



AESCs-Break Smallholders' Extension Service Barriers



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Background

Since March 8, 2015, the USAID Agricultural Extension Support Activity (AESA) project and the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) are demonstrating an improved agricultural extension service delivery model to the farmers at fields through 129 Agricultural Extension Service Centers (AESCs).

The AESCs have been established in four demonstration upazilas of AESA project's working areas. The upazilas are:

- Barisal Sadar upazila of Barisal district – which represents a division's (Barisal) central upazila;
- Faridpur Sadar upazila of Faridpur district – which represents a district's (Faridpur) central upazila;
- Chowgachha upazila of Jessore district – which represents an outside the district (Jessore) center;
- Kalia upazila of Narail district – which represents a remote upazila from district (Narail) center.

The AESC-Model was designed to overcome the work accommodation difficulties and the transportation and communications difficulties that the field level DAE officials – the Sub Assistant Agriculture Officers (SAAOs) had been encountering.

With the AESC-Model, the SAAOs had been decently housed and well equipped. They had been provided with own offices inside work-locations (i.e.; blocks), fast-moving office transports, a motorcycle, and a smartphone for mobile communications and accessing ICT facilities (e.g.; connecting to Call Centers, etc.).

AESC implementation modalities

The AESC-Model is providing farmers' prescription-based problem-solving solution. The farmers are getting technical information and services on agricultural productions, pest and disease management, fertilizer management, seed testing, etc. The center is also equipped with various IEC materials like flip charts, posters, leaflets, videos, etc.



The AESC is also being used as a platform for disseminating information and used for meeting with other stakeholders. As the extension agents are sitting here on schedule basis, it is easy for them to ensure services covering the whole area. The SAAOs also visit farmers' fields for problem diagnosis and providing services. An AESC is covering around 1,725 farm families (including 481 farmer producer group members of the project).

The SAAOs at the AESCs and also at the fields, use the project developed various ICT Apps like Farmer Query System (FQS), Crop Diagnostic Apps (CDA), SAAO Diary, etc. By using these apps SAAOs can easily give solutions to the farmers. They provide their schedules to their supervisors – the Upazila Agriculture Officers (UAOs) who can easily monitor the SAAOs live activities through the project developed ICT based monitoring tool (dash board).



The results

The AESCs have created opportunities where farmers especially the women farmers can visit the centers at their convenient time for receiving need-based extension advices from the SAAOs.

To the farmers, the AESC-Model has given increased frequency and promptness in receiving services from the SAAOs. This has also opened an avenue for knowledge development, enhanced self-esteem and status of women in households and society. A total of 189,395 farmer households are receiving agriculture extension services through these centers especially through advisory services on crop productions and market related information.

A preliminary evaluation on the AESCs through an external consultant shows that the AESC-Model intervention has provided the frontline public extension agents (i.e. SAAOs) with job satisfaction, work effectiveness and efficiency and work credibility. It has facilitated the senior DAE management towards better monitoring, evaluation and management of SAAOs.



The study result also reflects the following:

- Around 96 farmers are taking services from the AESCs on an average per month;
- 62% farmers confirming that the AESCs are fulfilling their needs;
- 11% women farmers are receiving services through the AESCs;
- 100% farmers who are visiting the AESCs are receiving ICT services from there;
- Through optimizing the services from the AESCs, 0.35% crop productivity could be increased in each year.

Challenges:

The main challenge remains with the sustainability of these AESCs beyond the project period. These improved agricultural extension service delivery model is quite effective for both the farmers and the DAE frontline extension service providers. The model has facilitated increased SAAO-Farmer contacts because of the close proximity of the centers and the fast transportation. The Government and other Donor agencies could embrace these and adopt and replicate the model across the country.

The model lack involvement from other sectors i.e.: livestock and fisheries, so it should emphasize on providing a unified extension services from a common platform. It should also enhance the public-private partnership in this platform for the betterment of the smallholder farmers.

