

Renewed State engagement in agricultural advisory services? The situation in Benin

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AFTER A PERIOD OF WITHDRAWAL from agricultural advisory services, West African States appear to be renewing their engagement through agencies and national funds for agricultural development. In Benin the government is reforming the agricultural sector, and the country offers a prime example of these institutional changes regarding agricultural advisory services.

THE LIBERALISATION of agricultural advisory services in the early 1990s enabled private entities and farmers' organisations to become involved in funding and providing advisory services in West Africa.

Although the State always maintained a presence in the field alongside them, its role became more focused on coordination and regulation, which suffered from a lack of funding. As a result, the number of advisory schemes increased in a fragmented manner and without synergies. Recent changes may therefore be assessed in light of challenges such as coordinating, regulating and funding (pp. 28–29) agricultural advisory services.

The return of the State. After a 30-year period of withdrawal, States are now making an effort to address deficiencies in their national agricultural advisory systems by building on the achievements of several West African countries. New forums and mechanisms involving all stakeholders in agricultural advisory services (government entities, farmers' organisations, NGOs, private entities, etc.) are gradually being put in place to help regulate, revitalise, coordinate and fund agricultural advisory services. States have a ubiquitous role in that process.

The most remarkable trend has been the creation of national advisory agencies (ANADER in Ivory Coast, ANCAR in Senegal, APCA in Niger) and regional advisory agencies (Benin) with a wide range of mandates, agencies specifically for agricultural advisory services (Senegal, Niger), and agencies for agricultural development in general (Ivory Coast, Benin). In Ivory Coast and Senegal, those agencies have their own advisory schemes in the field. In Benin and Niger, they work with private service providers (NGOs, professional agricultural organisations). States have also developed various agricultural advisory strategies, such as ANCAR's manual of technical procedures in Senegal, the national agricultural advisory system in Niger, and the national agricultural advisory strategy in Benin. Those policy documents offer an assessment of the state of agricultural advisory services as well as the principles of those services, their strategic orientations, and their intervention and monitoring/evaluation mechanisms.

The agencies' boards of directors are composed of

representatives of public organisations, private service providers and professional agricultural organisations. Despite participation by such a diverse group of actors, the predominance of representatives from public entities may result in strong State influence in orienting the advisory services organised by the agencies. Decentralised State entities, for their part, are in charge of controlling the quality of the services.

National funds for agricultural development with a component dedicated to agricultural advisory services (national fund for agricultural development in Benin, investment fund for food and nutrition security in Niger) and funds specifically for agricultural advisory services (interprofessional fund for agricultural research and advisory services in Ivory Coast) are created to fund agricultural advisory schemes. Those funds are funded by levies on agricultural value chains, State grants, and donors.

Agricultural advisory services in Benin: a new beginning. Benin is a typical example of renewed State engagement. The reform of the agricultural sector over the past three years as part of the Government Action Programme is changing the country's institutional landscape for agricultural advisory services. The Strategic Plan for the Development of the Agricultural Sector (2017–2025), which led to the creation of the National Agricultural Advisory Strategy, placed the twelve departmental directorates of agriculture, livestock farming and fishing in charge of implementing agricultural policy, monitoring the agricultural sector, overseeing regulation, and providing technical assistance to agencies. Those directorates are in charge of defining and ensuring compliance with standards, and controlling the quality of agricultural advisory services at departmental level.

Seven territorial agencies for agricultural development (agences territoriales de développement agricole, or «ATDA») are in charge of overseeing agricultural advisory operations.

Each Beninese ATDA is run by a board composed of representatives of the ministries of agriculture, trade, and finance; the departmental directorates of agriculture, livestock farming and fishing within the target zone; interdepartmental chambers of agriculture; professional agricultural organisations; the National Association of Beninese Municipalities; civil society in the agricultural sector; and one de-

“The State is taking back control of agricultural advisory services with the private sector”

legate representing the ATDA's staff. State services are therefore strongly represented in that governance body. The reform seeks to break down agricultural development by territory and area of specialisation. Each ATDA has specific mandates to promote leading value chains and favours an approach that is strongly oriented towards promoting value chains and based on delegating work. Advisory services are therefore implemented by NGOs, professional agricultural organisations and private firms selected through tender calls and funded in accordance with the National Fund for Agricultural Development mechanism. There are no longer any public agricultural advisory agents in the field.

In short, the State is creating a new framework for the governance and organisation of funding for agricultural advisory services by integrating actors from the private sector. It grants exclusivity for the provision of advisory services in the field to non-State entities, while reserving the right to assist them and to oversee regulation and supervision. Agricultural service centres (which are considered to be a source of technical support for ATDAs) are in charge of transferring savoir-faire and agricultural technologies, and helping strengthen the capacities of farms, service providers and technical training entities for actors in the different value chains by offering demonstrations as examples. Feasibility studies are being carried out in order to define how to set up such centres.

Renewed State engagement for market-oriented agricultural advisory services. Agencies for advisory services and agricultural development are currently in vogue, funded by agricultural development funds. While States have renewed their engagement in the governance of agricultural advisory services, those services have also become more focused on promoting value chains and have moved towards privatisation. In Benin, for instance, there are no more public agricultural advisory agents.

It is important, however, not to forget that agricultural advisory services also play a crucial role in food security, poverty reduction and environmental protection. In order for them to fulfil that role, specific local characteristics and differences between crops (subsistence crops, cash crops, etc.) and between farmers (small farmers, family farms, etc.) must be taken into account when organising agricultural advisory services. Otherwise, those services may remain inaccessible to many farmers. Actors (public entities, farmers' organisations, inter-professional associations, NGOs, private consultants, etc.) must therefore be well-prepared in order to properly fulfil their new roles in the current political and institutional context. ■



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The Territorial Agency for Agricultural Development (ATDA), Benin