

Cross perspective: Do agricultural advisory services still have a purpose?

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GIVING PURPOSE to agricultural advisory services in West Africa today requires examining the different types of services offered, the needs they address, and the visions of agriculture they support. Given the future challenges advisory services will face, the actors interviewed in this article are urging for participatory holistic approaches.

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GRAIN DE SEL (GDS): *Agricultural advisory services are currently being reconfigured in West Africa. What are the impacts?*

SALIFOU SARE – SS (DDC): Since the structural adjustment plans of the 1980s and 1990s, the State has withdrawn from agricultural advisory services (see pp. 11–12), which has had a negative impact on agricultural production and yields. Food crises are still a reality, and the value chains that were starting to develop have run out of steam.

Meanwhile, new actors —such as farmers’ organisations (FO, see pp. 15–16)— have moved in to fill the void, and have assumed responsibility for assisting their members and providing services for them.

SOW YAYE MBAYANG TOURÉ – SYM (FONGS): Yes. For example, FONGS assists family farms (FF) and supports endogenous dynamics. But monitoring and advisory services require too much in the way of funding and training to be led by FOs alone. We need to pool our experiences and get all actors to participate (State services, NGOs, etc.).

SS (DDC): And knowing how all those actors are going to coordinate with one another is another question! Plus, FOs need to be able to mobilise their own financial resources in order to fund advisory services over the long term (see pp. 28–29).

GDS: *What needs should advisory services address?*

BOUBA MOUMINI – BM (ACEFA): Agricultural advisory services are primarily geared towards family farming, which is the foundation of West African society and the only type of farming capable of ensuring food security. Advisory services need to support the development of FFs by taking into account their technical, economic, financial and organisational needs.

SYM (FONGS): Exactly. Advisory services must address all FF needs, not just production. The peasant-farmer movement calls for holistic advisory services based on simplified balance sheets that include both agricultural aspects and non-agricultural aspects, such as family spending.

SS (DDC): Yes, FFs certainly need information on management, production techniques, marketing, and bringing their products to market. But advisory services should also focus on issues other than those relating to the market. That’s the difference with extension services. But it’s not really the case yet. The fact that advisory services for farms are too

focused on technical aspects, or that the different actors do not coordinate enough with one another, makes it difficult to obtain conclusive results in terms of food security.

GDS: *What type(s) of agricultural advisory service would you recommend? What vision of agriculture does it embody?*

BM (ACEFA): Our advisory scheme has learned from the mixed results of the National Programme for Extension Services and Agricultural Research (Programme National de Vulgarisation et de Recherche Agricoles), which is based on the “Training and Visit” method. It now aims to assist farmers in their activities and help them make decisions. In this vision of agriculture, farmers are trusted to make their own decisions, and their capacities are strengthened. Since

the peasant farmers assume all market risks, models can no longer be imposed on them.

SYM (FONGS): Yes. There needs to be a shift towards approaches based on assisting and supporting FFs. The FONGS approach is participatory and involves family meetings and holistic

support for indigenous instructors (see p. 25).

SS (DDC): Agricultural advisory services should help manage the FF like a company. With respect to their technical, administrative and risk-management approaches, the different types of advisory services currently offered are very different. They are no longer top-down approaches, but rather approaches that are based on participatory joint development of expertise. Knowledge is generated through university research, and by peasant farmers.

In Burkina Faso, the SDC directly supports several FOs to help them structure themselves and improve their skills. We also support many advisory schemes relating to the sale of agricultural products. The Cooperative for the Provision of Agricultural Services (Coopérative de Prestation de Services Agricoles) developed a scheme offering warrantage and training/awareness-raising services for farmers.

GDS: *How do you create an advisory system that takes into account the family farm in its entirety while also integrating the family farm into value chains?*

SYM (FONGS): In value chains, advisory services are purely agricultural. Those services cover production, sales, management systems, markets, and income. They focus on agricultural productivity and finan-

“Agricultural advisory services are an important tool for transitioning to agroecology”

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cial profitability, but they should be more holistic! Advisory services should take into account the FF's entire range of activities.

BM (ACEFA): The extension system where agents were responsible for disseminating standardised crop-management techniques developed by researchers did not lead them to have a holistic way of thinking. The holistic approach is complex. It requires studying how each proposed technical and economic change will affect the entire farm. It is time-consuming and requires being thoroughly familiar with each farm and acquiring specific skills.

The integration of FFs into value chains is necessarily performed by farmers' groups (cooperatives, joint initiative groups, etc.) who play an essential role carrying out one or more economic functions.

SS (DDC): Farms may specialise in subsistence crops (cereals) or cash crops (sesame, market gardening crops, cotton), but there is always a 'backbone' value chain that makes it possible to develop the other value chains. By supporting the development of the organic cotton value chain, Switzerland also contributed to the development of the organic sesame and hibiscus value chains in Burkina Faso thanks to crop rotations. The important thing is to disseminate the innovations in order to influence all of the links in the product's value chains and to have an impact on the

other value chains. The FF must be seen as an economic entity if advisory services are to have a purpose.

GDS: *How and to what extent do agricultural advisory services take into account vulnerable groups?*

SYM (Fongs): The advisory approach based on family meetings brings together all members of the family (see p. 35). Profits are shared and are not attributed solely to the man. During the meetings, the older family members acknowledge that it is time to give young people and women more responsibilities.

SS (DDC): By developing advisory services, you bring together different agricultural actors to share and discuss ideas. Often women are not able to travel without their husband's consent, but information and communication technologies (ICT) allow them to access the information without needing to travel (see pp. 8–9). In eastern Burkina Faso, ICT provide agricultural/weather information to roughly 50,000 people, 55–60% of whom are women. Technological innovations allow agricultural advisory services to take into account the needs of vulnerable people.

Women also have difficulty gaining access to land. Agricultural advisory services can help them produce more on small parcels of land, find the right produce with high added value depending on the available space, etc.



GDS: *Do advisory services help reduce the negative impacts of certain agricultural practices on the health of consumers and farmers?*

SYM (FONGS): FFs make up the biggest group of farmers and consumers. The advisory approach therefore needs to incorporate nutrition and health problems while promoting local consumption. Families in Senegal produce and sell their produce, while consuming imported products.

BM (ACEFA): Yes. Agricultural advisory services should train farmers in best phytosanitary practices. But strengthening the capacities of advisors is still a challenge. Despite their technical skills, we have noticed learning gaps among advisors, partly because of their relatively low level of education (56% of advisors have not pursued studies beyond the baccalaureate).

GDS: *How can advisory services help drive the transition to agroecology?*

BM (ACEFA): The transition to agroecology is a real social issue in the North. But here, it is unknown territory... So much needs to be done in terms of research, training and dissemination. Agronomists have been trained based on a model that emphasises chemically based farming and the use of heavy machinery. In Cameroon, the tractor has become the symbol of modernity, even though ploughing can be harmful to tropical soils. It is therefore a vast programme that goes beyond the individual level and that calls into question an entire segment of the economy. This transition is not advantageous for agribusiness, which is now turning to Africa...

SYM (FONGS): One of the functions of the FF is to help sustainably manage natural resources, but the simplified balance sheets do not explicitly take agroecology into account. Indigenous instructors now offer assistance for each terroir, because advisory services can play a very important role in the transition to agroecology!

SS (DDC): The local knowledge of West African farmers (zai, half-moons, etc.) is a source of many agroecology techniques. But the agricultural practices of some farmers who are uninformed or in too much of a hurry are dangerous for their own health and for the health of consumers.

BM (ACEFA): Researchers in northern Cameroon are working on sowing under plant cover, and there is a lot to learn. But research in agroecology is, on the whole, largely absent. It is therefore not easy to set out in this direction, when farmers want fast results and know that chemical inputs are effective. This does not mean they are not sensitive to environmental or health issues —on the contrary. But what concrete, effective recommendations can advisors make? Who will fund the research and testing?

GDS: *In your opinion, do agricultural advisory services still have a purpose? What are the major challenges facing sustainable agricultural advisory services in West Africa?*

SYM (FONGS): Yes, agricultural advisory services have a purpose. They support the transformation of FFs and help them boost their productivity and feed the world. But those services should be run more by State bodies than by FOs, and they should be sustainable with national agricultural advisory systems based on partnerships between FOs, States, researchers, and the private sector. The broadening of our peasant-farming approach should also offer better support for the transformation of FFs, by utilising their knowledge and experience.

BM (ACEFA): Agricultural advisory services are needed more than ever! No country has been able to develop its agriculture without them. And despite the level farmers have attained, issues continue to evolve. But even the best agricultural advisory schemes and methods cannot solve all of the problems farmers face, starting with the funding of farms.

SS (DDC): With the withdrawal of the State, the major challenge for advisory services is funding, which is the key to ensuring the longevity of those services. FOs are starting to play this role, but they have financial and institutional difficulties. The State needs to help define and standardise a form of advisory services in order to ensure quality, in conjunction with agricultural actors. The State also needs to coordinate everyone in order to ensure that actors' actions complement one another in relation to local knowledge. ■