (function domain) that energizes and engages the group. The key stakeholders are held together by a shared context and interest in the coordination of small ruminant development interventions and are driven by a desire to solve coordination and implementation challenges together and contribute to enhanced development outcomes that benefit all the actors.

The CoP will facilitate local coordination, peer learning and action among key actors in the transformation of sheep value chain by enabling the actors to come together to share and learn from each other, generate new insights, solve problems together and contribute to the development of the value chain. The CoP is a vehicle for action and change, benefitting stakeholders who are influential change agents in the transformation of the small ruminant value chain.

With this purpose, the Small Ruminant value chain Transformation in Ethiopia (SmaRT) pack project facilitated a stakeholder consultation meeting towards the establishment of a community of practice among small ruminant value chain actors in the country.

This report documents the process and outputs of the CoP establishment meeting held at Menz Mama District on 10 June 2021, which engaged diverse stakeholders.

Background and context

A local partnership landscape assessment has been conducted through monitoring and coaching of partners regarding the implementation of integrated interventions and community conversations (Lemma, Tigabie and Mekonnen 2021). The monitoring visits revealed coordination challenges and low partnering capacity of local stakeholders in Menz Mama District.

To facilitate coordination, peer learning and action among core stakeholders in the implementation of the SmaRT integrated interventions, it was necessary to bring relevant stakeholders in a CoP. This was meant to create a local coordination mechanism for joint learning, action and problem-solving among the key value chain actors and to address small ruminant production and marketing bottlenecks in the district.

This was achieved through a stakeholder consultation meeting to discuss implementation challenges, value chain bottlenecks and form a local stakeholder coordination mechanism. The Office of Agriculture together with the Livestock and Fishery Development Office led the organization and facilitation of the stakeholder meeting to establish a local CoP among key value chain actors. They sought expressions of interest for participation from across public and private stakeholders working in the district in the small ruminant sector. Based on the local context and the level of interest from stakeholders, the meeting organizers identified and invited core value chain actors that play key roles in small ruminant production and marketing. This helped ensure ownership of the CoP initiative from the beginning.

Expectations of participants and meeting objectives

The participants were asked to briefly introduce themselves, share an exciting experience in working with other stakeholders, and identify expectations for the CoP establishment meeting. They expected to discuss implementation challenges and devise a mechanism to work together and identify their roles and responsibilities to achieve profitable sheep value chain transformation in the district.

In addition, they expected the following from the CoP establishment meeting:

- Clarify the synergic effects among stakeholders in the CoP initiative
- Create a shared understanding on implementation coordination challenges
- Clarify the costs and benefits of working together
- Decide how to share responsibility and benefits from the CoP initiative.

The participants' expectations were reviewed against the objectives of the meeting which aimed to:

- Sensitize key stakeholders about stakeholder coordination challenges
- Discuss the need for working in partnership and the importance of a CoP
- Discuss and agree on the leadership, working modality and sustainability of the CoP
- Clarify the vision, objectives and outcomes of the CoP process
- Agree on size and composition of CoP membership
- Clarify on the roles and benefits of stakeholders in the CoP
- Clarify communication, accountability, monitoring and documentation of CoP process and outcomes
- Discuss and identify a guiding agenda for the CoP that would be addressed through a series of meetings/activities
- Discuss and approve a working ToR to guide the management and functionality of the CoP process

Approach and process

Setting the scene. Standing in a circle, participants were asked to name an animal, which they think describes them, and explain why they chose it. As participants were explaining their reasons, the facilitators connected their descriptions to the context of the stakeholder consultation meeting. This introduced the theme of the meeting.

Stakeholder voices. An introductory, explorative challenge was used to identify how the different stakeholders think about the current situation of stakeholder coordination and partnership regarding small ruminant value chain transformation. The exercise aimed to sensitize participants about implementation coordination challenges in their context and motivate them to act together for better coordination, joint learning and action.

They were asked to answer the following questions that solicit stakeholder views about the current partnership situation, challenges, and the need for a local stakeholder coordination mechanism.

- How do you describe the current partnership situation among the different small ruminant value chain stakeholders in Menz Mama District?
- In your view, what are the challenges in stakeholder coordination and partnership development in the district?
- In your context, what is the need for stakeholder coordination and what functions will this coordination initiative have?



Paper labels for key stakeholders (farmer, research, service provider, private actor, market actor) were placed on the ground and participants were asked to stand on a stakeholder label and voice the concerns/ issues of the stakeholder they represented based on the questions.

The stakeholder voices were recorded on a flip chart, which served as a reference for the ongoing discussions and reaching agreements.

Stakeholder voices (photo credit: ICARDA/Abiro Tigabie).

Below are the outputs of the exploratory exercise.

How do you describe the current partnership situation among the different stakeholders in Menz Mama District?

- Limited improved breed/genetic resource
- Poor access to market information
- Weak price bargaining capacity of producers
- Low attention given to organize farmers for collective action
- Implementation challenge of integrated interventions

- Weak input and service supply
- Limited credit services
- Limited technology adoption

In your view, what are the challenges in stakeholder coordination and partnership development in the district?

- Lack of motivation, commitment and capacity to work together among stakeholders
- Challenges to sustain partnership initiatives
- No coordination among small ruminant value chain actors
- Weak culture of coordination and support between stakeholders
- Lack of awareness and capacity for collaborative action and learning

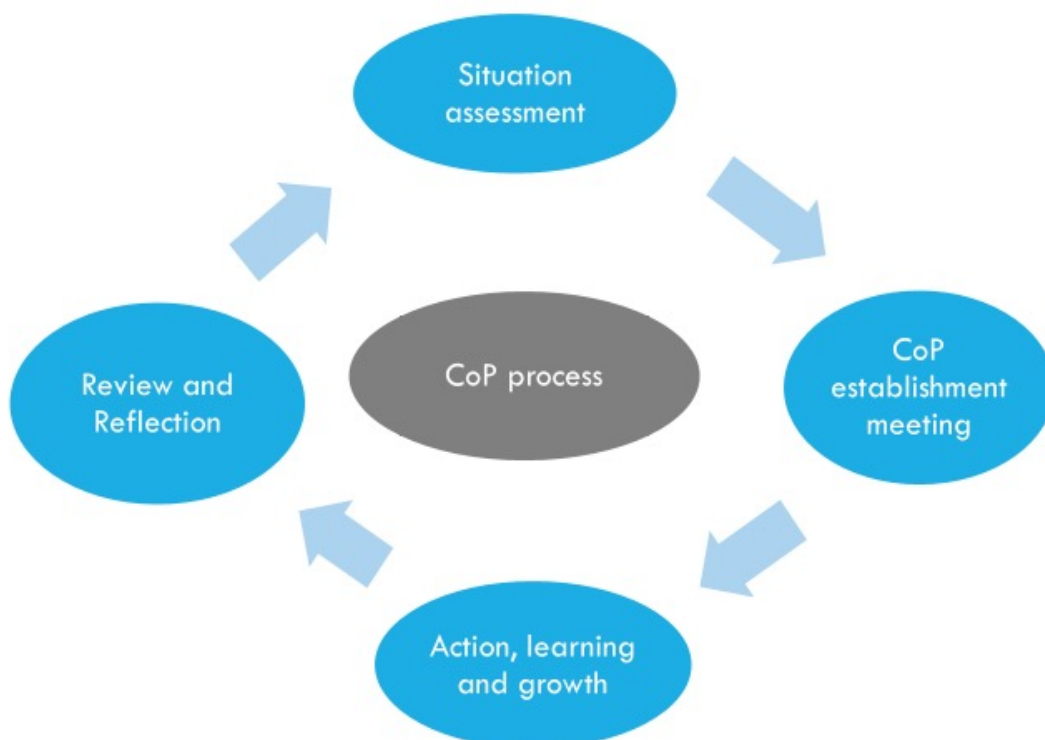
In your context, what is the need for stakeholder coordination and what functions will this initiative have?

- Clarify organizational responsibility and accountability to act accordingly.
- Improve organizational culture and capacity to work together.
- Support each other for common target and maximize benefits.
- Share experiences and resources among stakeholders

With this context-setting and priming exercise, an overview of a CoP process (Figure 1) was used to help participants have a big picture of the journey towards a mature and sustainable community of practice.

Deep diving into the discussion, partnership challenges assessed during partner monitoring and coaching visits were presented. This helped expand the discussion around stakeholder coordination and implementation challenges and the need for a coordination mechanism, allowing participants to recognize the challenges and generate interest to act.

Figure 1. CoP process.



It was essential that participants define a clear purpose, scope of work and ways of working and agree to particular terms of participation and engagement in the CoP initiative. To do this, using a working terms of reference (ToR), the essential elements for the establishment and management of a successful CoP were discussed, concerns clarified, and strategies agreed to address the concerns. The vision, objectives, outcomes, leadership and management, responsibilities, benefits, resourcing, sustainability and expected challenges of the CoP initiative were discussed.

The vision of the CoP in Menz Mama District is to see capacity developed for a conducive partnership, stakeholder coordination and collaborative learning that maximizes development outcomes and benefits for all stakeholders.

The CoP initiative in Menz Mama District seeks to bring key small ruminant value chain actors together to:

- Share information, diagnose bottlenecks, identify solutions, and take actions to solve strategic issues facing local communities.
- Strengthen partnership, engagement and collaborative culture and capacity of stakeholders to strategically work together and exploit synergies.
- Develop capacity for working together, planning synergically and approaching small ruminant development in a systemic and integrated way.
- Develop engagement and response capacity of service providers and increase the effectiveness and efficiency of small ruminant development interventions.
- Develop demand capacity of local stakeholders and community organizations and increase uptake of research outputs and improved services.
- Create a conducive partnership environment that will attract more development opportunities and actors.
- Collaborate on specific challenges or exploit opportunities in ways that achieve greater development impacts than stakeholders could achieve alone.

It is expected that the CoP process will lead to the following outcomes:

- Strategic engagement and collaborative capacity of stakeholders strengthened.
- Institutional capacity created for jointly analysing key small ruminant value chain bottlenecks and taking actions to address problems.
- Culture for collaboration and sharing information among stakeholders developed.
- Increased capacity of stakeholders for uptake and scaling of innovations.
- Increased organizational learning capacity and culture and peer support among stakeholders.

The meeting discussion centred around clarifying the purpose, specific needs and benefits for the stakeholders to come together as a community of practice. This led to articulation of shared interests, practices, resources and commitments towards improving small ruminant value chain transformation. It was recognized that the CoP would improve individual as well as organizational performance.

Changes on the draft ToR were made and validated on the spot as participants discussed the ToR. Building on the stakeholder voices, the results from community conversations and the observations from monitoring and coaching visits, the guiding agendas for the CoP initiative were presented, discussed and enriched.

Size and membership of the CoP

Initially, it is important that the size of the CoP is manageable, comprising a small group of mandated institutions that work in coordination and synergy to achieve greater sectoral development outcomes. In essence, the CoP is a flexible, needs-based peer learning and action mechanism to achieve stakeholder coordination and enhanced development outcomes. It brings stakeholders together to work jointly, leverage resources and create coordination to address key value chain bottlenecks and achieve sustained development outcomes. In time, other stakeholders may join in and contribute to the CoP depending on the issues and context.

Ownership and sustainability was considered in identifying representatives of the CoP initiative. Individuals holding high-level leadership positions will have decision-making and ownership advantages in the CoP initiative. But they are also less accessible for meetings as they have time pressure, and there is also a problem of turnover. To address this challenge, team leaders who have middle-level positions were selected to represent the key stakeholders in the CoP establishment meeting (Table 1).

The turnover and time shortage of office heads was recognized. The middle-level position holders are relatively stable and are the individuals who coordinate organizational responsibilities and manage the overall activities. They have better technical skills, good leadership capacity, and stay a long time in the organizations. They are also expected to have the energy and time to take care of logistics and hold the space for CoP meetings/activities. However, it is important for the middle-level representatives to have good support of organizational leaders.

Table 1. CoP membership

#	Name of representative	Organization	Position
1	Hailu Eshete	Menz Mama office of agriculture	Team leader, extension communication
2	Tesfaye Derbe	Menz Mama office of livestock and fishery	Team leader, animal production
3	Kebede Kassahun	Menz Mama office of livestock and fishery	Team leader, animal health
4	Azalech Alemu	Menz Mama office of cooperative promotion	Cooperative promotion expert
5	Tesfaye Tafesse	Menz Mama office of trade and market development	Team leader, livestock marketing
6	Tibebe Zilelew	Menz Mama office of communication	Communication expert
7	Lemlem Negash	Menz Mama office of women, children and youth	Gender team leader
8	Teklemariam Haile	Amhara Credit and Saving Institution	Manager
9	Techale Gebreab	Organization for Rehabilitation and Development in Amhara (ORDA)	Manager
10	Belay Mulatu	ORDA	Focal person
11	Zebene W/Mariam	Farmers' cooperative representative (04/Zeram)	Chairperson
12	Sintayeu Bashahdir	Farmers' cooperative representative (06/Keyafer)	Vice chairperson
13	Hulunm Gatew	Debre Birhan University	Vice dean, research and community service
14	Shenkute Goshme	Debre Birhan Agricultural Research Center (DBARC)	Team leader
15	Assefa Gebrehana	Private feed supplier	Private actor

Leadership, resourcing, communication and accountability

Participants discussed the organization, leadership and management of the CoP initiative. The extension communication team leader from the Office of Agriculture is the chairperson and two team leaders from the Livestock and Fishery Development Office (animal production and animal health team leaders) will serve as the deputy chairperson and secretary, respectively. The two offices are lead CoP convenors responsible for chairing meetings, facilitating communication and collaboration among members, and managing relationships with external stakeholders.

In addition, core mandated stakeholders, including the lead convenors, were identified and organized as a technical team to champion the operation and functionality of the CoP process, with a responsibility to:

- Create meeting agendas
- Decide on meeting times and places
- Organize and facilitate meetings
- Monitor and document progress, learning and experience
- Follow through on agreed actions
- Communicate with each other.

The livestock production team leader; trade, industry and market development; cooperative promotion and development; and women and children's affairs office were selected as champions or expert task groups who will steer and pilot the CoP process. This allows sharing of responsibility and ensuring continuity in driving content and action.

As the CoP matures, members can create subgroups within the larger CoP to have discussions on specific issues and new members can join the CoP as new issues emerge.

After the initial excitement, it is important that the CoP maintains interest and commitment of the members to continue the energy and engagement. At the start of the CoP initiative, more frequent meetings (every two months) with the champion partners and biannual meetings with the wider stakeholders was agreed. The first meeting will take place in July 2021 to define the focus and specific CoP activities. It is important that CoP meetings are aligned with planning and budgeting cycles of the stakeholders to ensure inclusion of partnership activities and interactions in the plans.

Guiding agenda for the CoP

To get the ball rolling, the following issues, which were identified during community conversations and stakeholder landscape assessment visits, were presented as an example, encouraging the stakeholders to identify locally relevant discussion agendas for the platform.

These included:

- Access to improved forage planting materials and seeds, improved feeding technologies
- Supply of veterinary drugs
- Coordination and implementation challenges among stakeholders
- Issues of input supply and access to finance
- Annual animal health treatment calendar
- Transboundary animal disease communication
- Market infrastructure development and utilization
- Issues of gender integration in sectoral programs
- Challenges in small ruminant production and marketing

This encouraged further discussion about the potential CoP agenda. The following were issues identified for the CoP agenda.

Technology-related issues

- Improving the small ruminant production system through new technology
 - Breeds
 - Feeding technology
 - Disease management
 - Value chain development
- Supply of proven/improved technologies
 - Forage seed and planting materials
 - Feed and forage
 - Drug and veterinary equipment
 - Breeding and genetics

Marketing and community organization issues

- Market-related issues
- Price negotiation capacity
- Broker challenges

- Collective marketing
- Market facilities

Gender equality and women empowerment issues

- Women's participation and decision-making in the value chain
- Resource access and control
- Women's workload and mobility

Service/input supply and regulatory issues

- Quality issues
- Regulations
- Awareness
- Credit
- Market information
- Herd health management

Capacity development

- Training
- Coaching/mentoring

Enabling and constraining factors: a force field analysis

A force field analysis was used to identify enabling and constraining factors for the functionality of the community of practice. Participants were asked to identify their hopes and worries for the CoP and discuss strategies to exploit the strengths and address expected challenges of the new CoP.

Hopes and opportunities/strengths (enabling/success factors)

- Previous experiences in working together
- Interest and goodwill to work together
- Demand for integrated and coordinated interventions
- A sense of ownership
- Organizational support
- Recognition for contributions
- Expectations for value creation

Fears/worries (challenges/constraining factors)

- Weak commitment
- Lack of trust
- Staff turnover/position change
- Limited capacity for working across boundaries
- Limited partnership and innovation skills

Strategies for reducing constraints and exploiting opportunities

- Create value proposition/business case for stakeholder coordination.
- Document and share good practices for creating influence through demonstration of benefits.
- Institutionalize stakeholder coordination/partnership building initiatives beyond individual commitment.
- Provide coaching and problem-solving support on partnership development.

Monitoring, learning and evaluation

Participants discussed what they would like to see changed or improved as a result of the establishment and functionality of the community of practice. They also discussed how they would know the success of the CoP as implementation unfolds.

The need for monitoring and documenting the process, outcomes and lessons of the CoP activities was emphasized. The performance of the CoP will be evaluated by seeking feedback from members and periodically evaluating outcomes. Such evaluation will also facilitate identification of emerging issues and challenges.

Monitoring and documentation of the CoP process and activities will focus on reaction, learning and behaviour. In each CoP meeting, feedback on the process and level of participation and satisfaction of members will be captured using participatory tools. Periodic evaluations will focus on improvement of partnering culture and problem-solving skills of members.

The CoP champion group will take the responsibility for devising an appropriate monitoring and review process to learn from experience and improvise as the CoP grows.

In addition, the SmaRT pack project will continue providing monitoring, coaching and problem-solving support to strengthen the CoP initiative.

Analysis, lessons learned and way forward

Ownership and sustainability

The CoP will be managed and convened by two core mandated institutions. Team leaders from the Menz Mama District Livestock and Fishery Development Office and the Office of Agriculture have been identified as the champions to lead the initiative. In addition, the CoP membership consists of middle-level managers who supervise technical staff but also work with the high-level leadership. They have supervisory roles, are influential in their organizations, and have motivation and expertise that meets CoP objectives.

Mindset, attitude and partnering capacity

The current partnership situation indicated that partners largely have a sectoral focused-orientation. They lacked intersectoral orientation and collaboration culture, and learning practices. Local stakeholders demonstrated limited capacity for working across sectoral boundaries.

Partners blamed one another (individually or organizationally) rather than jointly analysing systemic challenges and devising solutions collaboratively.

It is hoped that, with sufficient support, the CoP initiative will contribute to developing the learning and collaborative culture and capacity of local stakeholders.

Lessons learned and way forward

- Strengthening capacity for partnership and engagement at the local level takes time and patience. Change towards an impactful and sustainable coordination mechanism cannot be expected overnight (e.g., the formation of a community of practice).
- Taking a phased approach (based on capacity and needs) helps nurture and develop CoPs organically.
- Start small (with a core set of frontline partners) and localize, and build on existing structures, and as experience is gained and new issues emerge, more partners can be included.
- Given local capacities, the CoP initiative requires continuous supportive monitoring, coaching and capacity development.

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Annex. List of CoP establishment meeting participants

#	Name	Organization	Position
1	Hailu Eshete	Menz Mama office of agriculture	Team leader, extension communication
2	Getish Hailegiorgis	Menz Mama office of livestock and fishery development	Drug and input quality coordination expert
3	Eshetu Alayu	Menz Mama office of livestock and fishery development	Team leader, animal health
4	Azalech Alemu	Menz Mama office of cooperative promotion and development	Expert, cooperative promotion
5	Tesfaye Tafesse	Menz Mama office of trade, industry and market development	Team leader, livestock marketing
6	Tibebe Zilelew	Menz Mama government communication affairs office	Communication expert
7	Habtewold Dagne	Menz Mama office of women, children, and youth	Gender team leader
8	Teklemariam Haile	ACSI	Manager
9	Assefa Gebrehana	Private feed supplier	Private actor
10	Kes G/Tsadik Dibabe	Community based breeding program (CBBP) member	Representative
11	Zebene W/Mariam	Zeram farmers coop representative	Chairperson
12	Sintayehu Bashahder	Keyafer farmers coop representative	Vice chairperson
13	Hulunm Gatew	DBU	V/dean, research and community service
14	Shenkute Goshme	DBARC	Team leader
15	Aregahegn T/Yohanes	CBBP member	Representative
16	Belay G/Hana	Small ruminant trader	Private actor
17	Getaneh Mamo	CBBP member	Representative
18	Liulseged Alemayehu	DBARC feed researcher	Feed and nutrition researcher
19	Erdachew Yitagesu	DBARC	Animal health researcher
20	Amsalu Abie	DBARC	Socio-economics researcher