

## Private agricultural advisory actors: Algeria's market gardening sector

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**A**GRICULTURAL ADVISORY SERVICES have responded to State withdrawal by allowing the private sector to play a greater role. This article explores how that change has affected the market gardening sector in Biskra, Algeria, where suppliers and input retailers are the main advisory operators.

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**I**N A CONTEXT where the State has withdrawn from agricultural services, advisory schemes in Algeria —particularly in the province of Biskra— are dominated by input suppliers with no specific State oversight. The State has continued to support public agricultural research and the system for controlling the import of inputs in order to ensure their quality.

Biskra is located roughly 400 km south of Algiers. Over the past 30 years, the region has had a remarkably dynamic agricultural sector characterised by strong growth in the amount of irrigated land (date palm, market gardening, potato) and a rapid increase in market gardening production in greenhouses (referred to as “plasticulture”). Biskra has become a major vegetable supplier for the national market and a very attractive region for private agricultural input suppliers. Market gardening farms are highly intensive and are on average 1 hectare (ha). They coexist with larger date palm farms (between 5 and 15 ha) that also sometimes engage in market gardening in greenhouses.

### **Agricultural advisory services: a virtual monopoly for agricultural input suppliers and retailers.**

Starting in the 1990s, it was revealed that Algerian public systems for research and agricultural advisory services were having difficulties disseminating technical innovations. Those institutions rarely collaborate with one another and have weak ties with private actors, which reduces their impact in the field.

During the 2000s, as the public system for innovation was declining, the number of agricultural supply firms and input retailers (called “seed sellers”) steadily increased. Those private actors developed activities for the transfer of knowledge and innovations and for agricultural extension services in the province of Biskra, which now has 24 agricultural input suppliers and 50 seed sellers. Selling inputs is the basic function of those private actors, but strong competition has driven them to adopt several strategies to expand their clientele, including the free provision of agricultural advisory services.

No other private advisory actor has been created in the region, because there are no farmers’ organisations (FO) in the region and because buyers have little interest in improving vegetable quality. Moreover, Algeria does not have a fund dedicated to advisory services allowing for the purchase of advisory

services from a specialised engineering office.

### **Agricultural input suppliers offering a variety of agricultural advisory services.**

Agricultural input suppliers provide several different types of agricultural advisory services. Seed sellers provide plasticulture farmers with technical information on the use of agricultural inputs at the time of purchase. Events dedicated to technical information on market gardening crops and new inputs are also organised, mainly by firms for farmers and retailers. Individual advisory services based on monitoring in the field are sometimes provided by engineers from firms and technicians from large seed sellers, but few farmers avail of them.

**New inputs for greater profits?** Input importers are represented by technical/commercial delegates whose first objective is to boost their revenue. Those firms are continuously introducing new inputs on the market. These new inputs are presented as being more “modern” and effective, and they are generally more expensive for farmers because the agricultural supply firms add a higher profit margin to them. Retailers and delegates therefore have an incentive to recommend their use in their advisory services.

The technical/commercial delegates organise demonstration events for farmers and seed sellers, and visit them once before the growing season to choose pesticides, seeds and fertilisers, and then two or three times during the growing season. It is possible to call on them in urgent cases. Advisory services may go beyond and

involve innovations practised in other regions relating to irrigation, planting density, and the testing of new products. The delegates monitor the process on a regular basis.

The delegates have created a network of market gardeners who are ready to test or buy new inputs and with whom they discuss directly. Several different means of communication are used: phone, meet-ups in the field, and (for certain farmers) social networks (see pp. 8–9).

**Three types of advisory services provided by retailers.** Seed sellers are the interface between the agricultural input suppliers and the farmers, as they are in constant contact with them. In Biskra, three types of seed sellers have different positions vis-à-vis

**“A strictly private agricultural advisory system presents major risks”**

◀ advisory services.

Some with training in agricultural engineering offer local advisory services. They regularly visit the market gardening farms of their best customers (in terms of quantity of inputs purchased and willingness to use new inputs). During those visits, they assess the state of the crops and how the market gardening season is progressing, and they provide continuous technical assistance. They provide mainly solutions that involve using the inputs they sell and, less often, recommending cultivation techniques or equipment.

Others provide information for farmers. They explain how to use the inputs they sell and orient farmers towards certain cultivation practices, while advising against others. They provide the delegates of firms with a lot of information and help them build up their networks.

Lastly, some are “simple traders” who just sell agricultural inputs while limiting the amount of time they spend providing information to market gardeners. They answer farmers only if the farmers ask them specific questions. They do not participate in networking or in the supervision of farmers.

**Advisory services: main activity or secondary service of private actors?** Firms and retailers organise advisory services in order to develop customer loyalty and gain clientele. They also provide inputs needed for production on credit. That credit is short term and without interest, and it is for loyal farmers known to be good payers (often the biggest farmers). The vast majority of actors involved in supplying agricultural inputs have adopted this strategy, and in the future the quality of the advisory services

will perhaps be decisive when it comes to maintaining clientele.

**The risks of a strictly private advisory system.** The system of private agricultural advisory services for market gardening in the province of Biskra presents major risks. First, it is not very diverse in substance or in form, and it offers only partial answers to farmers’ questions. It does not address the economic and financial management of the farm, or strategic advisory services. Those private actors also do not take into consideration the environmental and social challenges of regional agriculture. Inputs are used in large doses, because the advisory services orient farmers towards the “chemicalisation” of agriculture, and towards greater and greater use of imported seeds. This may lead to health and environmental problems. Because they lack information and local alternatives, farmers are demanding products that are increasingly effective but that are often more dangerous and cause crop diseases to become more resistant. The consumption of agricultural pesticides in Algeria has increased by a factor of 3.5 since the early 2000s.

**The need for intervention by public authorities.** Such risks require State intervention, the first step of which is to take control again of the management of agricultural advisory services. Doing so will require mobilising and revitalising public technical institutes. But the State should also encourage the emergence of functional FOs in order to help farmers become less dependent on agricultural input suppliers. ■



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Plasticulture  
(eggplant), Biskra,  
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