

Farmer field schools: an innovative approach to agricultural advisory services?

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ONE OF THE LESSONS LEARNED through AVSF's farmer field schools in northern Togo is that this type of agricultural advisory service (which requires human resources and time) allows farmers to look for solutions to their problems on their own and acquire new skills.

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► This article was written based on the following documents:

- Bakker, Teatske. 2017. *Démarches d'accompagnement pour la co-construction d'innovations paysannes. Guide méthodologique des champs-écoles de la région des savanes au Togo*. AVSF;
- Bakker, Teatske. 2019. *Les champs-écoles d'AVSF au Nord Togo : une démarche d'accompagnement pour la co-construction d'innovations paysannes et le conseil agricole*.

Data collection – Field school in the Savanes region

THE FIELD SCHOOL is a method of hands-on group learning: Twenty to thirty peasant farmers (including women) from the same village come together as a group to reflect on local agricultural practices, set up cultivation experiments and discuss their findings. When they assemble periodically to cultivate a plot of land, the farmers (assisted by technicians) compare the results of their practices as well as their financial records.

The plots of land are made available by a member or rented by the group. They are welcoming places where groups of farmers may visit and discuss with one another. Field schools can also set up innovative trials, conducted with the assistance of an advisor or external instructor, in order to develop technical guidelines adapted to local conditions.

Farmer field schools: a method in support of agroecology. As part of the “Sustainability and resilience of family farming in the Savanes region” project led by AVSF and the NGO RAFIA between 2014 and 2018, and funded by the French Facility for Global Environment (Fonds Français pour l'Environnement Mondial), 21 field schools for rainfed crops (cereals and legumes) and 18 field schools for off-season market gardening were set up, involving 350 people, and a dozen visits were organised allowing for interaction between groups. The main topics of discussion and experimentation at the market-gardening field schools were: how to determine optimal plant density when transplanting (tomato and onion); use

of organic fertiliser; reduction of doses of mineral fertilisers; and use of natural pesticides (made from onion, chilli, garlic, neem). New crops were also introduced on small plots (cabbage, carrot). Tests helped significantly reduce the use of mineral fertiliser by replacing it with organic fertiliser.

The farmers replicated several lessons from the field schools, such as: cultivating rows of onion (technique also used by women for rice), cultivating onion with compost, and using natural pesticides. Market gardeners are also saving water by using compost, reducing the size of their “pits”, and optimising plant density. After comparing the gross profit margin of the field schools with what they obtained from their own plots, farmers have been reducing their doses of mineral fertilisers and have started focusing more on the production of compost.

A demanding but suitable approach to advisory services. In addition to developing agroecological crop-management techniques, field schools help participants develop an ability to find solutions to their own problems and acquire new experimentation, innovation and communication skills. It appears, therefore, that field schools help family farms become more resilient and more capable of adapting to climate change.

But this experience has shown that the field school is a scheme that requires a lot of human resources (one technician for a group of 20 farmers) and time, while reaching a relatively small number of farmers.

In conclusion, this type of advisory service is the most capable of meeting the following objectives: emergence and validation of innovations tailored to the constraints (particularly socio-economic) of farmers; and creation of technical agroecological guidelines for the local context, and adoption of those guidelines by farmers. Ultimately, one of the impacts of the scheme is to shift agricultural practices and systems towards more ecological alternatives. ■



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