



USAID Agricultural Extension Support Activity

MID-TERM EVALUATION REPORT 2016

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of the USAID Agricultural Extension Support Activity (AESA) mid-term evaluation is to 1) review and analyze the effectiveness of AESA project in achieving the program objectives and 2) analyze if the project is contributing to the improved agricultural service provision which in turn will lead to increased productivity of farmers.

The AESA project is organized into three components that together contribute to the AESA goal: "a strengthened agricultural extension system in southwest and central Bangladesh." Component 1 is premised on the empowerment of smallholder farmers (with an emphasis on women farmers), through development of farmer producer groups (FPGs) around six non-cereal value chains in central and southwest Bangladesh: jute, chili, mung bean, fish farming, beef-fattening and dairy. Component 2 enhances networking, linkages and access to information for farmers and extension agents through development and introduction of new information communication technology (ICT) capacity. Component 3 addresses transformational change within the public and private extension services, so they not only have the capacity to provide the most relevant and up-to-date technical information, but smallholder farmers have equal access to all government and non- government infrastructure and services in their area.

The original design was premised on relevant pro-poor targeting and relevant value chains in central and southwest Bangladesh but exceeded geographic targeting exceeded project resources. In 2015 AESA, in consultation with USAID, made strategic changes to the project design, in part to accommodate an unexpected budget reduction announced by USAID. AESA reduced project geographic scope and the total number of FPG groups targeted. Resource savings were used to intensify activities in four demonstration Upazilas to allow the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) to observe the process and outcomes and to adopt the improved practices that are deemed appropriate and valuable. This project realignment will have a positive effect on future project achievements, in particular on establishing a clear proof-of-concept for an implementation model that can be adapted for scale.

Overall, the project made meaningful progress towards the overall goal, and the most essential project results and objectives. Across all 12 districts, there are signs of emerging positive impact. AESA has linked farmers and extension agents through a series of light touch activities. The intensification of agricultural extension delivery in four Upazilas is also showing early signs of success. AESA interventions provide farmers with access to information they did not have before, which will resolve the majority of their agriculture questions and problems. Early market interventions linking farmers to trusted agro-vet services have improved access to, and knowledge about, affordable value chain inputs. These achievements, together with direct project investments in strengthening agriculture capacity among both farmers and extensions agents, have already yielded small but important improvements in farmer productivity in the project value chains. ICT activities and outputs have not yet come to full fruition. The potential benefits of the Agro Knowledge Bank and Agricultural Call Center investments are high, if AESA finds a way to effectively link farmers with these resources. There are also indications of emerging negative impacts attributable to project interventions. There is a risk of unmet expectations among FPG leadership and members as to the future role and sustainability of the groups beyond the project timeframe. Similarly, there is a risk of disappointment among farmers as to the potential of 'new' ICT due to unmet expectations of the distribution of technology within the project.

The ET's recommendations are provided in section V in detail, with a simplified list found in Box 1 below.

Box 1: Summary of midterm review recommendations (for full detail see section V)

1. Clarify with field staff which project value chains the project will promote increased group marketing for.
2. While it is reasonable to assume that not all elements of the demonstration site interventions will be sustainable, the model itself must have some form of adaptation and continuation in the medium term or else the proof-of-concept will have failed. The project must formulate the potential future journey of demonstration sites to ensure continuation of core elements by stakeholders
3. Reduce expected level of efforts of selected ICT Champions. Focus resources on further building capacity of ICT leaders, Field Facilitators and Field Supervisors into a "assistant extension agent" roles.
4. Develop a 1-2 page document on FPG expectations. The document should highlight key talking points for field staff, and be grounded expected results for the end of the project. Supplement this with training on expectation management.
5. Consolidate the FPG leadership functions. Provide the main Farmer Leader the overall training package through a refresher process. Provide farmer leaders with training on communication and adult learning methods, how to organize courtyard sessions, and catalyze collective action. Ensure trainings are provided with FF, FS, SAAOs, present to build the trust between farmer leaders and sources of extension knowledge.
6. Work with FPG groups to identify low risk lenders and provide a series of trainings on input financing options to FPG members. Relative to the cascade training provided for the 5 key practices, AESA should have more of a hands on technical role in these trainings.
7. Increase the utilization of existing visual ICT tools such as videos developed by the project via smart phones. Increase the use of non-text training tools for trainings that go beyond the 5 key practices. This can include picture heavy leaflets, flip cards, posters, and videos.
8. Consider more direct farmer training models involving FFs and private market actors for farming as a business training. This provides an opportunity to further build trust between farmers and the private sector around inputs on credit, or with existing finance institutions
9. Increase information dissemination via FFs and ICT leaders to FPG members on call centers function as a source of reliable extension knowledge. Couple this with targeted support to project partnered call centers to increase volume and content capacity
10. Develop a simple knowledge management framework with select knowledge products that address the AESA advocacy strategy needs. These are short documents, aimed to demonstrate proof of concept project blue prints.
11. Insert specific activities related to strengthening external partnerships into the Year 4 implementation plan. These activities should be linked to the project advocacy and exit strategies.
12. Provide FF, FS, and ICT leaders/champions remaining phones, with the intent for the project to transfer those phones to the most appropriate persons at the end of the project. Demonstrate a proof of concept that capable persons, with limited agriculture knowledge, can provide extension support with appropriate ICT tools and resources.
13. Work with mPower and CARE to develop AESA field staff's ability to provide practical hands-on support to extension agents and farmer members in the final phase of the project.
14. Reformulate indicators for outcome monitoring with a focus on project performance. The system should focus on an evidence base for of adoption, replication, GoB ownership, and learning questions associated with the proof-of-concept investments.