

Diversity of agricultural advisory services in West and Central Africa

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AGRICULTURAL ADVISORY SERVICES are crucial for strengthening the capacities of farmers and improving the performance of their farms and organisations. The diversity of approaches and types of advisory services is a reflection of the many different visions of agriculture held by actors in agricultural value chains and in different geographic areas.

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COUNTRIES AROUND THE WORLD, massively invested in advisory services after 1945 in order to modernise agriculture. In Africa, advisory services began to develop in the 1960s with a supervision-based approach. Until the 1990s, the dominant system was the “Training and Visit” system funded by the World Bank, which was based on the transfer of technologies and a standardised approach to advisory services. Implemented by the public authorities, the system aimed to promote intensive agriculture based on the principles of the green revolution. Although strongly criticised by donors, researchers and farmers’ organisations (FO), it is still a source of inspiration for many advisory schemes, particularly those run by upstream and downstream businesses.

After a period of State withdrawal (see pp. 11–12), there has been renewed interest in advisory services since the 2000s, and new approaches are being tested. These approaches are often based on participatory methods in order to ensure that the needs of farmers are taken into account, and to help farmers become more independent.

The farmer field school approach. Farmer field schools are becoming more and more popular (see p. 10). This approach aims to promote cross-learning between farmers, with technicians and sometimes researchers, and is based on analysing situations in order to make decisions; agroecological practices may be encouraged. In Burkina Faso, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) is using this method as it works with the government on programmes for adapting to climate change. But in many projects there is a large discrepancy between theory and practice, with the field school becoming just a field where techniques proposed by the projects are demonstrated.

Managerial advisory services for family farms. This type of service aims to strengthen the capacities of farms so that they can manage their resources based on their objectives and available means through technical, economic and financial analyses. It aims to take into account the entire farm and family, and to promote agriculture that enjoys greater freedom from the choices imposed by value chains. This type of service can also be provided to FOs in

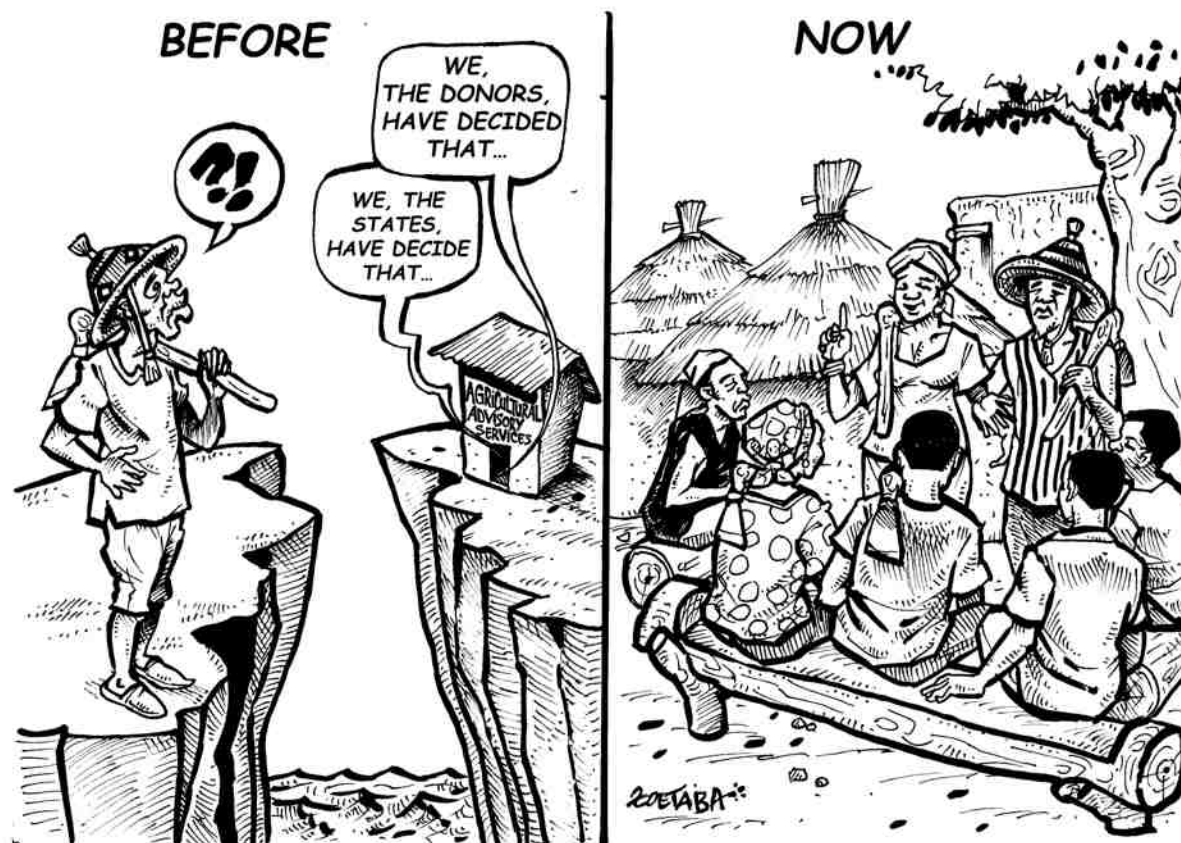
order to help them manage their services. This service is struggling to reach a large audience: Despite great efforts in Benin, it is provided to less than 5% of farms in that country.

Innovation platforms. The innovation platforms promoted by international researchers and NGOs were adopted by several institutions (FARA, CORAF/WECARD, etc.) to help ensure that research is in line with what is needed in the field. The platforms bring together actors from the same value chain to solve technical and organisational issues. But they are struggling to become operational and autonomous, because there is a lack of long-term support and strong partnerships. They are also struggling to free themselves from a projects-based mindset, where they are often used as a way to disseminate a project’s own productivity-focused proposals.

Farmer-to-farmer advisory services. Farmer-to-farmer advisory services are often run by NGOs or projects, and are developed in order to utilise peasant-farmer knowledge, promote an indigenous approach to advisory services, and reduce the cost of those services. Sometimes peasant-farmer instructors are involved in addition to advisors who can provide more thorough advice. The content of the programme depends on the organisation in charge of running the scheme. It may be an effective way to promote agroecology that makes use of peasant-farmer knowledge. But it requires rethinking what peasant-farmer instructors are able to do and what they want to do, as well as the practical conditions of their involvement (see p. 25).

“The right advisory approach depends on the complexity of the problem that needs to be solved, and on the type of solution desired”

Advisory services and ICT. Advisory services via phone platforms, farmer WhatsApp groups, online resource centres, etc. appear to have a promising future (see pp. 8–9). Those services focus on a few different themes: information on prices, weather, production techniques. Their main aim is to circulate information, and —with the exception of WhatsApp groups— exchanges between farmers and advisors are very limited and do not allow for thorough advising. Accessibility to these services is still limited, and the services themselves are not very financially sustainable and are poorly adapted to the actual needs



of farmers (content of the information, joint development of the service). But digital tools may be paired with more conventional types of advisory services.

To a more limited extent, legal advisory services and marketing and sales advisory services have been set up by projects, NGOs and engineering offices. In Cameroon, the European Institute for Cooperation and Development (Institut Européen de Coopération et de Développement) assists farmers with new forms of organisation, production standards, and the sale of agricultural products to expat consumers.

Satisfying a wide range of objectives. All the different types of advisory services create a territorial system driven by many different actors who provide advisory services with many different objectives. In theory, such a vast offer should satisfy all needs. In practice, however, the offer of advisory services is not enough to satisfy the growing demands of farmers. Moreover, advisory activities are relatively uncoordinated and poorly funded by the States and value chains, despite the creation —in certain cases— of dedicated funds.

Different advisory approaches for different types of farming. All of these advisory approaches are based on methodological principles that may vary from one situation to another. In the example of the farmer field school approach, certain advisory organisations may favour a “knowledge transfer” approach, while others may favour a “capacity-building” approach to help farmers become more independent in their decision-making. Each approach involves relatively frequent and deep interaction between the advisor and the farmer(s), as well as the mobilisation of different tools. Each approach also affects the cost of the advisory services and the number of beneficiaries.

The choice of approach depends on the complexity of the problem that needs to be solved, and on the type of solution desired or possible (standardised, jointly developed, individual or collective). The

right approach depends in large part on the values and objectives of the organisation running the service, and on the type of farming promoted (intensive farming, agroecology, peasant farming, etc.).

Advisory services incorporated into broader schemes. Agricultural advisory services are not just defined by their advisory approach. They are also defined by other criteria relating to advisory schemes. The first has to do with the capacities of the advisors (training, experience, skills, etc.) and their availability.

The second has to do with: the governance mechanisms of the advisory schemes (see pp. 26–27); the values and objectives of the organisations providing the service; the possibility of farmers and FOs to actually participate in that governance; and the participatory mechanisms for orienting and evaluating advisory schemes (see pp. 32–33).

The third criterion has to do with the objectives of the funding providers (State, donors, private firms, FOs, etc.), the funding mechanisms for the service (tender call, delegation, sale of services, etc.), and the cost of the service for the farmers. In Africa, it is often the donors who, through projects, have dominant influence in guiding advisory services (see pp. 13–14).

Diversity of advisory services: choosing the right one. The funding mechanisms (see pp. 29–30) and governance mechanisms of advisory services have a strong influence on the type of service chosen and on how the schemes are organised in the field. Those mechanisms also reflect the choices of the States and actors from the agricultural sector regarding the farming model or co-existence of models. In particular, advisory services focusing on agroecology and on helping farmers become more independent will be largely run by FOs or NGOs, and will be based on participatory approaches where local knowledge is utilised and where proposals are tailored to the local context.. ■