

Review on the role of agricultural extension services in improving farmers' livelihoods in Ethiopia.

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural extension services have long been recognized as a transformative force in Ethiopia's agrarian economy, playing a central role in enhancing the livelihoods of millions of smallholder farmers. This review critically examines the historical evolution, operational mechanisms, and current performance of agricultural extension systems in Ethiopia. Despite extensive government investments and evolving models—from top-down interventions to participatory and pluralistic approaches—the impact of extension remains constrained by a multitude of systemic, institutional, and contextual challenges. These include low development agent (DA) capacity, weak farmer participation, insufficient funding, poor research-extension linkages, and recurring external shocks such as conflict, climate change, and macroeconomic instability. The study concludes that while extension services have positively influenced productivity, technology adoption, market access, and climate resilience, a transformative shift toward inclusive, well-funded, and adaptive extension systems is imperative. A future-focused extension system must integrate digital tools, climate-smart practices, and multi-stakeholder engagement to ensure sustainable agricultural development and resilient rural livelihoods in Ethiopia.

Keywords: Agricultural extension, Ethiopia, farmers' livelihoods, Role

DOI: 10.7176/JESD/16-7-04

Publication date: October 31st 2025

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Justification of Review.

Ethiopia's economy is based primarily on agriculture. It generates 90% of all export earnings and more than 45% of the country's GDP. Agriculture is also thought to employ 85% of the labor force. However, the yield of Ethiopian agriculture is incredibly low. For all crops combined, the average grain yield was 2.14 tons (CSA, 2018). The agriculture sector's low productivity has made achieving national food self-sufficiency challenging. Globally and especially in emerging nations, the agricultural industry continues to be a vital component of economies, contributing significantly to GDP, creating jobs, and ensuring food security (FAO, 2023). However, despite its importance, the sector frequently faces challenges such as low productivity, limited access to markets, environmental degradation, and vulnerability to climate change (World Bank, 2022).

In Ethiopia, agriculture is the main source of income. Agriculture is the most important sector, accounting for 80% of all jobs, 60% of exports, and roughly 46.3% of the general GDP. Over 90% of agricultural output is produced by smallholder households, who dominate the agricultural sector. Smallholders get their revenue from agricultural produce, either in cash or through self-consumption. Crop, livestock, fisheries, and forestry subsectors make up the agricultural sector, according to the national accounts. In agriculture, crop production is the most important subsector (Solomon Yokamo, 2020).

Ethiopian agriculture is centered on subsistence and is reliant on rainfall. Small-scale farmers who use traditional farming methods and tools produce the majority of the product. The country has a wide range of livestock and food crops, fruits, and vegetables because of the substantial variance in landform, soil types, climate, farming methods, etc. One strategy for achieving the Millennium Development Goal of reducing extreme poverty and hunger in emerging nations like Ethiopia may be agricultural extension. Despite Ethiopia's long history of extension, small-scale farmers have just recently received attention (Biratu Gizachew Kebede, 2008).

Thus, since the 1950s, Ethiopia has adopted a number of extension strategies and initiatives to give farmers access to pertinent agricultural data and suitable technologies that could raise household income and production. In 2020 The National Extension Intervention Program (NEIP) has overseen the implementation of the extension program known as the Participatory Demonstration Training and Extension System (PADETES) since 1995. The

program focuses on a supply-driven package approach that includes close monitoring of farmers' plots, on-farm demonstrations of improved farm practices and technologies, and increased supply and promotion of improved seeds and fertilizers (Kassa and Abebaw, 2004; Kassa, 2008; Gebremedhin et al., 2009; Asfaw et al., 2012). Ethiopia is still among the world's poorest nations (USAID, 2013), susceptible to frequent food shortages, national food insecurity (Abate et al., 2011), and pervasive rural poverty (Spielman et al., 2011) despite the agricultural extension program's implementation.

1.2 Objectives of this review

1.2.1 General objectives of this review

The general objective of this review is to review the role of agricultural extension services in improving farmers' livelihoods in Ethiopia.

1.2.2 Specific Objectives of this Review

The specific objectives of this review are to

- To review the various roles of agricultural extension services in enhancing farmer livelihoods.
- To review the major challenges and weaknesses affecting the effectiveness of agricultural extension services.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Meaning of Agricultural Extension Service

In Ethiopia, agricultural extension services are viewed as an essential public tool that is becoming more pluralistic. Their purpose is to help the country's millions of smallholder farmers, who are the foundation of its agrarian economy, acquire agricultural knowledge, technologies, and practices (Belay, 2003). Extension frequently followed a top-down, directive style under the imperial and Derg regimes, with a major emphasis on collectivization or the promotion of particular crops under state control. After 1991, the definition changed to a more participatory, but still primarily package-based, approach that aimed to achieve food self-sufficiency through the distribution of improved seeds, fertilizers, and related agronomic practices, especially with the launch of the Participatory Demonstration and Training Extension System (PADETES). This approach focused on educating farmers and showcasing the advantages of contemporary inputs through demonstration plots (Spielman, Davis, Negash, & Ayele, 2011).

The main aims of agricultural extension in Ethiopia are closely linked to the nation's overall objectives of reducing poverty and ensuring food security. Promoting the adoption of high-yielding crop varieties, better livestock breeds, enhanced soil and water conservation methods, and efficient pest and disease management measures are the responsibilities of extension services. Additionally, extension is becoming more widely understood to support market-oriented agriculture, value addition, climate change adaptation, and nutrition-sensitive agricultural practices. Its definition has expanded beyond merely increasing production to include improving rural households' livelihoods and resilience (Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources [MoANR], 2016).

According to Belay and Abebaw (2016), the term "agricultural extension service" in Ethiopia mostly refers to a government-run program that aims to increase productivity and food security by distributing agricultural information, improved technology, and practices to smallholder farmers. The nation's agricultural development strategy has traditionally relied heavily on this system, which has developed over decades using a variety of methodologies (Berhanu et al., 2014). Initiatives like the Agricultural Growth Program (AGP), which aimed to shift toward a more pluralistic, demand-driven, and market-oriented service, had a considerable impact on Ethiopia's definition of extension after 2010 (World Bank, 2012). Development Agents (DAs) assigned to Farmer Training Centers (FTCs) inside Kebele (local administrative unit) structures are primarily responsible for

direct farmer contact and training as part of the core operational structure (Ragasa et al., 2013). As an essential connection between research findings and farming communities, these FTCs are designed to function as centers for technology demonstration, farmer mobilization, and skill development (Davis et al., 2010). On the ground, however, DAs frequently provide pre-packaged technologies and information, occasionally with little modification to local contexts or farmer requirements (Spielman et al., 2011).

The role and significance of agricultural extension services in Ethiopia are also starting to be redefined as a result of the growing emphasis on climate change adaptation and mitigation (Deressa et al., 2011). It is becoming more and more expected of extension agents to help farmers develop resilience to climate shocks and variability and to spread climate-smart agricultural practices (Bryan et al., 2013). Additionally, the incorporation of ICTs, like cell phones and specialized agricultural hotlines (like the 8028 farmer hotline), is progressively changing the way extension information is accessed and disseminated, potentially increasing its timeliness and reach (Tadesse & Bahiigwa, 2015). This shows that in order to satisfy the various information needs of a sizable farming population, conventional face-to-face extension techniques must be supplemented (Gebremedhin et al., 2018). A growing focus on nutrition-sensitive agriculture, which aims to enhance dietary diversity and health outcomes in addition to productivity improvements, is also influencing the definition of extension (FAO, 2017).

Addressing enduring issues with DA capability, logistical support, localizing messages, and guaranteeing real farmer involvement in determining the extension agenda are critical to the efficacy of this changing meaning (Kassie et al., 2015). In the end, it is believed that agricultural extension in Ethiopia is a vital tool for revolutionizing the agricultural industry and enhancing the welfare of millions of smallholder farming households in a setting that is changing quickly (Abate et al., 2017).

2.1.2 Review on the evolution of agricultural extension in Ethiopia.

The agricultural extension service in Ethiopia is believed to have been in operation since the 1930s. However, it was not until the Haramaya College of Agriculture was established that a formal extension was initiated. The nation has been doing extension for more than 70 years. A number of extension and development strategies were used concurrently throughout this time (Belay, 2009). Community development (CD) was introduced as a technique to encourage population efforts to identify and address issues of a particular community through self-help programs during the first five-year plan (1998–2002). This initiative lasted until the third five-year plan, which ran from 2008 to 2013. The third five-year plan gave rise to the package program, which is the other program where extension has been used. Package techniques were developed as a project and have been used in Ethiopia since the 1960s.

A comprehensive package project, the Chilalo Agricultural Development Unit (CADU) was the first of its kind. Beginning as CADU in the Arsi region's Chilalo District in 1967, this is the nation's oldest major initiative. It was created with support from the World Bank and the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA). In addition to the Chilalo District, the project was eventually extended to include the Ticho and ArbaGugu districts in the region in 1976–1977 (Tesfaye, 2006). The "model farmer" concept was the extension strategy used by CADU until 1975. The extension strategy of the model farmer, however, drew criticism from both outside and inside CADU. The strategy was found to be ineffective and not the most effective means of knowledge dissemination by empirical investigations (Waktola, 2005).

A socialist perspective was introduced by the Derg dictatorship (1974–1991), which used state farms and Peasant Associations to distribute extension services. The emphasis was on food self-sufficiency and collectivization, frequently through a command-style, top-down method. Although the number of extension agents (then frequently referred to as "Development Agents" or DAs) increased, the system was hindered by resource limitations, strict ideology, and a lack of farmer participation (Pausewang et al., 1990). As the cornerstone of its Agricultural Development Led Industrialization (ADLI) plan, agricultural development was given top priority by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government starting in 1991, following the overthrow of the Derg. The implementation of the Participatory Demonstration and Training Extension System (PADETES) in the mid-1990s, which was greatly impacted by Sasakawa Global 2000, marked a dramatic change. PADETES promoted better seeds, fertilizers, and suggested techniques for staple crops, emphasizing a package approach. Production of several crops, especially maize and wheat, increased significantly as a result (Spielman et al., 2010). Later initiatives like the Agricultural Growth Program (AGP I & II) sought to improve institutional capacity, market accessibility, and productivity even more. At the kebele (lowest administrative unit) level, Farmer Training Centers (FTCs) were created with the intention of serving as training and demonstration centers manned by DAs.

In order to provide extension, input supply, financing, and marketing services to as many farmers as possible, the MPPs were made to span wide territories. The Extension Project Implementation Department (EPID), which was established in 1971 under the Ministry of Agriculture, was thus established to supply production to peasant farmers and to implement the minimum package program that had been initiated. This program's fundamental unit of development was the MPP areas, which stretched 5 km on either side of a 75-km stretch of all-weather roads and housed roughly 10,000 farm households. MPP—I implemented CADU's extension technique and embraced its grain technology. As the program was expanded to more farmers, some issues such as a lack of manpower at the woreda level and little to no in-service training for the extension staff became evident, despite the fact that the minimum package concept performed well in the small areas in which it was implemented under MPP-I (1971–74) (Tesfaye, 2006).

When MPP-I ended in 1974, there was a plan to expand it under the name MPP-II. This plan was put into action beginning in 1980–81 after attempts were made to modify it to fit the nation's new socioeconomic and political structure. The project's primary goal was to enhance infrastructure and establish institutions while also expanding smallholder farmers' access to and use of inputs. The Peasant Agricultural Development Project (PADEP) was started to encourage agricultural development in the predominately smallholder sector following the end of MPP in 1985. Based on lessons learned from the previous two MPPs, the program was created.

2.1.2.1 Review of the Current Situation of Agricultural Extension in Ethiopia.

To increase productivity, guarantee food security, and improve rural livelihoods, Ethiopia's agricultural sector—the foundation of its economy—heavily depends on the efficacy of its agricultural extension services. Basic agricultural technology and practices have been widely disseminated thanks in large part to the old public extension system, which is traditionally defined by a massive network of Development Agents (DAs) at the Kebele (lowest administrative unit) level (Davis et al., 2021). Nonetheless, this system has consistently encountered obstacles such as insufficient funding, insufficient DA training and capability, top-down planning strategies, and frequently a one-size-fits-all package distribution that does not always correspond with various local agro-ecological circumstances and farmer requirements (Berhanu & Poulton, 2022). Pre-2020 initiatives sought to tackle these problems, but since 2020, there has been a sustained—and perhaps increased—focus on changing the extension landscape in the face of novel and complicated issues including conflict, climate change, and changing market demands.

The Ethiopian government has persisted in recognizing the necessity of an extension system that is more market-oriented, demand-driven, and pluralistic (MoA, 2021). Current approaches stress incorporating elements of value chain development, post-harvest management, and climate resilience in addition to a production-only focus (World Bank, 2023). Growing awareness of the shortcomings of depending just on public DAs has led to increased willingness to include private sector players, farmer-based organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in service delivery (Lemma et al., 2022). As an example, several regions have carefully started pilot projects investigating fee-based advice services and private input dealer engagement in extension, indicating a trend towards market-led solutions (Ayele & Gardebroek, 2023). Despite their potential to serve as centers for hands-on demonstration and farmer education, the function of Farmer Training Centers (FTCs) is still being closely examined, with many of them being underutilized or inadequately equipped (Tadesse et al., 2021). Although there are ongoing efforts to resuscitate FTCs by enhancing their staffing, infrastructure, and curricular relevance, regional development varies greatly (MoA, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic's limits and the desire for a broader reach have contributed to the substantial trend of agricultural extension services becoming more digitally accessible after 2020 (Belay & Degnet, 2022). In order to distribute agronomic guidance, meteorological data, and market pricing, the Ministry of Agriculture has aggressively encouraged the creation and uptake of ICT-based platforms, such as mobile applications, SMS services, and interactive voice response (IVR) systems (MoA, 2023). In order to provide more timely and focused information to a greater number of farmers, these digital technologies are intended to support the work of DAs (GIZ, 2022). Nonetheless, there are still issues with digital extension, such as farmers' low levels of digital literacy, inadequate rural connectivity, the expense of devices and data, and the requirement for multilingual, regionally appropriate material (Asres & Tadesse, 2023). It is crucial to make sure that these digital projects are inclusive and do not worsen already-existing disparities among various farmer groups (IFPRI, 2022). Instead of replacing traditional face-to-face extension techniques entirely, it is believed that integrating digital tools with them is essential for effectiveness (UNDP, 2023).

In the present extension discourse, adaptation and mitigation of climate change have also emerged as major topics. Climate-smart agriculture (CSA) strategies, including drought-tolerant crop varieties, soil and water conservation methods, and agroforestry systems, are predicted to be promoted by extension services more and more (FAO, 2023). In order to better assist farmers in developing resilience, DA training programs are being revised to incorporate lessons on the effects of climate change and adaptation tactics (World Bank, 2023). However, because of things like perceived dangers with new technologies, uncertain land tenure, and restricted access to financing, actual adoption rates of CSA techniques at the farm level sometimes lag (Mekonnen et al., 2022). The extension system's ability to successfully convert climatic data into practical local guidance and facilitate the expansion of successful CSA technologies is continually evolving (AGRA, 2021). A major setback to any progress has also been caused by the continued fighting and instability in several areas of the country, which have severely hindered extension work, displaced farmers and DAs, and destroyed agricultural infrastructure (OCHA, 2023). In the upcoming years, one of the biggest challenges will be to rebuild extension services in areas impacted by violence and to meet the unique needs of displaced farming populations (WFP, 2024).

To sum up, Ethiopia's agricultural extension service is undergoing a time of change as it works to adjust to the opportunities and problems of the modern world. There is a clear policy trend towards increased pluralism, market orientation, digitalization, and climate resilience, even though the conventional public system still serves as its base (MoA, 2023). Sustained investment in DA and farmer capacity building, enhanced stakeholder coordination, fair access to digital tools and information, and the development of an environment that fosters innovation and farmer involvement are all necessary for the success of these reforms (Davis et al., 2021). An extension system that is not only technically sound but also extremely flexible, robust, and inclusive will be necessary to address the significant effects of war and climate change on the agriculture industry (UNDP, 2023).

2.2. Review of Empirical Literature

2.2.1 Role of agricultural extension service in enhancing farmers' livelihood in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, agricultural extension services are essential tools for improving rural livelihoods and reforming the largely smallholder agricultural sector (Belay et al., 2017). In order to promote agricultural development and food security, these services seek to close the knowledge gap between farmers' practices and research-generated knowledge (Lemma & Bezabih, 2019). As seen by the extensive use of Development Agents (DAs) to reach millions of farmers in various agro-ecological zones, the Ethiopian government has long placed a high priority on extension (Ragasa et al., 2016). Extension can benefit farmers' livelihoods in a number of ways, including by boosting production, expanding market access, and bolstering resilience to shocks (Tadesse & Bahiigwa, 2015). According to Abate et al. (2018), the main way that extension affects livelihoods is by encouraging the use of better agricultural technologies and practices. In order to achieve noticeable gains in agricultural productivity, this involves sharing knowledge on high-yielding crop varieties, proper fertilizer application, and efficient pest and disease control techniques (Spielman et al., 2017). For example, the adoption of row planting for teff, a crucial staple crop, has been favorably connected with extension program participation, which in turn enhances yields (Bekele et al., 2018). Furthermore, in order to address land degradation and improve long-term agricultural productivity, extension services make it easier to access and learn about sustainable land management approaches (Mekonnen et al., 2021).

In Ethiopia, agricultural extension services are essential public and, more and more, private interventions meant to enhance farmers' abilities and expertise (Belay et al., 2017). In order to boost agricultural output and rural lives, these services are intended to make it easier for people to adopt new technologies and better practices (Spielman et al., 2016). According to Ragasa et al. (2016), the Ethiopian government has long prioritized its agricultural extension system as the main instrument for agricultural development and poverty alleviation. A farming household's overall well-being, food security, and farm income can all be improved with effective extension (Berhanu & Poulton, 2022). Enhancing crop and livestock productivity through the spread of knowledge and technologies has frequently been the main focus (Davis et al., 2019).

Beyond production, agricultural extension is becoming more widely acknowledged for its function in facilitating agricultural commercialization and connecting farmers with markets (Barrett et al., 2022). Extension agents can help farmers join cooperatives for group selling, enhance the quality of produce to meet market standards, and offer useful market information (Minten et al., 2016). Higher farm earnings and the shift from subsistence to more market-oriented farming systems are both greatly aided by such initiatives (Gebremedhin & Jaleta, 2020).

By providing training and demonstrations, the extension's capacity-building component equips farmers with new information and abilities that facilitate improved decision-making about farm businesses and resource allocation (Davis et al., 2019).

According to current research, agricultural extension services play a wide range of vital functions in improving livelihoods. Giving farmers access to information on contemporary farming methods is still essential for assisting them in making wise decisions (Adem & Kaske, 2016). Extension professionals aggressively seek to transmit technology, including the promotion of better seeds, fertilizers, and pest control techniques (Wossen et al., 2017). To provide farmers with useful skills, capacity building is accomplished through on-farm trials, training, and demonstrations at Farmer Training Centers (FTCs) (Abate et al., 2018). One role that is becoming more widely acknowledged for improving commercialization is facilitating connections between farmers and markets, input providers, and financial institutions (Minten et al., 2016). Additionally, extension services can be very helpful in encouraging smallholders to adopt mitigation and adaptation techniques for climate change (Asrat & Simane, 2018). By encouraging farmer organizations and cooperatives, they also aid in the development of social capital, which can strengthen collective action and bargaining power (Francesconi & Heerink, 2017).

For Ethiopian farmers, the effective performance of these extension functions results in noticeable increases in their standard of living. Higher crop yields and productivity have been favorably connected with access to and use of extension services (Maertens et al., 2021). Accordingly, increasing productivity frequently results in better household income, which enables farmers to make investments in assets such as health and education (Kassie et al., 2018). Another important result is improved family food security, as families either increase their production for consumption or their purchasing power (Shiferaw et al., 2019). Farmers can become more robust to shocks like drought or price volatility by following extension guidance on diversification and climate-resilient practices (Deressa et al., 2017).

Embracing pluralistic service delivery combining private sector and NGO actors, which can supplement state efforts, is one way to strengthen extension (Spielman et al., 2016). Wider reach and faster information distribution are possible with the integration of information and communication technologies (ICTs), including digital platforms and mobile phones (Aker & Ksoll, 2016). The relevance and impact of extension services can be increased by moving toward more farmer-centric, demand-driven, and participatory approaches (Lemma & Hicha, 2020).

In summary, agricultural extension services play a critical role in improving Ethiopian farmers' livelihoods by raising income, productivity, and food security (Berhanu & Poulton, 2022). According to Davis et al. (2019), the key to optimizing their influence on sustainable agricultural development will be to tackle current obstacles and seize new opportunities.

Table 1: Key Roles of Agricultural Extension Services in Enhancing Farmers' Livelihoods in Ethiopia

Role Category	Specific Actions by Extension Services	Livelihood Impact	Reference
1. Knowledge & Technology Transfer	Dissemination of improved seeds, fertilizer recommendations, pest control	Increased crop yields, improved food security	(Kassie et al., 2017)
	Training on new farming techniques (e.g., row planting, intercropping)	Enhanced farm productivity and efficiency	(Kelemu et al., 2019)
2. Market Linkage & Commercialization	Provision of market price information, facilitating contract farming	Higher farm gate prices, increased household income	(Woldie & Nuppenau, 2020)
	Support for farmer group formation for collective marketing	Improved bargaining power, reduced transaction costs	(Haji & Legesse, 2017)
3. Capacity Building & Empowerment	Farmer Field Schools, demonstration plots, technical advice	Enhanced skills, better farm management decisions	(Tamene et al., 2023)
	Promotion of gender-inclusive extension approaches	Increased women's participation and economic empowerment	(Koirala et al., 2016)
4. Climate Resilience & Sustainability	Promotion of climate-smart agriculture (CSA) practices	Reduced vulnerability to climate shocks, sustainable land use	(Abera et al., 2020)
	Information on water harvesting and soil conservation techniques	Improved resource management, enhanced ecosystem services	(Tesfaye et al., 2021)
5. Facilitating Access to Inputs & Services	Linking farmers to credit providers and input suppliers	Improved access to essential farm inputs	(Berhane et al., 2018)

Note: Source: Authors computation based on the available data (2025)

2.2.2 Major Challenges and Weaknesses Affecting the Effectiveness of the Agricultural Extension Services

Effective extension services are crucial to Ethiopia's agricultural sector, which is the foundation of its economy, in order to increase productivity, guarantee food security, and enhance rural livelihoods (Belay Kassa, 2018). The overall impact of extension strategies on smallholder farmers is still undermined by major obstacles and fundamental flaws, even after decades of use ranging from top-down Training and Visit (T&V) systems to more recent participatory and pluralistic models (Ragasa et al., 2016). According to Davis et al. (2019), a complex interaction of structural, operational, and contextual issues consistently hinders the efficiency of these services and necessitates thorough and ongoing attention.

Ethiopia's strategy for agricultural transformation and improving the lives of millions of smallholder farmers through knowledge transfer and innovation adoption is largely dependent on agricultural extension services (AES) (Belay & Abebaw, 2018). A number of enduring and interrelated issues reported in recent academic research severely limit the overall efficacy of these services, even with major government investment and a large network of Development Agents (DAs) (Birhanu et al., 2021). To fully realize the agricultural sector's potential to support food security and the fight against poverty, these flaws must be fixed (FAO, 2020).

The technical expertise and practical skills of many DAs are frequently insufficient to meet the varied and changing needs of farmers, which is made worse by limitations in pre-service and in-service training programs. This makes human resource capacity and operational deficiencies within the extension system a major area of concern (Kassie et al., 2017). The consistency and caliber of service delivery in rural communities are negatively impacted by this problem, which is made worse by high staff turnover rates and low motivation among extension workers. These issues are typically linked to inadequate compensation and few opportunities for career advancement (Mengistie & Belete, 2019). Additionally, even though Ethiopia has a lot of DAs, the effective DA-to-farmer ratio frequently stays below ideal levels in terms of meaningful engagement and tailored support, which limits the level of interaction and follow-up required for effective advisory services (Lemma & Tesfaye, 2020). Despite being intended as local centers for hands-on agricultural education and demonstration, Farmer Training Centers (FTCs) often fall short of their potential to improve farmers' practical skills and knowledge due to underutilization, inadequate equipment, or a lack of operational resources (Ragasa et al., 2016).

Significant barriers to effectiveness are also presented by methodological constraints and the current extension approaches, which frequently overlook sufficient farmer participation in the planning, execution, and evaluation phases of extension programs due to their enduring propensity towards top-down, supply-driven models (Wossen et al., 2017). According to Berhanu and Poulton (2016), poor adoption rates may result from the advice and technology being distributed not necessarily being in line with local settings, particular needs, or farmers' priorities. It is acknowledged that a quicker shift to pluralistic, demand-driven, and participatory extension strategies is necessary in order to successfully incorporate the contributions of different actors, such as private sector companies, NGOs, and farmer-based organizations, which are currently progressing slowly (Spielman et al., 2021). Despite having the potential to greatly increase reach and improve the timeliness of information dissemination, the integration and widespread use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in extension delivery are still relatively new and underutilized in many parts of the nation (Taye & Mequanent, 2018). The ability of farmers to move from subsistence-oriented production to more commercially viable agricultural enterprises is further limited by a persistent lack of focus on market-oriented extension, which includes advisory services on value chain development, post-harvest management, and agribusiness skills (Belachew et al., 2020).

Table 2: Major Challenges and Weaknesses in Ethiopian Agricultural Extension

Challenge Category	Specific Weakness/Challenge	Manifestations & Exacerbations	References
1. Systemic & Institutional	Top-down planning & limited farmer participation: Quota-driven targets, insufficient local adaptation of packages.	Reduced relevance of interventions in rapidly changing local contexts (e.g., due to displacement, market shifts from conflict).	Lemma & Tesfaye (2023)
	Weak research-extension-farmer linkage: Disconnect between research findings and practical farmer needs.	Innovations may not address urgent post-conflict recovery needs or climate adaptation priorities effectively. Disruption of existing linkage forums.	ATA (2022)
	Inadequate Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E): Focus on quantitative targets (e.g., hectares covered) over qualitative impact.	Difficulty in tracking actual livelihood improvements or adapting strategies in volatile environments. M&E systems disrupted in conflict zones.	World Bank (2023)
	Political interference & high staff turnover: Extension used for non-extension duties, frequent reshuffling of staff.	Increased politicization in some regions, leading to mistrust and reduced DAs' focus on core duties. Staff displacement or fear of movement in insecure areas.	HRW (2022)
2. Resource Constraints	Insufficient funding: Inadequate operational budgets for Development Agents (DAs), lack of transport and materials.	Government budget reallocations towards security and humanitarian aid post-2020 have further strained agricultural budgets. Inflation eroding the real value of allocated funds.	MoF (2023)
	Shortage of qualified & motivated DAs: Low salaries, poor career progression, inadequate continuous training.	Increased stress and burnout among DAs working in difficult conditions (conflict, climate disasters). Brain drain from public extension.	FAO (2023)
	Limited access to ICT & digital tools: Poor infrastructure, low digital literacy among DAs and farmers.	Missed opportunities for remote extension delivery during COVID-19 movement restrictions and in insecure areas. Digital divide exacerbated.	IFPRI (2022)
3. Contextual & External (Prominent Post-2020)	Conflict & Insecurity: Displacement of farmers & DAs, destruction of infrastructure, market disruption.	Widespread disruption of extension activities in Tigray, Amhara, Oromia, and other regions. Inability of DAs to reach farmers; farmers unable to access inputs or markets. Breakdown of social cohesion vital for group approaches.	UN OCHA (2023)
	Climate Change & Environmental Shocks: Increased frequency/intensity of droughts, floods, pest outbreaks (e.g., desert locusts).	Extension systems overwhelmed by recurrent crises, shifting focus to emergency response rather than long-term development. Increased vulnerability of farmers making adoption of new technologies riskier.	IPCC (2022); MoA (2023)
	COVID-19 Pandemic Lingering Effects: Disrupted input supply chains, market access limitations, health impacts.	Though direct lockdowns eased, economic scars remain (e.g., input affordability). Health system strain affecting overall rural well-being.	WFP (2022)
	Macroeconomic Instability: High inflation (especially food & inputs), foreign exchange shortages.	Increased cost of agricultural inputs (fertilizer, improved seeds) making them unaffordable for many smallholders, undermining extension recommendations. Reduced purchasing power of farmers.	NBE (2023)
	Limited access for marginalized groups: Women, youth, and pastoralists often overlooked by mainstream extension.	Crises (conflict, climate) disproportionately affect marginalized groups, and extension services may lack capacity or specific strategies to reach them effectively in these contexts.	CARE Ethiopia (2022)

Note: Source: Authors computation based on the available data (2025)

The operational environment for extension agents is further challenging by severe resource shortages, logistical difficulties, and insufficient connections with vital input supply systems, all of which further limit the efficacy of AES (Asfaw & Neka, 2017). Particularly in isolated rural regions, DA mobility, their capacity to carry out hands-on demonstrations, and the overall logistical capacity needed for efficient outreach and service delivery are all severely limited by persistent underfunding and inadequate operating budgets (Davis et al., 2019). Importantly, there are frequently weak connections between extension advisory services and the mechanisms that provide agricultural inputs such as improved seeds, fertilizers, and credit. This means that even when

farmers receive sound advice, they might find it difficult to obtain the tools they need to carry it out successfully (Chamberlin & Ragasa, 2018). These logistical challenges are exacerbated by the inadequate rural infrastructure, such as inadequate road networks and inadequate communication facilities, which make it challenging for extension agents to regularly contact farmers and for information to circulate effectively (IFAD, 2019).

The effectiveness of extension initiatives is further compromised by deficiencies in institutional ties and coordination systems, especially with regard to the information exchange between farmers, extension, and research (Getachew et al., 2020). The feedback loop from farmers to researchers and the relationship between agricultural research institutions that develop new technologies and the extension service that distributes them are frequently fragmented, which hinders the adaptation and adoption of pertinent innovations (Belay & Degnet, 2017). Furthermore, insufficient coordination between the various actors involved in the increasingly pluralistic extension landscape, such as private sector providers, NGOs, and government services, can result in inefficient use of limited resources, conflicting messages to farmers, and duplication of effort (Gebremedhin et al., 2019). Strengthening cooperation with universities is also necessary to guarantee that agricultural curricula are up to date and that graduates have the theoretical knowledge and practical skills necessary for successful extension work (Tesfaye et al., 2021).

Finally, there are general obstacles to the efficacy of AES in Ethiopia, including institutional frameworks, wider policy, and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems. Although national policies frequently express a commitment to demand-driven, accountable, and participatory extension, ingrained bureaucratic practices and a predominance of quantitative goals over qualitative results frequently make it difficult to implement these principles in practice at the field level (Berhanu & Poulton, 2016). Instead of methodically evaluating the true impact of services on farmers' practices, productivity, and livelihoods, agricultural extension M&E systems are frequently too weak and focus more on monitoring activities and outputs (such as the number of farmers contacted) (Adem & Fufa, 2020). To guarantee more inclusive and equitable benefits from extension investments, there is also a continuing need for more focused and efficient extension strategies that take into account the unique needs and circumstances of marginalized groups, such as women farmers, young people, and pastoralist communities (Haile et al., 2019). The impact of local administrative or political directions on the deployment and daily operations of DAs might sometimes occasionally jeopardize the technical emphasis and operational autonomy of extension services (Bekele & Kassa, 2017).

In summary, improving the efficiency of agricultural extension services in Ethiopia requires a multifaceted reform agenda that tackles ingrained problems with methodological innovation, resource allocation, institutional coordination, human resource development, and the policy environment (World Bank, 2021). The implementation of rigorous M&E focused on tangible livelihood impacts, the development of truly farmer-centric and pluralistic service delivery models, the provision of sufficient and predictable funding, the strengthening of the entire agricultural knowledge and innovation system, and the empowerment of DAs with improved skills and motivation are all necessary for long-lasting improvements (Spielman et al., 2021).

3. Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendation

3.1 Summary

Agriculture, which employs over 85% of the workforce and makes a substantial contribution to GDP and exports, is the main engine of Ethiopia's economy. The industry suffers from low production, outdated methods, and susceptibility to economic and climatic shocks despite its centrality. Historically, agricultural extension services have been used to solve these issues by encouraging improved farming methods, technology, and knowledge transfer.

Ethiopia has used a number of extension strategies over the years, such as the Agricultural Growth Program (AGP) and the Participatory Demonstration and Training Extension System (PADETES). When used effectively, these services have been shown to improve resilience, food security, and productivity. But there are still several challenges facing extension services, such as DAs' limited capacity, insufficient infrastructure, low farmer engagement, and underutilized Farmer Training Centers (FTCs). After 2020, difficulties become more severe as a result of macroeconomic instability, conflict, climate extremes, and restrictions on digital access.

Although extension services are crucial for agricultural transformation, the evaluation concludes that in order to fully realize their potential, comprehensive reforms that improve capacity, inclusivity, and technology utilization and stakeholder coordination are needed.

3.2 Conclusion

Ethiopia's development strategy continues to rely heavily on agricultural extension services, which have been shown to improve smallholder productivity, market integration, food security, and adaptability. However, their influence is still being hampered by enduring institutional flaws, low farmer participation, resource limitations, and disjointed service delivery. It is imperative that extension services shift toward more inclusive, responsive, and decentralized approaches. Extension services will find it difficult to satisfy the expanding needs of smallholder farmers and the more general objectives of Ethiopia's agricultural reform without such adjustments.

3.3 Recommendations

- Development agents should be equipped with better training, adequate resources, and professional incentives to enhance their performance and reduce high turnover.
- Extension programs should be redesigned to follow participatory, bottom-up approaches that prioritize farmers' involvement planning, implementation, and evaluation.
- The government should promote a pluralistic extension model by encouraging collaboration with NGOs, private sectors, and farmer cooperatives.
- Digital tools such as mobile advisories, agricultural hotlines, and SMS- based information systems should be scaled up to expand the reach and effectiveness of extension services.
- Climate- smart agricultural practices must be mainstreamed into extension content to help farmers build resilience to climate variability and environmental shocks.
- Farmer training centers should be revitalized with appropriate infrastructure, staff, and funding to serve as practical hubs for technology demonstration and skill-building.
- Extension services should be better linked with markets, credit providers, and input suppliers to ensure that farmers can implement the advice and technologies they receive.
- Monitoring and evaluation systems should shift from focusing on output-based indicators (e.g., number of farmers trained) to impact-based metrics that track real livelihood improvements.
- Extension strategies must be tailored to address the unique needs of women, youth, and pastoralists to ensure inclusivity and equity in service delivery.
- A stable policy environment and long-term investment in extension infrastructure and capacity are essential to maintain continuity and foster innovation in the sector.

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