

Competition or complementarity of institutional agricultural advisory networks?

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SINCE 2010, agricultural advisory networks are being set up at global, continental and sub-regional level. These differences in scale could raise questions about the consistency of the networks' activities. We questioned representatives of those networks to find out more about the situation.

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GRAIN DE SEL (GDS): Could you briefly introduce your institution and tell us why it was created?

RASHEED SULAIMAN V (RSV) – GFRAS: The Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS) was created through consultations with many actors (professionals in agricultural extension services, experts, donors, etc.). Before the GFRAS was created, actors in rural and agricultural advisory services did not have an instrument that could speak on their behalf, strengthen their capacities, share best practices, and facilitate networking.

There was a platform of donor representatives who were interested in agricultural extension services, called the “Neuchâtel Initiative”. The platform was composed mainly of European donors. Starting in 2005, those actors began working more closely with partners in the South, such as the African Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services (AFAAS) and regional farmers’ organisations (FO) in Africa. In 2010, the Global Forum was created to make advisory services more effective, to better serve farming families and farmers, and to help improve living conditions in rural areas.

MAX OLUPOT (MO) – AFAAS: At continental level, there was a need to develop entities like the GFRAS to provide direct support for advisory actors. The African Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services (AFAAS) was created in response to that need, and it established a partnership with the GFRAS in Africa. The AFAAS aims to encourage dialogue, influence policy, and strengthen the capacities of actors with regard to agricultural advisory services for the African continent.

NICOLE APHING KOUASSI (NAK) – RESCAR-AOC: The Rural and Agricultural Advisory Services Network in West and Central Africa (RESCAR-AOC) was founded in 2010. It is a network of actors and stakeholders in agricultural advisory services who are active in the West and Central Africa sub-region. The roll-out of its activities highlights the need for a formal status. Preparations for its legalisation are in progress to give it a legal personality.

The RESCAR-AOC has three types of members: founders (national forums; national entities), subscribers (sub-regional or international organisations that are stakeholders in agricultural advisory services; technical, scientific and financial partners), and associates or affiliates (natural persons or legal entities that are interested and willing to participate in ac-

tivities that involve sharing experiences and information without any other formal commitments). The RESCAR-AOC’s purpose is to support national forums by carrying out activities that involve leading, coordinating, strengthening capacities, assessing and sharing experiences, and facilitating initiatives at regional level. So far, eleven countries in West and Central Africa have a national agricultural advisory forum (Burkina Faso, Benin, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, DRC, Sierra Leone, Togo). The functionality of those platforms varies, and the countries that do not yet have national forums are in the process of creating them.

All of those institutions — GFRAS, AFAAS and RESCAR-AOC — emerged in the 2010s, but French-speaking West Africa became aware of the need to strengthen exchanges between rural and agricultural advisory services later than English-speaking Africa. **RSV (GFRAS):** The three institutions are funded by different donors (Swiss Development and Cooperation, USAID, European Union, International Fund for Agricultural Development, etc.). But funding is one of the main problems when it comes to providing high-quality rural and agricultural advisory services that are long-lasting and well-adapted.

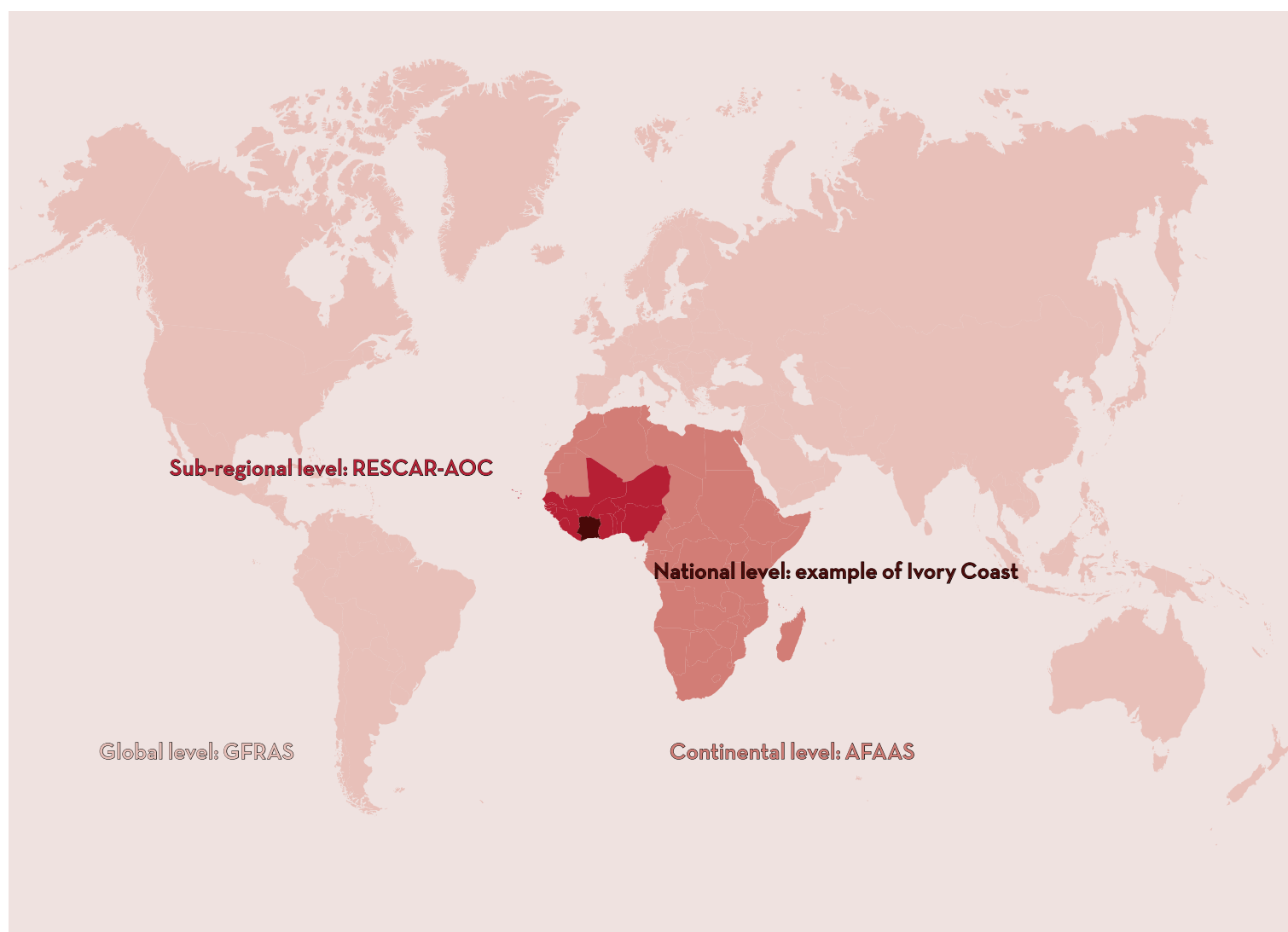
GDS: What are your network’s roles and missions, and how does your network operate in terms of rural and agricultural advisory services?

RSV (GFRAS): The Global Forum carries out advocacy work for pluralistic advisory services that are focused on demand with a view to sustainable development. It also oversees governance for those services. The GFRAS’ activities are carried out at all levels. But some activities are carried out at global level, such as policy advocacy for worldwide best practices. The GFRAS works directly with its member networks, but collaborates with a large number of (non-member) organisations to achieve its objectives.

The GFRAS advocates for a favourable policy environment and appropriate investments for advisory services in rural areas. It also oversees the professionalisation of rural and agricultural advisory services, and promotes effective and continuous management of knowledge.

MO (AFAAS): The main role of the AFAAS is political: It advocates for agricultural policies that have greater consideration for agricultural advisory services. To do so, we share information with beneficiaries.

“Each level of action is relevant, so long as it addresses a need!”



Every other year, AFAAS organises an event called “Africa Wide Agriculture Extension Week”, which brings together all actors in rural and agricultural advisory services (researchers, development partners, and actors from the private sector) to measure the role of rural and agricultural advisory services in key areas of rural and agricultural development. Lastly, partnerships are important when it comes to implementing rural and agricultural advisory services. The AFAAS is partnered with the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (*Forum pour la Recherche Agricole en Afrique*) and sub-regional research organisations such as the West and Central African Council for Agricultural Research and Development (*Conseil Ouest et Centre Africain pour la Recherche et le Développement Agricoles*).

NAK (RESCAR-AOC): The RESCAR-AOC’s mission is to offer a forum for exchange, monitoring, orientation, dialogue, capacity-building, and the sharing of information with actors in rural and agricultural advisory services at sub-regional level in West Africa. In 2018, the network organised a workshop in Abidjan with the AFAAS to explore and strengthen synergies between national platforms and private companies. In June 2019, a regional meeting was also organised

in Abidjan on the future of rural and agricultural advisory services in West and Central Africa to share the results of those services and make recommendations in order to improve the sub-region’s practices in that regard.

The RESCAR-AOC helps boost the performance of services in the region through knowledge management (including the creation of a dedicated website) and capacity-building through the creation of theme-based working groups bringing together all member-country representatives, or by conducting studies, engaging in advocacy work and strategic dialogue, networking, and forming partnerships. We work, for instance, with the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) to assess whether capacity-building is needed to incorporate nutrition in advisory services. The network also works to ensure that climate-smart agriculture, digital technologies and entrepreneurship are taken into account in public agricultural advisory services.

At national level, each forum or national platform associated with the RESCAR-AOC brings together actors from all agricultural advisory sectors and features activities similar to those of the RESCAR-AOC (knowledge-sharing, capacity-building, synergies ↻)

A multitude of regional networks.

Source: <http://www.g-fras.org/fr/se-connecter/membres.html>

◀ between actors, and advocacy) at local level.

GDS: *What types of advisory services does your network support in Africa? Why?*

MO (AFAAS): What matters most is that the approach is well-adapted to local needs and to each context. In West Africa, the AFAAS supports mainly agricultural advisory services run by the public sector, but there are other types of advisory services and other approaches run by different actors (see pp. 17–18): innovation platforms, farmer field schools (see p. 10), peasant-farmer relays (see p. 25), etc.

NAK (RESCAR-AOC): Exactly. There are many different contexts in the region, and there is even a term for “pluralistic advisory services”. There are a wide range of actors: State services, FOs, private entities, NGOs, etc. Instead of imposing a vision, the RESCAR-AOC does not support one particular type of advisory service, but rather makes existing services more effective and sustainable by promoting innovative approaches, such as the use of information and communication technologies (see pp. 8–9).

RSV (GFRAS): For the GFRAS, it is important to strengthen the supply of pluralistic advisory and extension services, and that is why we work with public actors as well as actors from the private sector and civil society (NGOs), including FOs.

GDS: *How does your network influence the creation of advisory policies? What are the limits, and how can they be circumvented?*

RSV (GFRAS): An external evaluation was performed by the AFAAS (and the RESCAR-AOC) in 2017 to assess the different activities that were launched. The evaluation revealed several problems that needed to be resolved in order to strengthen rural and agricultural advisory services in the sub-region. One of the main obstacles to strengthening agricultural advisory activities is funding. We are trying to mobilise more funding, but it is a long and complex process.

The GFRAS has also played a key role, along with the AFAAS, in creating and strengthening the West and Central Africa network (RESCAR-AOC). And it is the GFRAS that is advocating for greater investment and new capacities for rural and agricultural advisory services!

MO (AFAAS): At continental level, the AFAAS brings together decision-makers from each country to share their points of view, which are sometimes different. In terms of advocacy and dialogue, those peer discussions are essential in order to move forward!

The AFAAS has very political functions. We have close relations, for instance, with the African Union.

We also proactively support the development of

policies that have greater consideration for agricultural advisory services.

In Nigeria, these aspects were managed by the states. Each state defined their policy without necessarily taking into account rural and agricultural advisory services. Our role was to create ties between all parts of the country.

But, of course, each country has its own way of doing business and its own political will. Our ability to influence depends on the country’s authorities and their priorities. If they are not very interested in development, then it is a challenge. Each country also has its own priorities in terms of funding...

NAK (RESCAR-AOC): The RESCAR-AOC and affiliated national platforms are apolitical, neutral platforms for discussion. The RESCAR-AOC cannot engage directly in agricultural policies, but we are advocating for greater consideration of agricultural advisory services in agricultural policies and investments.

In Ivory Coast, the national agricultural advisory platform was recently created with support from the RESCAR-AOC and all agricultural advisory actors (national agency for support and rural development, private operators, universities, research institutes, NGOs, FOs). We did not run into any particular difficulties, as the platform addressed real needs.

GDS: *How do you work with other networks on advisory services in West Africa? How do you make sure your actions complement one another?*

RSV (GFRAS): The three institutions (GFRAS, AFAAS, RESCAR-AOC) complement one another; there is no competition. Together, we try to improve the governance mechanisms and rural and agricultural advisory services at each level. The AFAAS and the RESCAR-AOC are members of the GFRAS’ management committee, which ensures harmonious coordination of activities. For instance, the GFRAS and the AFAAS (along with the RESCAR-AOC) jointly organised the 2016 GFRAS Annual Meeting in Cameroon. The AFAAS and the RESCAR-AOC mobilised financial resources in Africa, but the GFRAS sponsored participants from around the world, which allowed for a lot of knowledge-sharing on extension services throughout the world. Both enjoyed greater visibility and greater interactions.

NAK (RESCAR-AOC): Exactly. There is no competition or overlap between our actions because the geographical areas and interventions of each institution are well defined, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity. Each level of action is relevant, so long as it addresses a need! ■