



The search for a balanced approach to supporting small farming organisations

The upheavals experienced in the agricultural markets since 2007 have gone a long way to confirming the place of agriculture as a leading sector both in terms of development and combating poverty. Drawing lessons from the effects of structural adjustment programmes, since 2003 African Union countries have in addition confirmed their desire to dedicate 10% of their budget to investing in the agricultural sector.

This memo is not intended to reiterate the numerous arguments justifying the need for governments to devote particular attention to agriculture. Instead it will focus more on qualitative aspects: what type of agriculture should be encouraged? What goals and analyses will facilitate its development? What mechanisms can be put in place to support small farming organisations?

The responses to these questions are drawn from the experience of West African small farming organisations (FO), which have been and continue to be key players in agricultural and rural development at both national and local level. They are supported in particular by the results of a study¹ conducted in association with the Fédération des unions de producteurs agricoles (Federation of Producers' Unions - FUPRO) in Benin and the Confédération paysanne du Faso (Faso Farmers' Federation - CPF). This study focused on one major feature of the changing context: the promotion, by governments and development partners, of a sector-based approach to the structuring of small farming organisations. Based on essentially economic principles, "this sector-based approach" would appear necessary but is certainly not enough to establish an effective support system for agricultural development.

1. Family farms and their organisational structure: major stakeholders in national development and food security

Before discussing the issue of developing an agricultural support strategy, it seems important to emphasise that the main concern of organisations backing this policy is to provide support to farms that for the most part are run by families and do not necessarily correspond to a purely economic rationale. Here, the discussion will focus on family farming.

The issue of developing family farming and a farm modernisation scheme is of highly strategic importance to governments. A number of arguments can be used to illustrate this:

- Family farming is a long-established tradition throughout the country. *"Family farming seeks first and foremost to pay its workforce, at a rate frequently below the market price for labour. Return on capital plays a secondary role, unlike in capitalist businesses where the need for profit is more pressing. This largely explains why family farms can survive in conditions where no capitalist enterprise could endure for long"*². They therefore do not necessarily fit the short term profit-seeking profile, unlike the vast majority of capitalist enterprises. Family farms favour diversification of resources. By combining agricultural and non agricultural activities, they limit the risks associated with markets and are able to adjust to changes within their local contexts.

¹ Effet des changements institutionnels et politiques sur les OP d'Afrique de l'Ouest et stratégie d'adaptation, C.Cornel and S.Keita, IRAM-AFDI, 2010.

² Memento de l'agronome, P.Bergeret and M.Dufumier, 2002.

- Given the importance of the rural population in West Africa, agriculture is a leading source of employment for this region. Revenue from family farming will primarily be redistributed across the country and will therefore be conducive to a long-term growth dynamic, provided that its development is genuinely encouraged.
- Investment in family farming ensures better coordination of food security strategies, based on a principle of localised production. However, it suffers from a negative image. Generally considered to be rooted in the past, traditional and unproductive, it is not viewed as a future solution. This view is however widely contradicted by a number of analyses. As early as 1964, TW Shultz demonstrated the inherent logic of small family farms that refuse to adopt technologies unsuited to their own particular context whilst at the same time making effective use of the resources to which they do have access. Productivity on family farms is often higher per hectare, taking account of the maximisation of their production methods on the land at their disposal. This form of agriculture is therefore capable of meeting the supply requirements of local and export markets.

Governments must consequently be aware that farms have always guaranteed their food security, that until now they have satisfied the needs created by demographic growth and that investing in their development is necessarily sustainable. An institutional and political environment conducive to their development must therefore be viewed as a political priority in countries with a predominantly rural population.

Farming organisations have for many years been the strategic tool of family farmers. They are their vehicles of political representation and have allowed them to organise provision of farming services. For small farmers, these organisations are a means of consolidating their revenue and production. It is crucial that they develop in an institutional and political environment conducive to the fulfilment of missions they set themselves to achieve on behalf of their producers. At the present time, it is essential to strike a balance between the work of FOs on sector-specific issues and their role in addressing issues that cut across the entire farming sector.

2. The need for balanced representation of producers

The structuring of West African small farming organisations has a diverse and often complex history. One trend can nevertheless be identified from these beginnings: it is clear that many small farming organisations organised their support to farmers by production sector.

This dynamic can largely be explained by the policies adopted by the West African authorities and by the particular interest devoted by technical and financial partners to economic growth sectors.

The "sector-based" approach presents FOs with undeniable opportunities to address a number of challenges:

- It encourages a better definition of the FO's sphere of activity, enabling it to organise economic activities more effectively. In relation to marketing, for example, a sector-based farming organisation can optimise marketing activities by grouping products and increase bargaining power with players both upstream and downstream;
- It tends to encourage FOs to develop a particular area of technical specialisation, enabling producers to benefit from quality services;
- It is a means of becoming more professional, inasmuch as specifying the objectives to be achieved is inherently better focused and enables producers to develop strategies that are specific to their sector;
- It improves small farmers' bargaining power on issues specific to a particular line of produce;
- It enables producers to acquire specialist training and technical expertise in a particular crop.

Nevertheless, a sector-based approach to the structuring of small farming organisations comes up against limitations imposed by the current characteristics of West African family farms. For the most part, family farms opt for diversified activities, both agricultural and non-agricultural. The lack of small farming organisations capable of covering the entire spectrum of options available to family farms is inevitably a handicap in terms of providing quality services to these farmers. In fact, sector-specialist FOs may have a natural tendency to support the most successful production units that specialise

very narrowly. In the context of West Africa, family farming is essentially characterised by diversity of production: crop specific specialisation on the part of FOs can result in some producers and, on a wider scale, some production areas, also becoming marginalised.

Given the demographic, social and economic importance of family farming, a geographically-based organisational structure enables all producers to enjoy services tailored to all aspects of farming. Moreover, general and/or geographically-based FOs are able to deal with issues common to all farmers:

- Security of land tenure;
- Management of natural resources;
- Agricultural funding;
- Training and advice, etc.

For small farming organisations, it is therefore of strategic importance to strike a balance between the provision of sector-specific services and the need to address cross-cutting problems.

This form of synergy makes it possible to:

- Consider issues shared by all sectors;
- Build the capacity of farming movements for consultation, submission of proposals and negotiation;
- Ensure that farming organisations become more representative of the rural community, a major factor in the challenges facing the agricultural community over the next few years.

Within a framework aiming to serve the collective interest, the quest for a balance between a "sector-based" and cross-cutting" approaches developed by FOs, appears an effective policy tool in supporting family farming.

A number of measures may be put forward with this in mind.

3. The vital need for new strategies to promote agricultural development and provide support to FOs

Given the agricultural and food challenges that the sub-region is experiencing, it is essential to give small farming organisations the means to combine the economic efficiency of the sector-based approach with the political, economic and social dimension of the cross-cutting approach.

In pursuit of this objective, FO support bodies must prioritise the following points for action and reflection:

- Build the capacities both of FOs and of their human resources
The effectiveness of FOs at any level will depend on the capacities of their human resources to champion a vision that meets all the challenges of family farming. Farming leaders must have access to training and information that equips them to make appropriate choices. At a wider level, it is essential to support the development of leaders in order to guarantee the existence of a long-term small farming dynamic.
The need to build the capacities of salaried FO staff is also strategically important in furthering this objective: producers must be able to make effective choices on economic and political issues.
This dimension merits the consideration of all partners of FO organisations.
- Enable FOs to (re)build stimulating projects, i.e. shared visions offering small farming movements the chance to support a coherent rural development strategy.
This objective requires technical and financial partners to carefully analyse the degree of interdependence between FOs and the context in which they are developing. This therefore entails a move to more global family farm support programmes, which must be developed in consultation with FOs and other agricultural development stakeholders.
- Enable FOs to develop in a legislative and political framework that will facilitate effective structuring of the farming sector.
Given the dual economic and political objective being pursued by many FOs, a balance must

be struck between sector-based and cross-cutting approaches. It would appear vital for West African governments to encourage and stimulate a process of in-depth reflection, enabling FOs to identify new solutions tailored to the sub-region's specific socio-economic environment. "Models" that may have been suitable in other contexts will not necessarily retain their relevance in an environment where the role of the state in combating poverty necessarily includes the rural sector. In order to be relevant, a national strategy of this kind must perforce include a contribution from the agricultural sector.

Small farming organisations feel that the division traditionally generated between sector-based and cross-cutting approaches is not relevant to the changes taking place in the agricultural sector within West Africa. The involvement of all segments of the rural population in the development effort must be based on a new approach, capable of harnessing to maximum effect the sub-region's particular features and potential. The value of this reflection process will of course depend on the effective participation in the debate by farming organisations, technical and financial partners and by governments.

At a time when the economy of West Africa countries is starting to take off, FOs are demanding a new approach to steer support for farming. Policies must evolve if FOs are to maximise their role in promoting agricultural and economic development. Farming organisations, which play a key role in supporting and representing farmers at the sub-regional level, are calling for these major changes and are ready to take part in the reflection process in liaison with governments and partners.