

Producing local improved seeds: the story of Nafaso

Nafaso is a Burkinabe company that produces and markets seeds, and is experiencing strong growth throughout the region. Mr Abdoulaye Sawadogo, founder and managing director, spoke to us about the history of his company, how it is organised, and how it partners with and supports the small farmers in its network.

Grain de Sel (GDS): Could you tell us about the history of your company?

Abdoulaye Sawadogo (AS): In the 1980s, I was working for an African tyre company. It was a very difficult period economically, and I had to change careers. Without any secondary education, I was looking for a line of business that was meaningful and that would allow me to be my own boss. I began producing bananas and watermelon. It quickly became profitable, but I ran into many difficulties. In 2008, I founded Neema Agricole du Faso (Nafaso), a company specialising in the production, marketing and distribution of improved seeds in the sub-region. Today, we are diversifying our activities with the production and marketing of rice. I am very proud of what we have achieved. We produce roughly 6,500 tonnes/year, with 80 permanent employees and 300 tempo-

rary employees, and our revenue fluctuates between 2 and over 3 billion FCFA depending on the year. We work with a vast network of individual suppliers and cooperatives, whom we support in various ways in order to ensure that they are able to carry out their work in the best possible conditions. Having been a producer myself gives me a better understanding of what other producers are going through and the difficulties they face. Nafaso is also partnered with several organisations: the Burkina Faso Environmental Institute for Agricultural Research (INERA), the West and Central African Council for Agricultural Research and Development (CORAF/WECARD), Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) and West Africa Food Markets, with whom we are working on programmes to improve varieties and boost the production and marketing of improved seeds. We are therefore recognised in the sector.

GDS: Your seed-production system is based on a network of seed producers. How does it work, and in what ways is it supported?

AS: We produce and market mainly improved varieties of rice and maize, as well as cowpea, groundnut, sesame, soy, sorghum and millet. These crops are part of the Burkinabe diet and, more broadly, the diet of West and Central Africa, where we also now have operations. We are organised as follows: we have a network of individual farmers and cooperatives (currently 75), mainly in Burkina Faso (in 11 of the country's 13 regions), as well as in Ivory Coast, Ghana and Togo. The production contracts specify the variety and price of the basic seeds provided. For fertilisers and pesticides, our advisors refer them directly to suppliers with whom prices have been negotiated. When we launched our first season of paddy-rice production in 2021, the number of farmers increased. There are currently about 3,600.

We support the farmers in our network, helping them strengthen their capacities and offering them services such as technical training in production, with supervisors assigned to work with them in the field in partnership with the Regional Directorate of Agriculture. Farmers are oriented towards crops for which there is a market and demand. We enter into contractual arrangements to buy from them directly. Lastly, we engage in intermediation with financial institutions, assisting farmers in their interactions with those institutions. Currently, financial institutions need guarantees that companies are solvent and credible, and that they honour their commitments. We therefore act as guarantor when farmers take out loans, for instance through Coris Bank International or Réseau des Caisses Populaires du Burkina, with whom we have a partnership. It is by creating these types of synergies that everything



Nafaso has a large network of seed producers in Burkina Faso and throughout the region. Here is a cowpea farmer in his field.

THE STARTING POINT FOR SELF-SUFFICIENCY AND FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IS THE SAME: SEEDS.

works. Although loans are open to all of our member farmers, we have noticed that it is the weakest ones who are actually taking out loans. This year, for instance, the total amount of guarantees provided by Nafaso was 100,000 FCFA.

GDS: How is your distribution and marketing system organised? What are your targets?

AS: Being from the class of small farmers allowed us to identify the main issues with precision. To acquire inputs, farmers need to leave the countryside and travel sometimes hundreds of kilometres to the city, which not only takes a long time but also costs a lot in terms of transport and fuel. Our desire is therefore to bring seeds and their users closer together, with prices that are aligned but that become attractive if there is no longer any need to travel. We have therefore set up more than fifty points of sale at village shops throughout Burkina Faso. The local network needs to be developed in order to overcome these challenges relating to access.

GDS: How do you see the evolution of farmers' organisations (FO) for seed producers? Is it possible and desirable for those FOs to become actual seed cooperatives?

AS: Under the OHADA Act (pp. 28-29), FOs are required to evolve towards the cooperative model. But most of them are focusing only on state markets or NGOs. This will not lead anywhere: The day NGOs or the state no longer have the means to pay for their seeds, they will run into huge problems. So, it is up to everyone to see how they can position themselves for the future. It would be great if those cooperatives grouped together as actual companies in order to have greater influence and blossom.

GDS: What kind of relations do you have with large seed and input multinationals? Do you see them as partners or competitors who are

threatening your development?

AS: We do not have any relations with them, strictly speaking. But we are attentive to developments in the seed world. Those multinationals have developed varieties that are nearly ten times more productive than what we can currently do. We must remain modest. We are a small company in comparison, but we do not work in the same segments. We target small farmers, whereas they target large industrial farms with purchase prices much higher than ours. We do, however, have a few projects in common with AGRA: setting up demonstration fields and investing in demonstration kits for farmers or in training on crop-management techniques. The West African market is still dominated by traditional seeds, and we want to offer seeds that are truly adapted to local agroecological conditions and that produce high yields. Farmers need to be able to choose quality. Demographic changes and food demand are telling us that it is time to develop an offer of African seeds that are accessible and that produce high yields. The starting point for self-sufficiency and food sovereignty is the same: seeds. We therefore want to expand our activities and our presence within the Economic Community of West African States, and encourage young people to engage in agriculture, because that is how Africa will be able to feed itself.

GDS: How would you assess your first season of paddy-rice production?

AS: Our first season of rice production was a success overall. The objective was to produce high-quality rice from high-yielding varieties that are nutritious and popular with consumers so that it is truly profitable for the farmers. We took a simple approach, paying them directly upon delivery of the paddy after weighing it and testing its quality. This year, we will be able to expand the network thanks to word of mouth between the farmers themselves. They lend us real credibility, and they trust us, which is very encouraging for us. There have been a few difficulties as well, but that's normal. We

had a provisional budget of 500 million FCFA, which we did not fully use because not enough quantity was delivered. Some farmers lacked information and sowed other varieties than the three that we had selected. ■

Abdoulaye Sawadogo



Founder and Managing Director of Nafaso

Jeune Afrique

Interview by Marie-Joséphine Ouedraogo, Communications Officer, and Alexandra Quet, Coordinator of Grain de Sel

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Experience-assessment report by Inter-réseaux with support from IFAD on the partnership between Nafaso and the rice-farmers' cooperative Barakadi in western Burkina Faso: <https://bit.ly/3DBsiZc>