A system step-change that improves our support to Agri-SMEs

Benchmarking Business Development Service approaches to International Standards

1. Background

AMEA supported the International Standards Organization to develop ISO 18716: Guidance for Professional Farmer Organizations. This global, intensive consultative process over a period of 8 years produced a set of six core capacities by which to measure the growth of Farmer Organizations and other forms of agri-enterprises.

The Six Core Capacities

These parameters also enable us to assess the scope of BDS tools used by different providers. AMEA launched a FREE benchmarking service in 2026 to support with the aim of testing the value of such a service to BDS providers.

This report provides insights from the first 12 reports which are drawn from the following BDS providers: Africereal Group, DLROPEA and Talent Plus Conseils (Benin); Biruhminds Consult PLC (Ethiopia); Chamber of Young Entrepreneurs, Outgrowers Value Chain Fund and Ghana Enterprises Agency (Ghana); Manpower Consultants and Afrifoods Ltd. (Kenya); Zenith Rwanda (Rwanda); National Alliance of Agricultural Co-operatives (Uganda); Women Empowerment Development Alliance (Tanzania) and East African Farmers Federation.

2. ISO 18716 Alignment Snapshot

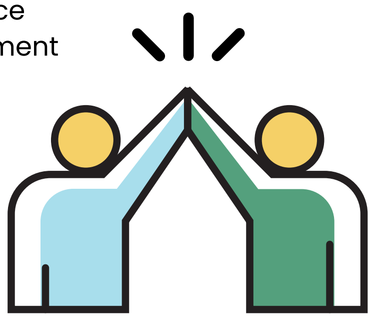
Across the twelve tools, ISO 18716 alignment ranged from **50% to 88%** as indicated in the table. This report is presented in a way which ensures the tool assessed cannot be connected to the BDS provider. This degree of anonymity encourages all providers to share data, tools and learning.

Low scores do not necessarily indicate poor tool quality but often the scope of the tool. For example tools which are targeted at companies rather than cooperatives and farmer organizations do not address membership processes and dynamics.

Tool (Anonymized)	**Tool Type**	**ISO 18716 alignment**
Tool 1	Financial & market advisory toolkit	88%
Tool 2	Farmer-organization / cooperative tool	85%
Tool 3	Farmer-organization / cooperative tool	83%
Tool 4	Farmer-organization capacity tool	79%
Tool 5	BDS / enterprise advisory tool	78%
Tool 6	Cooperative capacity tool	76%
Tool 7	Enterprise diagnostic suite	71%
Tool 8	Value-chain finance tool	61%
Tool 9	Enterprise-development curriculum	61%
Tool 10	MSME advisory toolkit	56%
Tool 11	Youth-enterprise ecosystem	54%
Tool 12	Agri-enterprise assessment tool	50%

3. What's Working: Common Strengths

Sales and marketing was the most consistently strong domain — nine of twelve tools scored 80% or higher here, several at 100%. Financial planning and KPI-driven performance monitoring were similarly strong wherever a tool had a financial management focus. Where a tool was purpose-built for one institutional function — value-chain finance, enterprise diagnostics, cooperative capacity — alignment in that specific domain frequently reached 90–100%, reflecting genuine best-practice depth rather than superficial coverage. Two tools also stood out for embedding risk-management and business-continuity content, a feature notably rare across the wider portfolio and a clear differentiator where present.



4. Common Gaps and Weaknesses

Despite differences in sector, geography, and institutional mandate, the same gaps recur across nearly every tool assessed.

- **Lack of depth in probing governance capacities**
  Some degree of governance gap was flagged in **all twelve tools**; for four it was the single largest driver of a low overall score. Formal election procedures, board/committee meeting requirements, and conflict-resolution or anti-corruption mechanisms were often absent.

- **Holistic toolkits for enterprise development**
  Closely related to governance and almost as widespread: mechanisms for inactive-membership management, member equity or fee-based participation, and an annual membership plan tied to the business plan were absent or only partial in the majority of tools. In addition tools related to production planning, input safety, post-harvest handling, food safety/hygiene, and environmental or climate-smart practice were also often absent. This can be explained as some tools were designed for private businesses rather than farmer organizations and cooperatives. However, **this process then led to BDS providers' decision to develop add-on modules.**

- **Financial governance "explicitness"**
  In tools that otherwise score well there also is a lack of detail in probing financial capacity. Signatory designation, dedicated bank-account governance, tax/regulatory responsibility, and periodic financial-statement production were frequently marked partial as the approach did not demand documented evidence. This is a low-cost, high-value fix: several assessments note it can be improved through ensuring supporting documentation is gathered and reviewed. **Diagnostics have to go beyond a conversation.**

- **HR infrastructure depth**
  Roughly half the tools lack checks on written job descriptions and a recruitment process formally linked to strategic planning, even where performance management and training content is otherwise strong.

- **Risk management**
  Absent entirely from the majority of tools. Where present, assessors flagged it as a distinguishing strength precisely because it is so rare — making it **one of the highest-leverage additions a provider can make to differentiate its tool.**

5. Why This Matters For BDS Providers

ISO 18716 (https://ameaglobal.org/standards/) aims to empower agri-enterprises to understand how to develop business capacities that unlock growth. Professional agri-enterprises are more likely to have better business opportunities, greater sustainability, and deliver more benefits to their members. This is essential to achieve inclusive growth. Proven tools which are used to deliver high quality BDS to agri-enterprises are already benchmarked to ISO 18716 – see AMEA's peer reviewed Toolbox (https://ameaglobal.org/toolbox/).

As this exercise shows **all BDS Providers can benefit** from the same benchmarking process. **First,** not one tool in this cohort needed to be rebuilt from scratch — every provider already had a working, credible tool, and benchmarking simply identified the specific, addressable gaps. Closing those gaps would take as little as four to six weeks work for the strongest tools, and no more than six months for the weakest. **Second,** benchmarking surfaces gaps a provider cannot see from inside its own tool. The most common weaknesses — governance depth, membership lifecycle mechanics, financial-policy documentation — are exactly the areas self-assessment tends to underestimate, because informal day-to-day practice feels sufficient to the people running it.

"We will strive to develop additional farm organization tailored toolkits to ensure its rural entrepreneurship development services for cooperatives and women- and youth-based MSMEs in different states"

"We will introduce a dedicated Governance Enhancement Module covering competitive and inclusive election processes, measures to promote underrepresented group participation, formal conflict resolution mechanisms, capital structure and shareholding governance, and organizational dissolution procedures. This module would address the suite's most critical governance blind spot."

The ultimate aim is to prove the value of the service and support local institutions to provide the service, possible through a self-service AI driven portal.

Join Us

Join us to localize a valuable service that can enable BDS Providers to meet future Standards and deliver the services that agri-enterprises demand and need.

www.ameaglobal.org/join-amea/