

## Advisory services: a one-way street?

**A**GRICULTURAL ADVISORY SERVICES such as “training and visit” schemes used to operate —except in rare cases— like a stream flowing from the “wise” (researchers and technicians) to peasant farmers in order to fulfil the priorities of the State and its financial partners. Those days seem far away. Austerity and structural-adjustment measures brought an end to most of the State-run schemes that operated those services.

A number of development actors then began providing advisory services to farmers: professional agricultural organisations, State agencies, investors, input suppliers, NGOs, telephony companies, etc. But how are those services structured? What is their purpose? Whom are they for?

The title of this edition of *Grain de sel* stems from those questions and seeks to explore the different directions agricultural advisory services have taken. Are they more closely aligned with the vertical (top-down) relationships between technicians and peasant farmers, or the horizontal relationships developed through farmer-to-farmer interactions? Whose needs do they serve? Those of the farmers? The investors? The State’s agricultural policy? This edition of the magazine, which builds on the work of Inter-réseaux’s members and partners (such as CER France, Ambre Conseil, IRAM and CIRAD)<sup>1</sup>, aims to remind readers that agricultural advisory services are important for the family farms that benefit from them, and for the (still too many) farms that do not. It also illustrates the many different meanings of agricultural advisory services that have developed over the past three decades, and discusses various

1. AFD, Technical report n°55. *Reviving agricultural advisory and extension services in sub-Saharan Africa: for new policies in line with the realities in the field*, July 2019 (English version published in April 2022).

agrarian issues, approaches offering different combinations of local knowledge and external support, local histories rooted in particular territories, etc. It is still too early to be able to meaningfully compare all of the different experiences, how they have evolved, and what results they have produced. While some countries appear to be remodelling the State’s role in the governance and funding of a variety of agricultural advisory actors, others see this trend as a withdrawal that opens the door to abuses. The debate over pesticides and the risks associated with coupling advisory services and the supply of farm inputs, for instance, deserves attention. The emergence of an agricultural advisory “system” at regional or national level gives rise to new challenges regarding: consistency and complementarity between different schemes; controlling the quality of advisory services delivered by a range of different providers; advisors training; cooperation; and regulation —not to mention permanent sources of funding.

There is also a risk that only solvent schemes for a small number of profitable commercial agriculture entities will be supported (as a result of “aid fatigue” or a lack of public investment), provided that those entities are sufficiently consolidated outside the countries that strongly support their agriculture. And yet a number of articles bear witness to the importance of supporting many different schemes tailored to farmers and their needs, whether that involves helping drive the transition to agroecology or improving the quality of products in order to promote them on new urban or export markets.

So ultimately, shouldn’t the real question focus on the diversity of models and the direction provided by agricultural policies?

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