Evaluating advisory services for family farms

**With the State’s withdrawal from agricultural advisory services, monitoring and measuring the impact of advisory services for family farms is important. Doing so involves examining the evaluation methods used, their scope and their limits. This article presents an example in Burkina Faso.**

An important challenge for agricultural advisory services today is to evaluate their impact on farms, families and rural communities. As fewer and fewer resources are being allocated to agriculture, summary qualitative evaluations of managerial advisory services for family farms (conseil à l’exploitation familiale, or “CEF”) are no longer sufficient when it comes to justifying the resources invested in those services.

Different schemes were therefore created to monitor and measure the effects of CEF. Performing evaluations to secure funding. Peasant-farmer advisory schemes affect a marginal proportion of farms in the countries where they are implemented. In Burkina Faso, CEF provided by three federations (Fédération Nationale des Groupements Naam, Fédération des Professionnels Agricoles du Burkina, and Union des Groupements pour la Commercialisation des Produits Agricoles de la Boucle du Mouhoun) covers only 6,510 farms out of roughly 900,000 members. Insufficient funding is an obstacle to ensuring the longevity of those schemes and scaling them up.

Farmers’ organisations (FO) therefore need to help more people understand the effects CEF has on farms and the community. Lending from stakeholders is dependent on the quality of the evaluation methods.

**Encouraging dialogue to improve schemes.** The “SEMI” scheme for monitoring, evaluating and measuring the impacts of CEF was designed by the agricultural organisation French Farmers and International Development (Agriculteurs Français et Développement International, or “AFDI”) and the French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development (CIRAD). The scheme’s pilot phase was implemented by the engineering office Agence Corade and Réseau Gestion (comprising seven FOs and community. As fewer and fewer resources are being allocated to agriculture, summary qualitative evaluations of managerial advisory services for family farms (conseil à l’exploitation familiale, or “CEF”) are no longer sufficient when it comes to justifying the resources invested in those services.

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To make impacts on the farm evaluated by technical performance criteria (planning of production, management and organisation of the family farm, etc.), economic criteria (boosting income, production-related investments) and environmental criteria (management of natural resources). They may also have an impact on farmers and their families.

Those impacts are evaluated based on the member’s personal development (self-confidence, change of perspective), improvement in the member’s technical and managerial capacities, household food and nutrition security, the member’s health, and women’s participation in managing the farm. CEF also has impacts on the professional environment (adopting innovations or improving FO management), the village community (development of community initiatives, improved social relationships), the local and national economy (emergence of value chains, new areas of activity), and the environment.

**Strong focus on qualitative indicators.** The impacts of CEF are measured using quantitative indicators (number of farms affected, increase in production) and complementary qualitative indicators (perceptions, attitudes, level of satisfaction).

With CEF, qualitative indicators deserve great attention, as most of the changes are triggered by changes in the farmer’s benchmark system, which gives rise to the possibility of new attitudes and sustainable transformations with respect to practices.

Additional data-collection methods. The “before and after” method consists in monitoring how a farm’s parameters change over a given number of years af-
ter establishing a benchmark situation in year zero.

The “with or without CEF” method compares member and non-member farms to see the difference CEF makes between the two types of farm. Data collection also takes into account farms’ cropping schedules. In Burkina Faso, the SEMI scheme was carried out after the crop year in order to assess the production and harvest, and in the middle of the year in order to establish the situation regarding sales and projects.

Given the complexity of the changes to assess, it is recommended that several data-collection methods (information sheets, member files, additional surveys) be combined in order to identify the different impacts. For the AFDI/CIRAD scheme, data is collected by FO advisors, and a firm assigned to provide advisory support for the FOs is in charge of analysing the data. This method may be biased because the evaluators are not independent. That is why some schemes (such as the scheme run by SNV, a Dutch NGO) propose having the evaluation performed by independent entities.

**For the most representative sampling possible.**

The sampling of farmers evaluated must be representative of all farms reached by CEF in terms of proportion and type. In general, type is established based on technical/economic criteria and on how experienced the farmers are in CEF.

For “with or without CEF” comparisons, samples of members and non-members must be as close to one another as possible in terms of technical/economic performance.

Farms in the control group must be selected in an environment that is not affected by the CEF scheme. Production conditions must also be the same (rainfall, agro-pedological conditions, etc.).

**Positive evaluations despite methodological limitations.** The different evaluations have helped confirm that CEF has a positive impact on farm performance and the personal development of promoters, and helps improve cohesion and conditions among farming families. The AFDI/CIRAD scheme showed that two-thirds of the beneficiary farms increased their revenue and capital, while farms in the control group stagnated or regressed. The SNV evaluation showed that 97% of the farms receiving advisory services adopted new practices for managing natural resources. But the impact of CEF on the local or national economic context has been rather limited.

But these methods do not differentiate between the role of CEF and the role of contextual factors in the changes identified, and do not sufficiently take into account the farmer’s personality. They are also sometimes too complex and too expensive to be replicated by FOs. Lastly, the large amount of data based on statements by farmers or collected by non-independent actors could introduce bias in the results.