Chapter 10

Enhanced Knowledge Management:
Knowledge Centers for Extension Communication and Agriculture Development in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge management (KM) provides opportunity for organizations to achieve higher efficiency and increased output. With objective of attaining opportunities in KM at district level, Woreda Knowledge Centers (WKC) were established and used in ten districts in Ethiopia from 2005 to 2010. WKC is a telecenter used to gather, share, classify, access, and use knowledge at district (woreda) level. The study involves questionnaire, group discussion, timeline, SWOT analysis, and KM performance assessment and document review. This chapter presents WKC usefulness, establishment steps, challenges, and opportunities. In ten districts, of the 500 survey respondents, 79% and 71% agree on an increase in knowledge delivery and availability, respectively. Temporal comparison showed that WKC increased staff capacity to document, access, share, and use knowledge leading to improved extension communication. The study recommends that WKC be established by ministry of agriculture and its partners to enhance KM at district level for agricultural development.
1. INTRODUCTION

There are increasing evidences on the benefits of knowledge management (KM) for organizations to be more competitive, achieve higher efficiency and increased output (Hussain, et al., 2010; 1; Sehai, 2006; 1; Lee and Choi, 2003; 181). The benefits for public agricultural institutes from KM can enhance partner collaboration, knowledge sharing and improve extension communication leading to increased agricultural productivity. KM is a joint effort and practices used by organizations and individuals to identify, create, accumulate, re-use, apply (use) and distribute (share) knowledge (Hartwich et.al, 2007; 21, Hussain, et. al, 2010; 4). KM involves identification, creation, acquisition, transfer, sharing and utilization of knowledge.

Knowledge management is a systematic discipline of policies, processes, and activities which empower organizations to apply knowledge to improve effectiveness, innovation and quality (Sehai, 2006; 1). There is a general recognition among academics that knowledge management is a cross-functional and multifaceted discipline (Lee and Choi, 2003; 181). Knowledge management is concerned with ways of exchanging knowledge among those who can develop it and those who can use it (Hartwich et.al, 2007; 21). Thus, it is broader than information management (Kebede, 2010; 416). There are examples of incorporating KM in planning process to gain benefit in public agricultural organizations (Zavaglia, et.al, 2011; 121).

Agricultural extension is a knowledge and information transfer service Gebremedhin, et al., (2006; 24) and KM is important to enhance development partner collaboration, improve use of knowledge in communication for increased agricultural productivity. The importance of knowledge management in agriculture sector is well recognized. Enhancing knowledge management will assist Ethiopian institutions, farmers and pastoralists to overcome challenges in agricultural extension (Sehai, 2006; 3) and enable them take advantage of opportunities in KM.

Different empirical studies have shown that knowledge cannot easily reach farmers through extension services and development projects. In response, new way of managing knowledge have emerged across developing countries beyond the traditional farmer-extension link (Hartwich et.al, 2007; 21). In this case study, the use of knowledge centers or tele-centers has been examined as knowledge management enablers (Lee and Choi, 2003; 198) to illustrate its role in extension communication and agricultural development. The paper shows changes in knowledge process in accessing, sharing, transferring and using knowledge as a result of establishing and using knowledge centers at district “woreda” level.

The Ethiopian government has embarked on a major initiative for use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to improve the efficiency and impact of its sector programs (World Bank; 2003; 68). As part of this initiative, the agriculture sector needs the use of ICT application for extension programs. Recent study in Ethiopia has indicated that ICT has application in extension service as it has become more vivid in reaching the rural communities (Gebremedhin, et al., 2006; 7). Information and communication technologies (ICT) have great potential to contribute to community development (Gomez and Baron-Porras, 2011; 1) and that is true to agriculture sector. The establishment of WKC paves the way for using ITC while addressing problems in extension communication. The argument is that knowledge cannot be simply accessed, transferred and used, when knowledge centers are lacking, which act as nucleus to enhance knowledge management. The lack of exchange of knowledge among and between farmers and those who produce farm-relevant products and services has often been regarded as the key issue in pro-poor agricultural