

HOW CAN INDONESIA STRENGTHEN VILLAGE EXTENSION CENTRES?

Evidence and Policy Options from the AFACI-RATES Project

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CONTEXT

Indonesia is a leading producer and exporter of agricultural products, with agriculture contributing over 12% to GDP and employing millions of people. With approximately 83,971 villages (BPS, 2023), many communities rely heavily on agriculture for their livelihoods. The decentralisation of the extension system in 2000, coupled with evolving regulations, has made management more complex. Following the 2015 dissolution of the Coordinating Agency for Agricultural, Fisheries, and Forestry Extension (*Bakorluh*), extension activities shifted to local agricultural offices. While the central government sets policies and oversees programs, local governments manage budgets for salaries and performance allowances, resulting in variations across regions (Dewi et al., 2024). Agricultural Extension Officers (AEOs) continue to support farmers by addressing technical challenges,

promoting sustainable practices, and strengthening farmer organisations (Faisal, 2020; Yanfika et al., 2024), enhancing knowledge, attitudes, and productivity (Nabilah et al., 2024).

Although the Ministry of Agriculture aims to deploy one AEO per village, this target has not been achieved. Currently, 44,000 AEOs serve approximately 72,000 agricultural villages, with only 32,000 working directly in the field. As a result, each AEO is responsible for an average of three villages, which limits both the effectiveness of outreach and the quality of support (Syaifudin, 2017). To address these gaps, the government has proposed Village Extension Centres (VECs), also known as *Pos Penyuluhan Desa* (*Posluhdes*; see Box 1), to strengthen local-level agricultural services and provide more accessible support for rural communities.

Box 1: *Posluhdes*

Posluhdes, or Village Extension Centres (VECs), are community-based hubs offering farmers access to essential knowledge, skills, and innovations. They aim to improve farming techniques, technology adoption, and sustainable practices, supporting demand-driven rural development (*Pusat Penyuluhan Pertanian*, 2017; Fadhlurrahman, 2024). Managed by volunteer farmers in collaboration with extension workers, local authorities, and the private sector, only about 15,192 *Posluhdes* have been established—covering 21.25% of villages with agricultural potential (Eko & Samiyono, 2019). In West Java, *Posluhdes* exist in just 2,147 of 5,962 villages (Fadhlurrahman, 2024).

VECs bring extension services closer to farmers, reducing reliance on centralised institutions. Currently, sub-district-level Agricultural Extension Centres (*Balai Penyuluhan Pertanian*, BPP) often cover multiple sub-districts, limiting timely access to information, especially in remote areas (Evrina, 2024). VECs serve as localised hubs that bridge the gap between farmers and larger institutions, such as BPPs.

CHALLENGES IN EXPANDING AND STRENGTHENING POSLUHDES (VECS)

Since its inception in 2013, the implementation of the VECs has remained limited to only 25% of the total number of villages in Indonesia.

Suboptimal Government Support: A significant challenge is the lack of necessary facilities from the central and regional governments (Jamil et

al., 2018). Currently, most VECs have only basic facilities, still occupying farmer group secretariats and lacking essential supporting equipment, such as computers. Neither the central nor the regional governments have allocated sufficient budgets to support the independent activities and infrastructure of VECs. These limitations impact the effectiveness of institutional functions and extension services for farmers.

Weak Institutional Management: The implementation of the institutional function of VECs still faces several challenges in its principles and operational mechanisms (Fadhilurrahman, 2024). Some villages have formally established the VEC, while others have not yet implemented routine activities, such as regular meetings and ongoing outreach. Champion farmers or committed farmers generally manage the VEC, but rarely with adequate managerial and institutional training. This situation limits the VEC's ability to manage activities and sets it apart from other farmer institutions. Furthermore, a VEC has not been recognised as a village-level institution with a strategic role as a source of information and innovation in agricultural development.

EXPERIENCES WITH STRENGTHENING POSLUHDES THROUGH THE AFACI RATES PROJECT

From 2023 to 2025, Indonesia participated in the RATES Project (Improvement of Rural Agricultural Technology Extension System in Asia), which was supported by the Asian Food and Agriculture Cooperation Initiative (AFACI) and funded by the Rural Development Administration (RDA) of South Korea. The project, called "Enhancing Capacity and Collaboration of Agricultural Extension Providers in Posluhdes in Indonesia," aimed to improve the performance of VECs through various targeted strategies. The main elements of the RATES Project included:

1. Technical Training Tailored to Local

Commodities: The project provided technical training across four villages in West Java, tailoring activities to each area's specific needs. Specifically, Sukaresmi focused on

sheep farming, Sukawangi on post-harvest processing, East Jomin on lowland oyster mushroom cultivation and home gardening, and Pucung on paddy cultivation. These sessions combined group discussions, hands-on technical demonstrations, and field practices to ensure the direct and practical transfer of knowledge relevant to local farming systems.

2. Enhancing Digital Skills for Young

Farmers: To foster digital innovation in rural extension, the project organized digital capacity-building sessions focused on managing the VECs website to promote village resources, utilizing social media for agricultural product branding and promotion, and mapping agricultural potential using GPS-based tools, with young farmers as the main participants, positioned to become digital champions and drive technology adoption in their communities.

3. Institutional Strengthening of the

VEC: The project also strengthened the organisational capacity of VECs by providing management support to local administrators through activities such as designing simple organisational structures and facilitating regular coordination meetings with village officials to plan and develop programs and activities. Additionally, dialogues were initiated among VEC administrators, agricultural extension workers, and local authorities to clarify the role of the VEC in promoting village agricultural development.

4. Building Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships:

A partnership-based approach was adopted to connect the VECs with a broader network of stakeholders, including technical directorates under the Ministry of Agriculture, spice processing businesses, ginger collectors, fertiliser companies, and young agri-entrepreneurs (millennial farmers). These collaborations were built through farmer group meetings, training sessions, and interactive discussions with business actors, with particular emphasis on involving women farmers and village youth to ensure inclusive rural development.

Through this approach, the RATES Project demonstrated how targeted interventions—integrating technical training, digital empowerment, institutional support, and multi-stakeholder collaboration—can significantly enhance the capacity and effectiveness of VECs in Indonesia.

Constraints faced during implementation

Despite its positive outcomes, the RATES Project in Indonesia faced several implementation challenges that limited the scale and sustainability of results:

1. Limited Uptake of Technical Training:

Training content was often too technical and insufficiently aligned with farmers' daily practices. Short training durations and irregular involvement of field extension workers further reduced impact and sustainability.

2. Uneven Digital Capacity:

Progress in digital initiatives was uneven due to varying levels of digital literacy, limited access to devices and connectivity, and weak mentoring support.

Inconsistent engagement of designated digital champions further undermined continuity.

3. Limited Post-Training Collaboration:

Sustained collaboration with local partners was weak. Participants lacked confidence and precise mechanisms for follow-up, while reliance on extension workers, who had competing priorities, limited the continuity of joint initiatives.

Lessons Learned from AFACI – RATES Implementation

1. Sustainable VEC Development Requires Long-Term Commitment:

Strengthening VECs is a gradual process that depends on consistent engagement from extension workers, champion farmers, and communities, as well as strong local awareness of the VEC's role as a hub for learning and innovation.

2. Training alone is Not Enough:

Technical training improves skills and productivity, but cannot sustain progress without strong organisational structures and leadership within VECs. Institutional capacity is crucial for achieving a lasting impact.

3. Partnerships Drive Effectiveness:

VECs need collaboration with governments, agricultural departments, universities, private sector actors, and certification bodies to access expertise, infrastructure, and policy support for farmer empowerment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure the *Posluhdes*/VEC becomes a sustainable and effective institution for agricultural development, three key areas require focused attention:

1. Integrate Organisational Strengthening with Technical Training

VEC sustainability depends on capable management and skilled human resources. Training must extend beyond technical knowledge to encompass organisational, managerial, and digital capacities, consistently supported by local governments and extension workers.

Key Actions:

- **Tailored Programs:** Adapt training materials and methods to local needs, ensuring they are simple, practical, and aligned with agricultural realities.
- **Regular and Continuous Training:** Provide routine learning opportunities that keep pace with technological and market changes.
- **Farmer-Friendly Scheduling:** Align training sessions with farmers' work calendars to maximise participation.
- **Commitment from AEOs:** Reinforce the central role of AEOs in ensuring VECs function as effective farmer learning and service hubs.

2. Build a Sustainable Digital Ecosystem with Continuous Support

A strong digital foundation enhances VECs' role as centres of innovation and knowledge exchange. Infrastructure, incentives, and mentoring are critical for building digital capacity.

Key Actions:

- **Infrastructure Investment:** Allocate village budgets to equip VECs with computers, internet access, and updated reference materials.

- **Village Digital Teams:** Establish teams to manage agricultural content, document activities, and promote products via digital platforms.
- **Incentive Schemes:** Provide financial (allowances, operational funds) and non-financial incentives (training, exposure visits, recognition) to motivate VEC managers.
- **System Integration:** Link VEC data and digital content with village and district information systems to expand visibility and impact.

3. Institutionalise the Role and Legitimacy of VECs

For long-term sustainability, VECs require formal recognition, good governance, and consistent allocation of resources.

Key Actions:

- **Institutional Self-Assessment:** Support VECs to regularly review challenges, strengths,

and priorities with guidance from extension workers.

- **Transparent Leadership Selection:** Appoint leaders through participatory processes, based on clear criteria, ensuring respected community figures take charge.
- **District-Level Policy Support:** Advocate for district regulations that recognise and mandate VECs as hubs for coordination, farmer education, agribusiness services, and market facilitation.
- **Village Decrees and Funding:** Issue village decrees to formalise VECs and allocate consistent Village Funds for operations.
- **Partnership Transition:** Develop exit strategies to shift partnership facilitation from projects to VEC leadership.
- **Partnership Skills Development:** Train leaders in identifying partners, proposal writing, and negotiation to secure strategic collaborations.

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