

New agricultural advisory actors in West Africa: interests, limits and strategic implications

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THE DIVERSITY of agricultural advisory service providers in West Africa over the past 20 years was the result of several factors and presents an opportunity to improve the offer of advisory services. But challenges are arising, and strategic orientations need to be (re)defined in order to enable agricultural advisory services to help transform agriculture.

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IN WEST AFRICA, demand from farmers for agricultural advisory services has become more and more diversified over the past 20 years. That diversification has given rise to a wide range of agricultural advisory service providers, which has had an impact on the services offered, funding, advisor profiles, and advisory methods and tools. The emergence of new actors is a major change that needs to be understood and encouraged in order to offer farmers inclusive and easy access to high-quality agricultural advisory services.

Strong recomposition over the past two decades.

Historically, agricultural advisory functions (provision of relevant knowledge and information, facilitation of interactions with actors, decision-making assistance and ongoing capacity-building) were overseen mainly by the ministries in charge of rural development. But public agricultural advisory services ran into difficulties, which culminated in the late 1990s (see pp. 11–12).

At the same time, new agricultural advisory service providers began to emerge, playing an increasingly important role. Many were from the private sector (agribusinesses, input distributors (see pp. 19–20), engineering offices), NGOs, and the agricultural profession (FOs, chambers of agriculture, etc.). Private entities also began to emerge that were initially non-agricultural but that developed activities in connection with one or more functions relating to agricultural advisory services (e.g. telephony companies, see pp. 8–9).

This diversity of actors at both national and regional levels means that the analysis and development tables for advisory services need to shift from a single scheme to an integrated system comprising several different schemes.

A wide array of actors supported by the State?

While shortcomings in public schemes played a big role in the emergence of new actors, other factors also contributed. The development of multilateral cooperation facilitated suppliers' access to several sources of funding. By focusing on its coordination functions, the State encouraged the private sector to take over the activities it was withdrawing from, sometimes suddenly. The desire of FOs to boost their performance drove them to set up internal advisory schemes offering their members access to local agri-

cultural advisory services, and to ensure that loans for inputs are used efficiently.

Governments more or less directly supported the emergence of new actors by passing legislation creating the legal statuses now used by several private agricultural advisory service providers (economic interest groups, associations, NGOs, cooperatives). In Benin, the decision to allow for contractual relationships in agricultural advisory services, with the authorisation of private service providers, has encouraged a rise in the number of new actors (see pp. 11–12). In Guinea, the public authorities in charge of agricultural advisory services helped create —through training programmes and the provision of agents— the agricultural advisory scheme for the Fédération des Paysans du Fouta-Djallon (FPPD), which was an example of successful internalisation of an agricultural advisory scheme.

Diversification of actors: improving the offer of agricultural advisory services.

The diversification of actors makes it possible for agricultural advisory services to cover more themes and geographical areas, as suppliers tend to focus on specific requests. Farmers' organisation schemes target their members first and foremost —sometimes even exclusively— by offering them technical/economic advisory services,

and sometimes managerial advisory services for family farms (conseil à l'exploitation familiale). That is the case with the Union des Groupements pour la Commercialisation des Produits Agricoles de la Boucle du Mouhoun (UGCPA/BM) in Burkina Faso. Engineering offices offer

mainly entrepreneurial advisory services and capacity-building, monitoring/evaluation and support activities. NGOs and public services target primarily vulnerable farmers. Agro-dealers offer advice mainly on how to choose and use the inputs (seeds, fertilisers, pesticides) they sell.

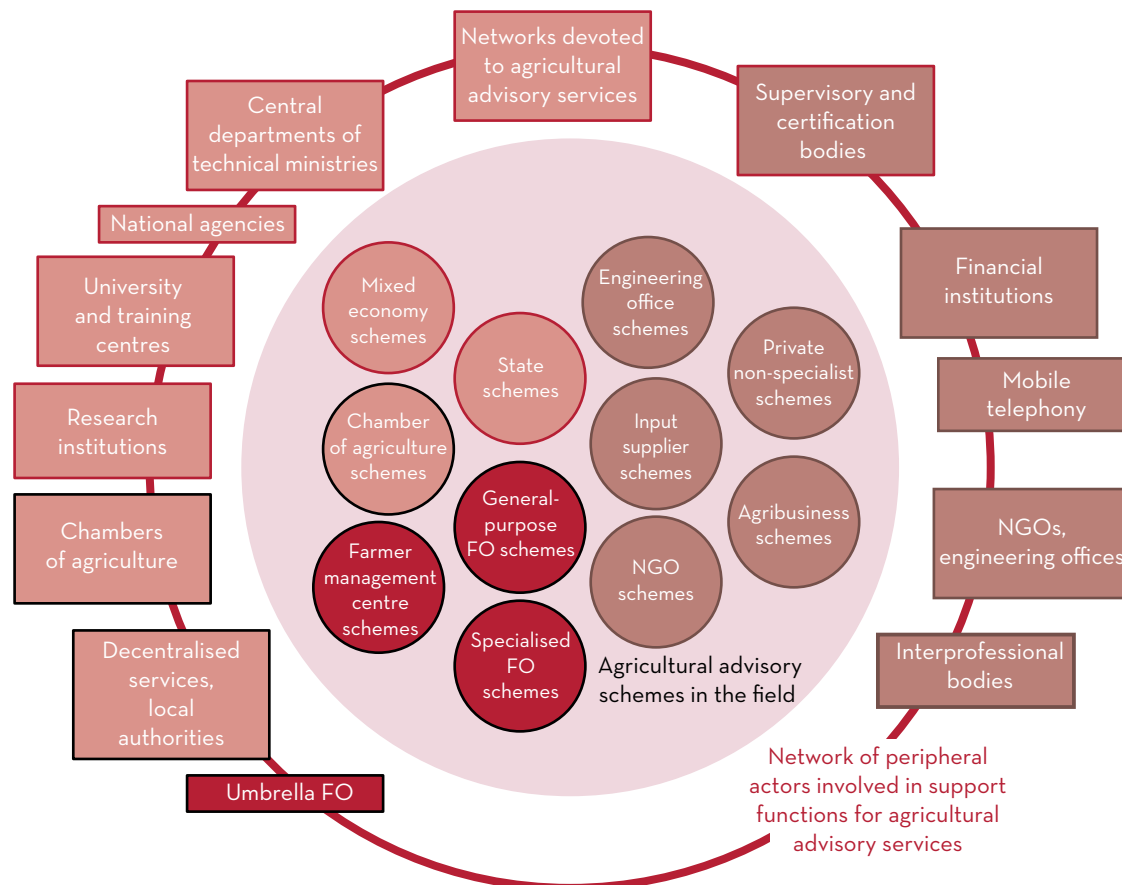
The challenges of diversity. The advantages of the emergence of these new actors have not yet been fully exploited, and farmers' access to high-quality agricultural advisory services is still problematic. Strategic choices adapted to the new context are lacking. Consequently, there is a lack of coordination and synergies between the different initiatives.

The offer of advisory services may be overabundant in certain areas, and completely lacking in others. ➔

“The diversification of actors may improve the offer of advisory services”

Diversity of schemes in the field and network of actors for support functions.

Source: AFD. Technical report n°55, *Reviving agricultural advisory and extension services in sub-Saharan Africa: for new policies in line with the realities in the field*, July 2019.



- Several emerging topics (nutrition, entrepreneurship, climate change), addressed mainly through projects with limited lifespan and scope, are not yet sufficiently taken into account. Best practices have not yet been fully implemented or scaled up, owing to a lack of synergies and insufficient assessment and sharing of experiences.

Several entities (engineering offices, local NGO service providers) were created through opportunism and were not able to develop a sustainable and dynamic business model that could operate on the entity's own funding. Those entities disappear or are put on stand-by once the development project that provided them with farmer-assistance contracts comes to an end.

Because many farmers are unable or unwilling to pay for the agricultural advisory services they need, supply is not yet fully driven by demand (see pp. 28–29). The large number of suppliers has not given rise to competing offers of services. Several suppliers are above all focused on their accountability vis-à-vis donors, and rarely put in place mechanisms to ensure their accountability vis-à-vis the users of their services.

The need to (re)define strategic orientations.

Because of the problems caused by the large number of actors, strategic orientations and institutional arrangements need to be (re)defined in order to take advantage of the full potential of agricultural advisory services when it comes to achieving national objectives for agricultural, economic and social development. That's why countries such as Cameroon, Nigeria and Guinea recently defined national agricultural advisory policies.

Better coordination with up-to-date mapping of supply and demand is essential when it comes to en-

suring that initiatives are consistent and in line with national strategic objectives. A mechanism for registering and certifying suppliers should be organised in order to improve actors' professional skills. The idea is also to promote learning and experience-sharing, and to develop ties with agricultural advisory support services (input sellers, finance, etc.).

Reinventing public agricultural advisory services?

The appearance of new agricultural advisory actors also presents the challenge of reinventing agricultural advisory services. The challenge for public services is not so much to find lasting solutions to recurring issues relating to the strengthening of human and financial resources; rather, the challenge involves rethinking the offer of services and modernising methods and tools. This involves a strategic repositioning that would offer added value compared with other actors and generate a better return on public investment in agricultural advisory services.

Through recent reforms, Guinea and Niger have decided to gradually shift public services to target the most vulnerable farmers, while private service providers target farmers who are able to cover some of the costs. Moreover, within the strategic framework for agricultural advisory services adopted in Guinea, the role of the National Agency for Rural Advancement and Agricultural Advisory Services (*Agence Nationale de Promotion Rurale et de Conseil Agricole*) —the public body in charge of agricultural advisory services— is to focus more on supporting and facilitating other service providers (agricultural profession, private service providers). The strategy is to ensure that the large number of suppliers results in a greater overall offer of high-quality services, and to provide better coverage to satisfy demand for advisory services. ■