



POSITION PAPER

Enhancing the relevance of agricultural messaging through mainstream media in Ethiopia

Introduction

Ethiopia has one of the most extensive agricultural extension systems in Africa, comprising approximately 80,446 Development Agents (DAs) and more than 13,699 farmer and pastoralist training centres. Despite this substantial infrastructure, the predominantly face-to-face model of extension service delivery has inherent limitations in rapidly reaching the country's large and geographically dispersed farming population.

In this context, mainstream media represents a complementary extension pathway with considerable potential to enhance the dissemination of agricultural information. Owing to its broad reach and capacity for timely communication, mainstream media can play a critical role in accelerating the diffusion of agricultural innovations and promoting the adoption of improved practices. In Ethiopia, a diverse range of national and regional media organizations are actively engaged in delivering agricultural content. However, the effectiveness of these efforts—particularly in terms of relevance, accessibility, and impact on farming practices—remains constrained.

This position paper presents key findings and recommendations emerging from a recent policy dialogue organized by Stichting Wageningen Research (SWR) Ethiopia in collaboration with the Agricultural Transformation Institute (ATI) and the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA). The dialogue was informed by an assessment conducted jointly by SWR Ethiopia and Farm Radio International (FRI), which examined the current state of agricultural messaging through mainstream media in Ethiopia and identified strategic opportunities to address existing gaps and enhance its overall effectiveness. The key actors engaged in the policy dialogue were (i) officials and communication experts from MoA, (ii) executives and communication experts from ATI, (iii) executives and journalists from mainstream media, (iii) executives and researchers from national agricultural research system (EIAR, RARIs and Universities), and (iv) farmers as main users of agricultural messages.

Key findings

The study and policy dialogue highlighted several critical challenges impeding effective agricultural messaging through mainstream media:

Limited focus on agriculture by the mainstream media

The study revealed that, despite agriculture's significance, it is underrepresented in Ethiopia's mainstream media landscape. Out of 80 media outlets (public, private, and community-based), only a few have regular agricultural programs. Moreover, there are no specialized media outlets dedicated to the agriculture sector. This shows that there is a lack of emphasis on the economic and strategic importance of agriculture across media systems.

Governance challenges in agricultural messaging

The Government Communication Service and Ethiopian Media Authority lead media governance in the country, but there is limited involvement of key sectors in agenda-setting and framing of agricultural issues. The lack of a unified platform for media coordination and poor alignment between research, extension services, and media have further hindered effective communication.

Limited demand-driven and participatory content development process

Agricultural messages are often top-down, centralized, rarely anchored in farmers' need or local agroecological realities, and lack participatory approaches. They are frequently crop- and male-biased, failing to address the diverse agroecological and socioeconomic realities of farmers.

Framing problem

Most agricultural programs are framed around subsistence production, crisis response, and traditional practices rather than commercialization, opportunities, and innovation. This orientation has practical

consequences on the effectiveness of agricultural messaging. In addition, most messages are fragmented and often celebrate success stories without explaining the processes behind them, leaving farmers without actionable guidance.

Limited agricultural science communication

Ethiopia's agricultural research system suffers from weak agricultural science communication, limited translation of findings for local contexts, and a frequent absence of practical technology manuals that follow scientific publications

Weak linkage among Media Outlets, Research, and Extension

In Ethiopia, linkages among mainstream media, extension services, and research are limited. This is due to the absence of an integrating platform, limited use of research findings by community radios, and the inaccessibility of research outputs and user-friendly manuals.

Mismatch between agricultural messages and farmers' real conditions

The agricultural messages in mainstream media often lack specificity, contextual relevance, inclusiveness, and timeliness, and they rarely align with farmers' crop calendars or input availability. The lack of a structured process consisting of problem definition, audience identification, behavioural objectives, message testing, translation, and alignment to seasonal calendars. These missing steps result in generic or poorly timed messaging.

Skills gap among journalists

Many journalists lack subject matter expertise and technical skills, given their background only in journalism, to effectively cover agriculture-related topics. This gap contributes to the dissemination of incomplete or inaccurate information, which can lead to mistrust among farmers.

Deficiency in feedback mechanisms

There are no well-established mechanisms for collecting feedback from farmers regarding the relevance and effectiveness of agricultural messages. This limits the ability to adapt communication strategies to meet farmers' needs.

Exaggerated or misleading reporting

Exaggerated claims about agricultural technologies are common in mainstream media, leading to scepticism among farmers and undermining trust in new innovations.

Media capacity and structural constraints

Media organizations struggle with leadership turnover, limited financial resources, and heavy dependence on advertising revenue. These pressures make their reporting overly cautious and optimistic that avoids discussing real challenges within the agricultural sector.

Policy recommendations

As indicated above, the agricultural messages disseminated through mainstream media face intertwined and complex challenges. To address these challenges and enhance the relevance of agricultural messaging in Ethiopia, the following strategies were agreed upon during the policy dialogue:

1) Strengthening national communication policy

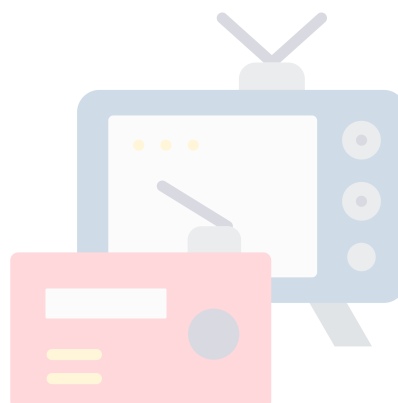
- Incorporate these findings into Ethiopia's national communication policy to ensure systemic improvements in agricultural messaging governance, content development, and dissemination through the mainstream media

Message outlets development

- Establish an Agricultural Media House under the Ministry of Agriculture to centralize efforts in producing high-quality agricultural communication products, with well-established linkage to the country's agricultural knowledge institutions (EIAR, RARIs, Universities)
- Enhance the application of digital platforms such as SMS services, mobile applications, and video productions to deliver timely and relevant agricultural information to farmers.
- Adopt ethical guidelines for mainstream media to prevent exaggerated or misleading reports on agricultural messaging, as accurate reporting will build trust among farmers and stakeholders.

Enhancing tailor-made agricultural message content design

- Create multi-stakeholder platforms at federal and regional levels that bring together agricultural research institutions, extension services, private sector actors, farmer organizations, and media practitioners. These platforms should facilitate coordination, knowledge exchange, and co-creation of agricultural content.
- Mainstream scientific communication in the national agricultural research system.
- Establish robust systems to collect feedback from farmers on the effectiveness of agricultural messages. This will enable continuous improvement of content and ensure that it aligns with farmers' real-world practices.



Promoting professionalism in agricultural journalism

- Develop short-term and long-term action plans that focus on enhancing journalists' competency, coordination among stakeholders and improving message validation processes.
- Engage higher-level officials, including those from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Agriculture, to discuss long-term strategies for integrating agricultural communication into educational curricula.
- Foster international collaboration to learn from best practices in other countries, where specialized agricultural journalism programs have been successfully implemented.

Call to action

The policy dialogue highlighted the shared responsibility among stakeholders: policymakers, researchers, media practitioners, extension services, and farmers, to improve the state of agricultural messaging through mainstream media in Ethiopia. As emphasized during the dialogue, no single entity can address this challenge alone; collaboration is essential for success.

A key outcome of the policy dialogue was a collective call to action directed at policymakers, researchers, media practitioners, development partners, and farmer organizations to strengthen collaboration in addressing the identified challenges. The dialogue underscored the need for coordinated and evidence-based efforts to enhance the design, delivery, and effectiveness of agricultural messaging through mainstream media, thereby positioning it as a strategic instrument for driving agricultural transformation in Ethiopia..



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