

The Paradox of Agricultural Extension Worker Competency: Personal Strength in the Midst of Knowledge Gap, Skills, and Innovation

Cindriany Pakaya¹, Udin Hamim², Muchtar Ahmad³, Rusli Isa⁴, Dwi Indah Yuliani Solihin⁵, Rustam Tohopi⁶

^{1, 2, 3, 4, 5, & 6}(Master of Public Administration Program, Gorontalo State University, Indonesia)

ABSTRACT

This study examines the paradox of the competence of agricultural extension workers and their contribution to strengthening agricultural extension institutions in Gorontalo Regency, Indonesia. The research uses a qualitative descriptive design. A total of 18 informants were selected purposively consisting of officials of the agriculture office, field agricultural extension officers, coordinators of agricultural extension centers, farmers, and community leaders. Data is collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis, then analyzed through data reduction, data presentation, conclusion drawn, and triangulation. The results of the study show that the competency profile is not balanced. The invisible dimensions of competence, namely motivation, disposition, and self-concept, are relatively strong and support commitment, adaptability, public service orientation, and farmer trust. On the contrary, the visible competence is still inadequate. Extension workers' knowledge is more dominant in the theoretical aspect than in practice, even though the knowledge of institutional development has been well applied. The skills of communication, facilitation, and assistance of farmer groups are relatively strong. However, cultivation practice skills, local conditions-based innovations, and professional certification are still limited. The research concludes that personal strength is able to maintain institutional resilience, but it cannot replace technical and innovative capacity. Therefore, field-based training, experiential learning, competency certification, and innovation collaboration are needed.

KEYWORDS - *Competency Gap, Human Resource Competence, Public Service, Institutional Strengthening, Agricultural Extension*

1. INTRODUCTION

Agricultural development plays an important role in food provision, job creation, and increasing rural household income. In Gorontalo Regency, agricultural activities are also a major part of the community's economic life. The success of this sector's development is determined not only by the availability of land, production facilities, and government assistance. It also depends on farmers' ability to access knowledge, apply technology, and manage farming activities sustainably. Agricultural extension is therefore needed to connect development programs with farmers' actual needs.

Agricultural extension is a nonformal education process that helps farmers improve their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and decision-making abilities. From a public administration perspective, extension is also a form of government service to farming communities. Law Number 16 of 2006 [1] positions extension workers as facilitators of learning processes and farming activities, as well as intermediaries between the government and primary actors. Extension workers are also responsible for building networks, expanding access to information, and strengthening farmer group institutions. These duties require competencies beyond the ability to deliver material because extension workers must adapt their services to regional characteristics and farmers' needs.

Changes in the agricultural environment have made the role of extension workers increasingly complex. Extension workers must understand cultivation technology, climate change, marketing, digital literacy, and the social dynamics of farmer groups. They must also facilitate adult learning and solve problems based on local conditions. Fitri et al. [2] emphasize that future extension workers need to master leading commodities, information technology, and digital literacy. These demands show that extension worker professionalism must

be developed through continuous, focused, and relevant competency development that responds to farmers' changing needs.

These professional demands are not yet fully aligned with the condition of extension worker resources in Gorontalo Regency. Data from the Gorontalo Regency Agriculture Office show that the number of extension workers declined from 221 in 2023 to 219 in 2024 and 217 in 2025. These extension workers serve 19 subdistricts with different numbers of villages and geographical coverage. Some extension workers must handle two to three villages, particularly in large and difficult-to-reach areas. This imbalance increases workloads, reduces the intensity of field visits, and limits the continuity of assistance to farmer groups [3], [4].

Table 1. Initial Indicators of Extension Worker Competency Gaps

Indicator	2023	2024	2025
Number of extension workers	221	219	217
Extension workers with bachelor's degrees	129	130	136
Competency assessment participants	5	-	11
Passed the competency assessment	2	-	1

Source: Gorontalo Regency Agriculture Office, 2025.

Another issue concerns the relationship between formal education and the functional competence of extension workers. The number of extension workers with bachelor's degrees increased from 129 in 2023 to 136 in 2025. This increase indicates progress in the academic qualifications of extension worker resources. However, formal education does not automatically produce the technical mastery and practical skills required in assigned areas. Americo et al. [5] and Dewi et al. [6] explain that academic education must be supported by technical training, field experience, and the ability to interact with farmers.

Limitations in competency development are also evident in training and certification data. From 2023 to 2025, 16 extension workers participated in competency assessments, but only three passed. Data from the Gorontalo Regency Agriculture Office also record that four extension workers held competency certificates during this period. These figures indicate a gap between occupational competency standards and the abilities demonstrated through the assessment process. Kurniyatik et al. [7] emphasize that training and work discipline influence extension worker performance, which means that limited access to training may perpetuate competency gaps.

These empirical conditions need to be analyzed through a concept of competency that encompasses visible abilities and personal characteristics. Spencer and Spencer [8] explain competency through the Iceberg Competency Model. Knowledge and skills lie in the visible section and are relatively easier to develop through education and training. Motivation, traits, and self-concept lie below the surface and form more enduring behavioral tendencies. This model helps explain that extension worker success depends not only on what they know and can do, but also on their motives, characteristics, and understanding of their profession.

Agricultural extension institutions require extension workers who can build farmer group participation and self-reliance. Extension workers help manage group administration, prepare activity plans, facilitate partnerships, and connect farmers with government programs. These abilities determine whether farmer groups remain active only when receiving assistance or can sustain their organizational functions. Anantanyu [9] explains that strengthening farmer institutions requires greater individual, organizational, and networking capacity. Therefore, the quality of extension worker competence is directly related to the ability of farmer institutions to manage their needs and solve shared problems.

Previous studies have explained several factors that shape extension worker performance. Listiana [10] found that technical and nontechnical competencies are related to successful extension and farmers' adoption of technology. Gultom et al. [11] showed that communication and facilitation abilities determine extension workers' success in improving farmer group capacity. Berliana [12] emphasized the importance of technical, managerial, and sociocultural competencies in extension work. Other studies show that motivation, professional recognition, supervision, and institutional support also influence the quality of extension worker performance [13].

Although they provide an important foundation, previous studies have mostly assessed technical, managerial, and social competencies or extension worker performance separately. Studies that integrate motivation, traits, self-concept, knowledge, and skills within a single analytical framework remain limited. The relationship between these five dimensions and the strengthening of extension institutions at the regency level has also received little attention. Previous research has not specifically examined conditions in which extension workers possess strong personal characteristics but limited technical and innovative abilities. This gap is important because competency imbalances may affect the quality of solutions farmers receive even when strong interpersonal relationships have been established.

This study views this imbalance as a paradox of agricultural extension worker competency. Extension workers may possess a strong service motivation, adaptive traits, and a strong self-concept as farmers' partners. These personal strengths allow service relationships and farmer trust to be maintained despite limited resources. However, weaknesses in practical knowledge, cultivation skills, certification, and the ability to create innovations may limit the quality of assistance. This paradox must be analyzed so that human resource development policies do not strengthen one component of competency while neglecting the others.

Based on these issues, this study aims to analyze the human resource competencies of extension workers in supporting agricultural extension institutions in Gorontalo Regency. The analysis applies five dimensions of the Iceberg Competency Model: motivation, traits, self-concept, knowledge, and skills. Theoretically, the study explains the imbalance between personal and technical competencies in extension services. Empirically, it shows how this imbalance affects farmer assistance and institutional strengthening. In practical terms, the findings can inform the design of practice-based training, competency certification, experiential learning, and innovation collaboration tailored to regional needs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Human Resource Competency in Public Administration

Human resource competency indicates an individual's ability to perform work according to standards and produce the performance required by an organization. Competency includes not only mastery of information but also the ability to apply knowledge, build working relationships, and act according to professional values. Boyatzis [14] views competency as an individual characteristic associated with effective or superior performance. This perspective treats competency as an integration of cognitive capacity, behavior, and personal characteristics. Public organizations therefore need to assess competency based on the actual ability of public officials to solve service problems. Dessler [15] emphasizes that competency must be linked to job demands, learning processes, and work outcomes so that human resource development has a measurable direction.

In public administration, public officials' competency is directly related to the quality of policy implementation and services to citizens. Public officials must do more than understand regulations because they must translate policies into actions that address community needs. Denhardt and Denhardt [16] emphasize that public officials must serve citizens, build shared interests, and strengthen public trust. This orientation requires knowledge, skills, responsibility, integrity, and adaptability. Human resource competency is therefore a strategic capacity that determines whether public organizations can deliver responsive and sustainable services. Tahir [17] also identifies professionalism, responsibility, and public service ethics as essential elements in improving the quality of public services.

Competency development in public organizations must connect individual needs with institutional goals. Formal education can strengthen foundational knowledge but does not necessarily ensure the ability to apply that knowledge in complex service situations. Training, work experience, supervision, feedback, and performance evaluation are needed to transform knowledge into functional ability [15]. Grindle [18] explains that public sector capacity rests on the quality of human resources, organizational strengthening, and a supportive institutional environment. Organizations therefore need to provide both learning opportunities and opportunities to apply competencies at work. An analysis of extension worker competency must consider personal abilities and the institutional system that supports their development.

2.2 Iceberg Competency Model

Spencer and Spencer [8] developed the Iceberg Competency Model to explain that competency consists of visible and invisible characteristics. Knowledge and skills lie above the surface because they are easier to observe, measure, and develop through education and training. Motivation, traits, and self-concept lie below the surface because they are more deeply embedded in an individual's personality. These five dimensions' influence how a person chooses actions, responds to problems, and maintains performance. The model rejects the view

that competency is synonymous only with formal education or technical ability. Wong [19] shows that the iceberg model remains relevant for assessing the characteristics underlying professional behavior and performance.

Motivation describes the drive that leads individuals to act consistently to achieve specific goals. Traits refer to relatively enduring characteristics such as perseverance, responsibility, adaptability, and self-control. Self-concept concerns the values, beliefs, and professional identity that underpin work behavior. Knowledge refers to mastery of information and understanding relevant to the job, while skills indicate the ability to apply knowledge through concrete action. An analysis that combines these five dimensions can explain why individuals with the same education deliver different service quality and problem-solving performance. The relationship among these dimensions shows that greater knowledge does not necessarily improve performance when it is not supported by motivation and professional identity.

The iceberg model guides competency development strategies. Knowledge and skills can be strengthened through technical training, demonstrations, field practice, certification, and workplace mentoring. Motivation, traits, and self-concept require coaching, role models, reinforcement of professional values, successful experiences, and reward systems. Spencer and Spencer [8] emphasize that below-the-surface competencies are more difficult to develop but strongly influence behavioral consistency. Bandura [20] adds that beliefs about one's abilities influence action choices, perseverance, and readiness to face obstacles. Strengthening extension worker competency therefore requires a combination of technical, psychological, and organizational interventions.

2.3 Agricultural Extension Worker Competency

Agricultural extension workers perform educational, facilitative, consultative, mentoring, and intermediary functions between the government and farmers. These functions require knowledge of cultivation, agroecosystems, agricultural policy, marketing, information technology, and farmer institutions. Extension workers also need skills in communication, adult learning, group facilitation, problem-solving, and activity evaluation. Davis [21] places extension workers as an important component of agricultural knowledge and information service systems. This role requires extension worker competency to evolve in response to technological change and farming needs. Leeuwis and Van den Ban [22] also identify communication, social learning, and interaction management as the core of modern agricultural extension.

Extension worker competency cannot be limited to mastery of technical material. Relationships with farmers require empathy, trust, perseverance, and the ability to adapt communication methods to the sociocultural context of the community. Sadono [23] explains that the extension paradigm positions extension workers as facilitators of learning rather than mere providers of information. Gultom et al. [11] found that extension workers' abilities as facilitators, motivators, educators, and catalysts tend to be stronger than their capacity as innovators. These findings show that strong social competence is not always accompanied by the ability to produce innovations that meet local needs. Americo et al. [5] found that extension worker education needs to be complemented by technical training and interaction skills to improve mentoring performance.

Modern agricultural change expands the competency standards required of extension workers. Extension workers need to understand climate change, sustainable agriculture, value chains, market access, risk management, and the use of digital technology. Fitri et al. [2] show that mastery of leading commodities, information technology, and digital literacy are important requirements for future extension workers. Dewi et al. [6] emphasize that extension worker performance is shaped by education, experience, communication, and continuous learning. This capacity must be accompanied by the ability to adapt innovations to resources, local knowledge, and farmers' needs. Extension worker competency should therefore be assessed through the changes it produces among farmers, not merely through mastery of material.

2.4 Agricultural Extension Institutions

Agricultural extension institutions include the structures, rules, working relationships, and mechanisms that regulate the delivery of extension services. These institutions involve the central government, local governments, Agricultural Extension Centers, extension workers, village governments, farmer groups, and other supporting actors. Law Number 16 of 2006 [1] states that extension institutions provide learning spaces, build networks, and increase the capacity of primary actors. Institutional effectiveness is determined not only by formal structures but also by coordination, resources, participation, and the quality of relationships among actors. Strong institutions allow farmers to receive information, technology, and program support more consistently. Leeuwis and Van den Ban [22] explain that modern extension operates within innovation networks

that require communication and coordination among actors.

Institutional strengthening is the process of improving an organization's ability to perform its functions and sustain service delivery. Grindle [18] explains that institutional capacity is formed through human resource development, organizational strengthening, and improvements in the institutional environment. In agricultural extension, this capacity is reflected in farmer groups' ability to manage their organizations, prepare plans, build participation, and establish partnerships. Anantanyu [9] emphasizes that farmer institutions require support for individual, organizational, and networking capacity. Extension workers therefore act as intermediaries who transform government support into learning processes and the institutional self-reliance of farmers. Davis et al. [24] show that participatory learning can increase farmer capacity when supported by adequate facilitation and institutions.

Agricultural extension institutions are also public service systems that operate through relationships across levels of government. The central government establishes policies and standards, while local governments and Agricultural Extension Centers manage service delivery at the regional level. Farmer groups provide spaces for learning, participation, and the organization of farmers' interests. Anantanyu [9] shows that weak coordination and organizational capacity can limit institutional functions even when formal structures are available. Grindle [18] emphasizes that formal rules need to be supported by human resources and effective working mechanisms. The quality of extension institutions therefore depends on the alignment of structure, actor competency, coordination, and service recipient needs.

2.5 Extension Worker Competency and Institutional Strengthening

Extension worker competency influences institutions through the quality of assistance, coordination, and facilitation provided to farmer groups. Motivation encourages consistent visits, willingness to assist farmers, and initiative in solving problems. Responsible and adaptive traits help extension workers build stable relationships with communities and stakeholders. A self-concept as a facilitator and public servant strengthens commitment to farmer group success. These three personal competencies create the trust needed to maintain participation and the legitimacy of extension institutions. Tjitropranoto [25] emphasizes that interpersonal relationships and continuous assistance increase farmer trust and participation.

Knowledge and skills determine the quality of solutions extension workers provide to farmers. Technical knowledge helps extension workers explain technology, policies, cultivation risks, and farming management alternatives. Skills enable them to apply knowledge through demonstrations, facilitation, communication, and problem-solving. Listiana [10] shows that technical and nontechnical competencies are associated with successful extension and technology adoption. Personal competence without technical capacity may maintain social closeness but may not produce the changes in practice and innovation that farmers need. Anwar et al. [26] show that extension workers' knowledge is related to farmers' adoption of agricultural innovations.

The relationship between extension worker competency and institutions does not operate automatically. Individual competency requires support from programs, facilities, financing, supervision, and coordination so that it can be applied consistently. Extension workers with technical ability still face obstacles when access to training is limited or assigned areas are too extensive. Conversely, institutional support does not produce quality services when extension workers lack appropriate motivation and ability. Kurniyatik et al. [7] show that training and work discipline influence extension worker performance. This reciprocal relationship confirms that institutional strengthening must develop individual capacity while improving organizational conditions.

2.6 Synthesis of Previous Studies and Conceptual Framework

Previous studies show that extension worker competency is shaped by education, training, experience, motivation, organizational support, and characteristics of the working area. Berliana [12] emphasizes the importance of technical, managerial, and sociocultural competencies. Fitri et al. [2] add mastery of commodities, information technology, and digital literacy as requirements for future extension workers. Gultom et al. [11] demonstrate extension workers' strength in facilitation and their relative weakness in innovation. These studies are important, but they have not integrated personal and visible competencies to explain the strengthening of extension institutions comprehensively. Dewi et al. [6] also show the need for a multidimensional assessment of extension worker performance that reflects the service context.

This study's conceptual framework positions the five competency dimensions as complementary capacities. Motivation, traits, and self-concept form the foundation of behavior, service orientation, and extension workers' relationships with farmers. Knowledge and skills form the technical capacity to translate this commitment into solutions, cultivation practices, and innovations. A balance among the five dimensions is expected to strengthen coordination, participation, learning, and institutional self-reliance. Conversely, an imbalance between personal strengths and technical capacity creates the competency paradox examined in this study. This framework directs the analysis toward relationship patterns, forms of gaps, and the institutional implications of each competency dimension.

The theoretical synthesis produces the proposition that personal strengths can sustain service relationships but cannot replace practical knowledge and innovative skills. Motivation, traits, and self-concept are expected to strengthen commitment, adaptation, trust, and the legitimacy of extension workers. Knowledge and skills are expected to determine the accuracy of solutions, the quality of facilitation, technology application, and the capacity to generate local innovations. Institutional strengthening will be more effective when all five dimensions develop in a balanced manner and receive organizational support. When this balance is not achieved, institutions may endure through personal relationships, but the quality of learning and changes in farmers' practices will remain limited. This proposition provides the basis for interpreting the empirical findings in Gorontalo Regency.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a qualitative descriptive design to develop an in-depth understanding of extension workers' human resource competencies in supporting agricultural extension institutions. This design was selected because motivation, traits, self-concept, knowledge, and skills need to be understood through the experiences, actions, and interpretations of the actors. The study did not test statistical relationships but described competency patterns, forms of gaps, and their implications for extension institutions. The researcher served as the main instrument who planned data collection, conducted interviews and observations, and interpreted the findings. This approach is consistent with qualitative research, which examines phenomena in their natural contexts [27], [28].

The study was conducted at the Gorontalo Regency Agriculture Office and Agricultural Extension Centers in Gorontalo Regency. These locations were selected because they serve as centers for policy management, coordination, and the delivery of extension services across 19 subdistricts. Data collection and processing took place from October 2025 to May 2026. This period covered preliminary observations, in-depth interviews, document collection, data analysis, and verification of findings. The research context also covered four service zones, namely Telaga, Limboto, Batudaa, and Boliyohuto, to represent variations in assigned-area conditions.

Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their knowledge, experience, and involvement in agricultural extension. The study involved 18 informants consisting of Agriculture Office officials, field agricultural extension workers, coordinators of Agricultural Extension Centers, farmers, and a community leader. Office officials and extension workers served as key informants because they understood policies, human resource development, and extension practices. Farmers, extension center coordinators, and the community leader provided assessments from service recipients and actors who interacted directly with extension workers. The selection of extension workers and farmers also considered representation from the four service zones in Gorontalo Regency.

Table 2. Distribution of Research Informants

No.	Informant Category	Number
1	Gorontalo Regency Agriculture Office Official (Head of Office)	1
2	Coordinator of Agricultural Extension Center	3
3	Field Agricultural Extension Worker	7
4	Farmer	4
5	Community Leader	1
	Total	16

Source: Research data, 2026.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. The interviews used a semistructured guide developed from the five dimensions of the Iceberg Competency Model: motivation, traits, self-concept, knowledge, and skills. Questions for office officials focused on policies, development, training, certification, and organizational support. Interviews with extension workers explored work experience, forms of assistance, technical ability, innovation practices, and obstacles in assigned areas. Farmers, extension center coordinators, and the community leader were asked to explain the quality of interactions, extension worker reliability, and extension workers' contributions to farmer group institutions.

Observations covered extension activities, interactions between extension workers and farmers, assistance activities, and the development of farmer group institutions. The researcher also observed working conditions at the Agriculture Office and Agricultural Extension Centers to understand coordination and institutional support. Documentation provided data on the number of extension workers, educational attainment, geographical distribution, training activities, certification, and competency assessment results. Other documents included institutional structures, activity reports, archives, and policies related to agricultural extension. These three techniques allowed comparisons among informant statements, field practices, and administrative evidence.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña [29], which includes data condensation or reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data reduction involved selecting, summarizing, coding, and grouping interview, observation, and document data into the five competency dimensions. The data were then presented in informant comparison matrices and thematic narratives to identify patterns, similarities, differences, and competency gaps. Conclusions were drawn from the initial stage of data collection and reexamined when new evidence emerged. The analysis proceeded iteratively until a consistent explanation of the relationship between extension worker competency and institutional strengthening was established.

Data trustworthiness was examined through credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through source triangulation, method triangulation, repeated observations, and confirmation with informants regarding the meaning of interview findings. Dependability was maintained through process records and an audit trail documenting data collection and analysis decisions. Transferability was supported by detailed descriptions of the location, extension worker characteristics, institutional structure, and service context. Confirmability was maintained by connecting each interpretation to interviews, observations, or documents and reflecting on possible researcher bias [30]. Informant identities were presented as codes at the reporting stage to maintain confidentiality.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings show that agricultural extension worker competency in Gorontalo Regency has not developed evenly. The three below-the-surface dimensions, namely motivation, traits, and self-concept, emerged as the primary strengths. The two visible dimensions, knowledge and skills, showed strengths in group development and communication but remained weak in cultivation practices, local innovation, and certification. This pattern was established through triangulation of responses from all research informants. Table 3 summarizes the findings for each dimension.

Table 3. Synthesis of Agricultural Extension Worker Competency Findings

Dimension	Primary Strength	Gap	Institutional Contribution
Motivation	Responsibility, dedication, professional pride, and concern for farmers.	Rewards have not reached all extension workers.	Maintains consistency of assistance and extension worker presence.
Traits	Adaptive, humble, resilient, responsive, and communicative.	Thirty-six percent are not fluent in Gorontalo.	Builds closeness, trust, and farmer acceptance.
Self-concept	Identity as a front-line actor, facilitator, information bridge, and farmers' partner.	Professional identity is not always supported by technical capacity.	Strengthens extension worker legitimacy and government-farmer relationships.
Knowledge	Mastery of farmer group development and access to information.	Knowledge is more theoretical; online training lacks depth.	Supports the administrative and organizational development of farmer groups.
Skills	Communication,	Cultivation practice, local	Strengthens routine meetings,

	facilitation, assistance, and group development.	innovation, and certification remain limited.	participation, and group management.
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Source: Analysis of research data, 2026.

The distribution of 153 agricultural extension workers covers all 19 subdistricts in Gorontalo Regency, but their numbers are uneven. Limboto and Tibawa have the highest numbers, with 14 extension workers each, while Talaga Jaya has the lowest number, with three. Telaga Biru has 11 extension workers and Bongomeme has 10, while the other subdistricts have between four and nine. These data show that extension services reach every subdistrict, but differences in the number of extension workers may create variations in workloads and the intensity of assistance. Assigned areas and operational support therefore need to be adjusted to provide farmers with more equitable services.

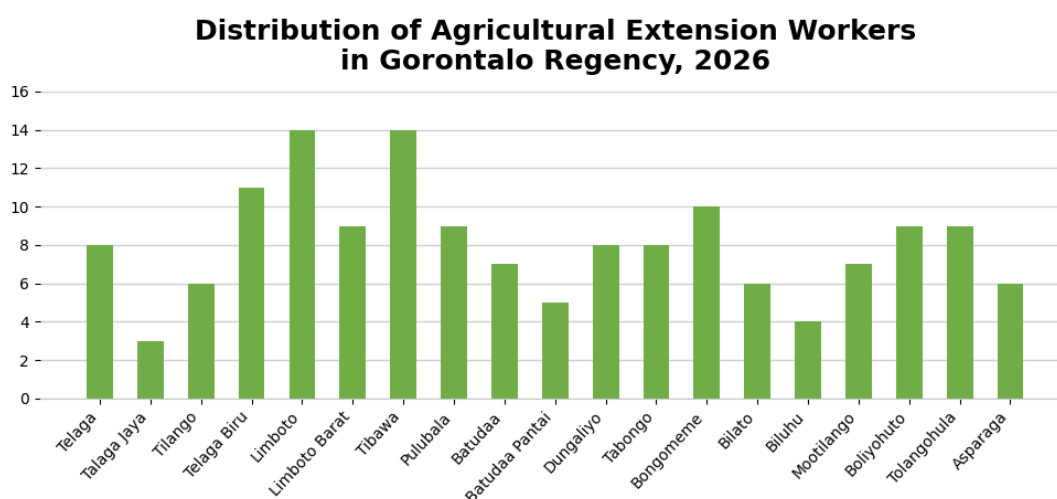


Figure 1. Distribution of Agricultural Extension Workers in 19 Subdistricts of Gorontalo Regency
Source: Agency for Agricultural Extension and Human Resources Development, Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Indonesia, 2026.

4.1 Extension Worker Motivation

Triangulation showed that extension worker motivation consists of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is reflected in a sense of responsibility, professional commitment, pride in being an extension worker, dedication to service, and a desire to help farmers. Extrinsic motivation comes from performance allowances, exemplary extension worker awards, certificates, and operational facilities. Although both forms were evident, the interviews identified responsibility toward farmers as the more dominant motive. Close relationships with farmer groups made extension workers feel obligated to remain present despite extensive assigned areas and limited resources.

One informant explained, "I feel responsible for the farmers. When they need assistance or information, I must be present because that is my duty as an extension worker." This statement is consistent with another informant's view that farmers' success is also the extension worker's success. Another informant reinforced this finding by stating that extension workers continued to visit even when farmer groups were located far away. The reward system was considered capable of increasing motivation, but not all extension workers had equal opportunities to receive rewards. These findings show that the continuity of assistance relies more on personal commitment than on material rewards.

Extrinsic motivation functions as reinforcement rather than the sole source of work motivation. The interviews showed that performance allowances encouraged discipline, attendance, and field visits because work achievements affected the allowances received. Informants also identified exemplary extension worker awards, certificates, and operational vehicles as valuable forms of appreciation. However, the informants explained that awards were given only to extension workers with specific achievements. Their effects were therefore positive but not experienced evenly.

A comparison of responses across informants showed a high degree of consistency. Informants emphasized work commitment, professional responsibility, and the presence of extension workers when needed. They also linked work motivation to the pride felt when farmers succeeded. Differences in emphasis did not produce contradictory findings. All sources showed that motivation sustains the continuity of assistance and relationships between extension workers and farmer groups.

The findings show that intrinsic motivation is the main driver of extension worker behavior, while allowances and rewards serve as reinforcement. This pattern is consistent with Spencer and Spencer [8], who position motives in the deepest layer of competency and link them to consistently chosen actions. Responsibility toward farmers, professional pride, and dedication to service explain why extension workers remain present when facing extensive assigned areas or limited support. This motivation is not a temporary response to incentives but a personal drive that sustains assistance. Motivational strength therefore provides a psychological foundation for the functioning of extension institutions.

This motivational orientation also reflects public service values. Denhardt and Denhardt [16] emphasize that public officials must serve citizens and build shared interests rather than merely carry out bureaucratic procedures. Extension workers who continue to respond to farmers' problems demonstrate a service orientation that goes beyond formal program implementation. Their consistent presence leads farmers to view them as trustworthy representatives of the government. This condition strengthens institutional legitimacy because the quality of public relationships is formed through everyday service experiences.

Motivation also operates through the formation of social relationships between extension workers and farmer groups. Tjitropranoto [25] explains that interpersonal closeness and continuous assistance increase farmer trust and participation. Anantanyu [9] adds that strengthening farmer institutions requires intermediary actors who can maintain communication and coordination. This study reveals the same mechanism because a sense of responsibility encourages extension workers to continue interacting and resolving group problems. Personal motivation therefore produces institutional effects through trust, participation, and continuity in working relationships.

Although intrinsic motivation is dominant, extrinsic support remains necessary to maintain fairness and work sustainability. Rewards received by only some extension workers may encourage achievement, but they need to be managed using transparent criteria. Arissaryadin et al. [3] show that extension worker motivation is influenced by workload, rewards, and organizational conditions. This finding indicates the need to combine a fair reward system, operational support, and reinforcement of professional values. Motivation policy should not focus only on allowances but should also recognize contributions to assistance, innovation, and farmer group strengthening.

4.2 Extension Worker Traits

Extension worker traits are reflected in adaptability, humility, resilience, patience, responsiveness, and the ability to cooperate. The interviews showed that extension workers must adapt to farmers' characteristics and the conditions of each village. Inventory data for 153 extension workers show that 64% speak Gorontalo fluently or understand the local culture. The remaining 36% have not fully mastered the local language. Language ability and cultural understanding help extension workers build close relationships and adapt how they communicate information.

**Percentage of Extension Workers Fluent in Gorontalo/
Who Understand Gorontalo Culture**

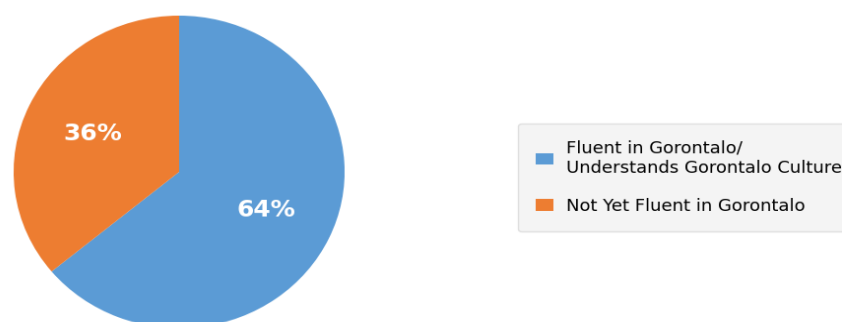


Figure 2. Percentage of Agricultural Extension Workers Fluent in Gorontalo

Source: 19 (nineteen) Agricultural Extension Centers in Gorontalo Regency, 2026.

The interviews showed that extension workers need to be adaptable, communicate effectively, remain humble, and become part of farmers' lives. Informants also emphasized that extension workers should not discriminate among farmers and should be approachable. Other findings stressed mental resilience, patience in accepting criticism, and rapid responses to farmers' problems. One informant stated, "When farmers experience a problem, extension workers must immediately go to the field." The consistency of these responses shows that service-oriented traits are a primary resource for maintaining farmer trust.

Mastery of the local language reveals variations in adaptability among extension workers. Those who speak Gorontalo fluently can explain material more easily, understand farmers' responses, and engage in informal conversations. The local language also helps extension workers recognize values, customs, and community decision-making practices. In contrast, extension workers who are not fluent need more time to build close relationships. The 64% and 36% figures show that cultural sensitivity is a strength among most extension workers but is not yet evenly distributed across all areas.

Triangulation also showed that service-oriented traits are reflected in daily behavior. The interviews indicated that extension workers were willing to listen to problems, continue making visits, and help find solutions. Informants stressed the importance of patience because each farmer has a different level of acceptance and different characteristics. The findings also showed that criticism and rejection need to be addressed without reducing the intensity of assistance. The consistency of these responses demonstrates that adaptability, resilience, and responsiveness have increased farmers' acceptance of extension services.

Adaptive, humble, resilient, patient, and responsive traits are important strengths in extension work. Spencer and Spencer [8] explain traits as relatively enduring personal characteristics that influence an individual's responses to work situations. These characteristics are evident when extension workers continue to assist farmers despite rejection, criticism, geographical distance, and different needs. Resilience maintains consistency of action, while humility creates opportunities to learn from farmers' experiences. Extension worker traits therefore transform technical interactions into more open and sustainable service relationships.

The ability to use the Gorontalo language demonstrates the relationship between adaptive traits and cultural sensitivity. Sadono [23] emphasizes that participatory extension requires equal communication suited to farmers' social contexts. Leeuwis and Van den Ban [22] also view communication as a process of constructing shared meaning rather than merely transferring information. Mastery of the local language helps extension workers understand farmers' expressions, customs, and ways of assessing an innovation. It accelerates the development of close relationships and reduces social distance between public officials and communities.

The findings on service-oriented traits are also relevant to the professionalism of public officials. Tahir [17] explains that integrity, responsibility, ethics, and commitment determine service quality in addition to technical ability. Sulila [31] emphasizes the importance of public officials' behavior in building coordination and harmonious working relationships. Rapid responses to farmers' problems demonstrate that extension worker traits have direct consequences for public trust. This trust makes it easier for extension workers to mobilize participation and keep groups active.

However, the 36% of extension workers who are not fluent in Gorontalo show that cultural adaptability remains uneven. This gap does not mean that they cannot provide services, but it indicates a need to strengthen social understanding in certain areas. Cross-regional learning, mentoring by senior extension workers, and local cultural orientation can support adaptation. Traits cannot be strengthened through short lectures because their development requires habituation, reflection, and experience in social interaction. Organizations need to include the ability to build social relationships in extension worker competency development and evaluation.

4.3 Extension Worker Self-Concept

Extension worker self-concept has developed into a multidimensional professional identity. The interviews described extension workers as the front line of agriculture, an extension of the government, facilitators, information bridges, information providers, and farmers' partners. These different terms convey the same meaning: extension workers do more than perform administrative duties. They view themselves as development actors responsible for helping farmers obtain information, programs, production facilities, and solutions. This identity encourages extension workers to maintain service relationships beyond the implementation of government programs.

The interviews referred to extension workers as the front line and the government's representatives in the field. Other findings positioned extension workers as facilitators who provide education and help farmers access government programs. Extension workers were also viewed as information bridges because farmers first confirmed program information with them. One informant offered a more personal interpretation by stating, "Extension workers are farmers' partners." These findings show that service orientation and social closeness have become embedded in extension workers' professional identity.

A shared professional identity was evident in the responses of all informant groups. Informants viewed extension workers as policy intermediaries and emphasized their facilitation and information provision functions. The findings also showed that extension work was understood as a responsibility to assist farmers in both success and failure. Extension workers were the first people contacted when problems arose or program information was needed. This consistency shows that extension workers' professional identity has gained recognition from both organizations and communities.

A strong self-concept influences extension workers' patterns of field presence. Assistance is not provided only when government aid or formal activities are available. Informants explained that extension workers continued to provide consultations, connect farmers with the office, and help groups resolve administrative issues. Their relationship as farmers' partners made communication more open than a rigid bureaucratic relationship. Nevertheless, a strong service identity was not always accompanied by equally strong technical and innovative abilities.

Extension worker self-concept has developed as a professional identity that includes roles as a front-line actor, facilitator, information bridge, and farmers' partner. In the Iceberg Competency Model, self-concept includes values, beliefs, and how individuals perceive their roles [8]. This identity influences extension workers' decisions to continue helping farmers outside formal activities. Extension workers do not view their work merely as fulfilling civil service duties but as a social responsibility for farmers' success. This self-concept explains the strong mentoring orientation and interpersonal closeness found in the field.

The relationship between self-concept and action can be explained through professional belief. Bandura [20] states that beliefs about one's abilities influence perseverance, choice of action, and responses to obstacles. Hidayanti [32] found that public officials' self-concept affects performance, particularly when supported by consistent work behavior. Among extension workers in Gorontalo, an identity as facilitators encourages involvement in group development and the resolution of farmers' problems. However, professional belief becomes more effective when supported by adequate technical mastery.

Extension workers' self-concept also strengthens the legitimacy of extension institutions. Denhardt and Denhardt [16] view public service as a process of building trust and shared interests with citizens. When farmers make extension workers their first point of contact, trust in individuals also strengthens acceptance of government institutions. The relationship as farmers' partners creates two-way communication and reveals information about groups' actual needs. Institutions therefore operate not only through formal structures but also through the service identity embodied by extension workers.

These findings also reveal the limits of self-concept as a source of performance. Gultom et al. [11] found that extension workers may perform strongly as facilitators, motivators, and educators while their capacity as innovators remains low. This pattern is consistent with the Gorontalo findings because service identity developed more strongly than technical and innovative ability. A positive self-concept needs to be accompanied by practical experience so that professional belief produces appropriate solutions. Without such reinforcement, extension workers may be socially trusted but remain unable to address complex cultivation problems.

4.4 Extension Worker Knowledge

The educational background composition shows that most extension workers have education relevant to the agricultural sector. Agricultural Science bachelor's degree holders form the largest group, with 71 people or 46.41%, followed by senior high school/agricultural development senior high school graduates with 28 people or 18.30%, and Diploma III in Agriculture graduates with 19 people or 12.42%. Animal Science bachelor's degree holders account for 9.15%, Applied Science bachelor's degree holders 7.19%, master's degree holders in Agriculture/Agricultural Technology 4.58%, and master's degree holders in Animal Science 1.96%. This composition provides an academic foundation for extension work, but the findings show that relevant formal education does not automatically result in mastery of cultivation practices and innovative ability. Formal education therefore needs to be strengthened through farmer field schools, demonstrations, internships, and training based on local problems.

**Percentage of Agricultural Extension Workers in Gorontalo Regency
by Educational Background, 2026**

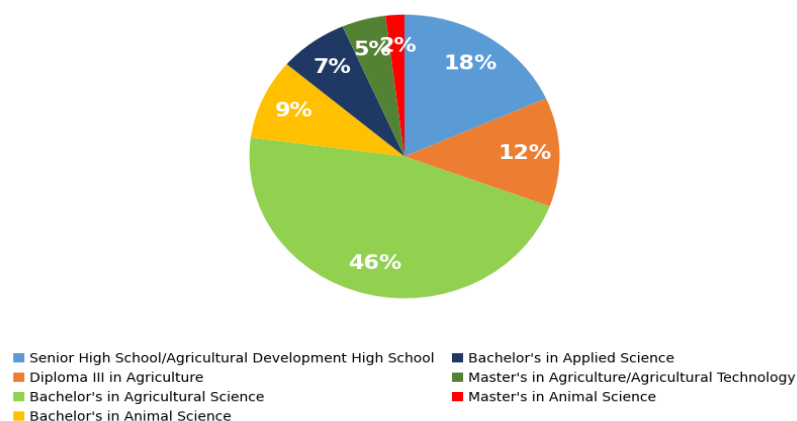


Figure 3. Percentage of Extension Workers by Educational Background

Source: Agency for Agricultural Extension and Human Resources Development, Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Indonesia, 2026.

Knowledge is developed through formal education, functional training, technical guidance, webinars, and other training activities. However, most post-pandemic activities have been conducted online. The interviews showed that online training provided limited depth and practical experience. The strongest finding was the gap between theoretical mastery and field cultivation ability. Extension workers can access materials and technical guidelines, but not all can apply this knowledge under diverse farming conditions.

The interviews showed that extension workers understood more theory, while farmers often possessed greater mastery of technical practice. Other findings showed that technical mastery of cultivation was related to confidence when providing solutions. Informants also stated that extension workers' knowledge and skills need to be developed through more frequent practice. In contrast to cultivation, extension workers' knowledge of farmer group development was considered strong. They prepared visit schedules, managed administration, organized meetings, and encouraged active group membership.

Opportunities for knowledge development were available through agency activities and programs at different levels of government. The interviews showed that education and training had been incorporated into organizational planning. Informants also confirmed extension workers' participation in functional training and technical guidance. The main problem concerned learning methods, which relied largely on webinars or online meetings. The interviews showed that these formats provided access to materials but were insufficient to develop deep understanding and application ability.

Knowledge of farmer group institutions produced stronger results than knowledge of cultivation practices. The interviews showed that extension workers understood how to prepare agendas, develop membership, and activate group meetings. Extension workers also supported administrative management, cash recording, and communication between groups and the government. Frequent social interaction made extension workers more confident in organizational development. These findings show that the knowledge gap is specific to technical aspects rather than a weakness across all areas of extension work.

The findings reveal a gap between access to information and the ability to apply it. Knowledge lies in the visible part of competency and is relatively easy to develop through education and training [8]. However, the availability of materials, webinars, and technical guidelines does not ensure mastery of cultivation practices. Extension workers understand basic concepts, but farmers with direct experience still possess greater knowledge of some field problems. This gap indicates that knowledge development places too much emphasis on transferring material and has not adequately developed applied knowledge.

The dominance of online training widens the gap between theory and practice. Kurniyatik et al. [7] show that training influences extension worker performance when the material and learning process support work needs. Dewi et al. [33] emphasize that coaching, self-evaluation, and reflective learning improve field problem-solving ability. The findings support the need for farmer field schools, demonstration plots, internships, and case-based learning. These approaches allow extension workers to test concepts, receive feedback, and build technical confidence.

Unlike cultivation knowledge, knowledge of farmer group development has been applied effectively. Extension workers can prepare agendas, manage administration, activate members, and facilitate relationships between groups and the government. Anantanyu [9] explains that strengthening farmer institutions requires organizational, participatory, and networking abilities. The Gorontalo findings show that intensive interaction produces more mature institutional knowledge. This difference demonstrates that knowledge develops more effectively in areas practiced frequently and directly.

Technical knowledge remains essential for innovation adoption. Anwar et al. [26] show that extension workers' knowledge is related to farmers' acceptance of technology. Rajalahti [34] positions extension workers as knowledge intermediaries in agricultural innovation systems. This function operates only when extension workers can assess technological suitability, explain risks, and adapt recommendations to local conditions. Knowledge development should therefore focus on the ability to diagnose problems and produce recommendations rather than merely recall material.

4.5 Extension Worker Skills

Extension worker skills produced different results across fields. Communication, facilitation, assistance, and farmer group development skills were considered strong based on all interview findings. Extension workers routinely held meetings, developed membership, supported administration, and facilitated group cash management. However, their cultivation practice skills and ability to produce innovations remained limited. Most extension workers acted as users or disseminators of existing innovations rather than creators of innovations based on local conditions.

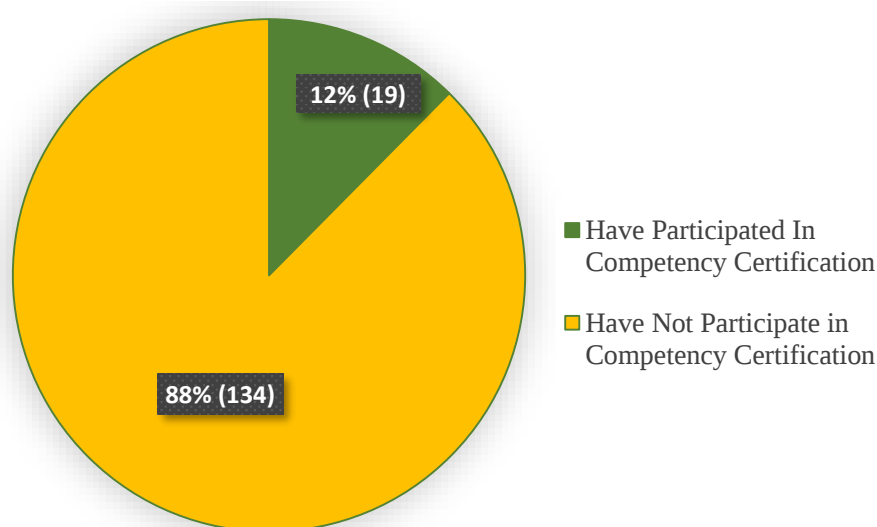


Figure 4. Percentage of Agricultural Extension Workers Who Have Participated in Competency Certification

Source: 19 (Nineteen) Agricultural Extension Centers in Gorontalo Regency, 2026

Data from 2026 show that only 19 of 153 extension workers, or 12%, had participated in competency certification, while 134, or 88%, had never participated. This low certification rate shows that skills development depends primarily on work experience and technical guidance. The interviews showed that new innovations from extension workers were still rare. One exception involved developing a peanut flower-pruning technique to improve yields. This finding shows that innovative capacity exists but has not developed evenly among extension workers.

The most evident strength in the skills dimension was farmer group development. One informant assisted 23 farmer groups across two villages and maintained a regular agenda to discuss membership and cash management. Another informant stated that extension workers did not merely provide information but also checked member activity and provided organizational guidance. These social and organizational skills helped farmer groups maintain routine activities. However, strong group development was not yet fully accompanied by the ability to conduct cultivation demonstrations and provide technical innovations suited to local problems.

Comparisons across skill areas clarify the paradoxical nature of the findings. Extension workers could lead meetings, build communication, and maintain working relationships with farmer groups. However, several informants stated that extension workers still learned from farmers when addressing technical issues that required direct cultivation experience. Internet access made it easier to find material but did not ensure the ability to demonstrate and apply it in the field. This condition shows that social and organizational skills have developed more strongly than technical and innovative skills.

Communication, facilitation, and group development skills are extension workers' primary assets. These skills enable knowledge to be applied through interactions, meetings, assistance, and organizational management. Sadono [23] shows that social skills determine the success of participatory extension because farmers need to be involved in the learning process. This study shows that extension workers have maintained group routines, improved communication, and supported administration. These abilities explain their concrete contribution to institutional continuity.

Innovative capacity presents a different condition. Most extension workers continue to adopt existing technologies or programs, while innovations based on local conditions emerge from only a few individuals. Gultom et al. [11] and Syarief et al. [11] found a similar pattern in which competency as facilitators, educators, and catalysts was stronger than the role of innovator. This condition shows that innovation skills require space for experimentation, knowledge support, and tolerance for trial processes. A simple innovation in peanut cultivation proves that this capacity exists but has not become a collective practice.

Low participation in certification reinforces the finding of a skills gap. Only 12% of extension workers had

participated in certification, while 88% had not gained this experience. Certification is not merely formal recognition because the process can assess the ability to apply knowledge, solve problems, and meet professional standards. Listiana [10] shows that technical and nontechnical competencies are related to successful extension and technology adoption. Expanding practice-based certification can help organizations identify gaps and design more appropriate development programs.

Skills development needs to apply an experiential learning approach. Demonstration plots, farmer field schools, internships, coaching, innovation clinics, and the exchange of practices among extension workers can connect knowledge with action. Dewi et al. [33] show that coaching and self-evaluation can improve extension workers' communication, problem-solving, and innovative abilities. Collaboration with universities, research institutions, and innovative farmers can also expand learning resources. These strategies are needed to transform strong communication and social relationships into technical and innovative capacity that strengthens extension institutions.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that agricultural extension worker competency in Gorontalo Regency forms an uneven pattern. Motivation, traits, and self-concept have developed as personal strengths that sustain commitment, adaptability, service orientation, and farmer trust. Knowledge and skills show strengths in communication, facilitation, farmer group development, and the management of institutional relationships. However, mastery of cultivation practices, the ability to produce local innovations, and participation in certification remain limited. These conditions confirm a competency paradox in which service resilience is supported by personal strengths amid gaps in technical and innovative capacity.

Personal strengths are important but cannot replace practical knowledge and professional skills. Motivation keeps extension workers present, adaptive traits help communities accept them, and self-concept strengthens their identity as facilitators and farmers' partners. These three dimensions maintain the legitimacy and continuity of extension institutions. However, the quality of solutions provided to farmers still depends on the ability to diagnose problems, apply technology, conduct cultivation practices, and create innovations. Institutional strengthening therefore requires a balance between below-the-surface and visible competencies.

In practical terms, competency development needs to focus on experiential learning. The Ministry of Agriculture, the Gorontalo Regency Government, Agricultural Extension Centers, universities, and research institutions need to develop farmer field schools, demonstration plots, internships, coaching, and innovation clinics. Competency certification needs to be expanded and designed around practical performance so that it can identify extension workers' actual abilities. Reward systems also need to recognize assistance performance, local innovation, and success in strengthening farmer groups through transparent criteria. These strategies can transform the strength of extension workers' social relationships into professional capacity that produces appropriate solutions for farmers.

This study is limited to one regency and uses a qualitative approach, so the findings are not intended for statistical generalization. Competency assessments were based primarily on interviews, observations, documents, and the perceptions of actors involved in extension services. Future studies can test the competency paradox model in regions with different agricultural and institutional characteristics. Mixed methods can measure relationships among the five competency dimensions, extension worker performance, innovation adoption rates, and farmer group capacity. Longitudinal studies are also needed to assess the effects of practice-based training and certification on changes in competency and institutional quality.

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