

Producer organizations as providers of advisory services: lessons learnt and perspective in Francophone Africa

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Introduction

Producer organizations (POs) form the interface between local societies and their economic, social and institutional environment. They are constructed around two main issues: defending producer interests and organizing access to agricultural services. In West Africa, their importance in rural development has grown since the 1990s following the withdrawal of the State from the agricultural sector. Some POs have extended the services they provide to their members by developing advisory services. This has been possible mainly due to the support of donors and of support structures involved in renovating and reviving advisory services. This article presents the main issues which confront POs and the entities which support them. These issues concern the effectiveness and sustainability of advisory mechanisms controlled and implemented by the POs. What type of advice to meet the needs and challenges faced by the POs and their members? How to make advisory services compatible with PO constraints? How to finance and sustain these services?

This article is based on a self-analysis undertaken in 2012 of 12 advisory mechanisms with varying involvement of POs in the provision of advisory services. It also draws on findings from a workshop held in 2012 at Bohicon, Benin, financed by AFD and GFRAS, on sustainability and scaling of management advice for family farms in West Africa.

1) Testing an innovative advisory method: Management Advice for Family Farms

The first experiments in advisory services provided by POs in West Africa took place in the context of testing a new advisory approach: management advice for family farms (MAFF). MAFF is defined by fundamental principles which have gradually been appropriated by the POs: placing the producer at the heart of the process; developing a comprehensive farm approach by taking technical and economic aspects into account; using tools to help the decision-making process which require literacy but which are adapted to the profiles of members; and promoting learning processes to enhance participants' skills and autonomy. Today variations of this approach have been implemented in several advisory mechanisms, including POs. For POs, the mechanisms differ depending on the type of PO (market-oriented or community-oriented), the type of funding available for the entirety of the advisory mechanism and specifically earmarked for POs, human skills available within the POs or outside, and objectives of the donor who is supporting the PO (support to an entire sector, commercialization of farms, dissemination of technical topics, etc.). Depending on these criteria, the role of POs in advisory mechanism varies considerably: simple interaction with stakeholders to orient the advice; a major player in controlling and orienting the advisory service; and the main actor in the implementation of advisory services. Table 1 shows the diversity of situations encountered in Francophone Africa.

Table 1: Diversity of advisory mechanisms involving POs

Role of the PO	Beneficiaries	Funding	Method	Specificities pertaining to the PO
Central role MAFF implemented by the POs (salaried advisers and endogenous advisers)	members	Ad-hoc and targeted support from individual partners (Farm,	MAFF (group and individual advice)	Endogenous advisers/coordinators Co-construction of the offer and the

managed by the PO) and controlled by multi-service POs (planning and evaluation)		Afdi, support donors	Snv), from	demand
Marginal role MAFF implemented by an entity specifically dedicated to advisory services (development association or consultants) but controlled by POs	Producers or front-line POs	Partially financed, support from donors	self-support	Mixed (MAFF and other advisory approaches)
MAFF backed by a sector-strengthening programme and partially controlled by a PO	Members	Development programme		MAFF (group and individual advice)
Service provider Implementation by POs of a specific advisory activity (contract between a project and a PO)	Producers and front-line POs	Multi-donor projects		Mixed

Based on the lessons learned from these MAFF experiences, we show how MAFF meets the requirements of members and of the PO. We identify the challenges faced by the POs, and we make recommendations for making the advisory service sustainable and more efficient.

2) How does MAFF meet both member expectations and PO objectives?

The participation by the PO leadership in orienting advisory services, the presence of advisers employed by the PO and of ‘endogenous’ advisers not only guarantee the relevance of the advisory service (greater consideration of cultural aspects, of local knowledge and farmer perceptions which are often ill-understood by external projects) but also impart improved sustainability of the approaches developed, especially after donor-funded projects come to an end.

The co-construction of the offer and the demand takes time

As with any advisory service, the demand is built concurrently with the offer. In the early years of the experiment, producers had the usual expectations, conditioned by their perception of how an advisory service could help them: literacy, access to new farming techniques, and access to equipment or inputs. In the case of MAFF, the co-construction of the advisory content is especially long (from 5 to 10 years) because the advisory service seeks to address complex and non-standardized problems. The majority of POs are still in this phase of co-construction, but the specifics of MAFF proposed by the POs (PO-grounded advisory services) are beginning to emerge.

Training for the members

One objective of the POs is to provide quality services to their members. MAFF is a service that is able to respond to member demands for improving agricultural production, food security and incomes.

MAFF primarily ‘awakens’ marginalized producers, struggling at the edge of subsistence, to the possibilities of improving their lives by improving farm management practices: for example, better management of their crops in order to ensure food security, better calibrating input use to reduce production costs, planning their spending to avoid debt, and reorganizing the workforce for its more efficient use. MAFF allows participants to make more informed decisions by adopting a management approach based on the diagnosis, planning, action, and evaluation of their actions. Capacity building of its members through MAFF directly strengthens the PO since well-managed farms (high production, low debt, etc.) are required for a strong and healthy PO (existence of marketable

surpluses, reduced risk of debt, etc.). Finally, some MAFF participants assume responsible positions in the PO and use management skills acquired from the MAFF for the PO's benefit.

Strengthening the PO

MAFF also helps create a new type of capital for the POs. This capital consists, in part, of improved knowledge of their members' farms (yields, margins, incomes, etc.). It helps orient advisory services based on member needs, engender debates within the POs on issues that arise from advisory activities, negotiate better prices for the sale of agricultural products by having knowledge of the economic performances of the members, and better orient other services directed towards the members (access to inputs, credit, etc.). This capital also consists of new skills acquired by those responsible in the PO for managing the advisory service (managing advisers, managing a budget, planning and evaluating activities, etc.) which can also prove useful in managing the PO's other activities.

3) Limitations encountered by the POs

The problems encountered by the POs in implementing MAFF pertain to both the characteristics of the POs themselves and the novelty of the MAFF approach. We discuss here four main challenges.

First, POs are organizations whose capacities are generally still weak. A PO's leadership encounters recurring difficulties in managing an advisory service (planning and evaluating advisory activities to be implemented, managing advisers whether employees or endogenous, etc.) and in inscribing it an overall strategy for the PO's development (building an advisory service that meets both member needs as well as the PO's strategic objectives, developing an advisory service that complements the other services that the PO provides, etc.). As a result, there exists a co-evolution between the MAFF and the PO, with the latter improving the quality of its advisory service as it goes ahead with the MAFF experiment but also as and when it acquires more experience and greater self-reliance for undertaking all its activities.

Second, a PO has difficulties in managing the heterogeneity of its members in terms of their profiles (woman vs man, passive vs proactive, etc.), training (literacy level, basic school education), socio-economic structures (farm size and income), etc. These heterogeneities call for the development of varied and innovative advisory tools in the context of limited financial and human resources at the PO level. For example, how to advise women who are not farm managers as opposed to those who are? How to deliver advice to illiterates? How to make a difference in hard-to-access remote communities?

Third are difficulties pertaining to the skills required to provide advisory services. POs have to make a difficult choice between recruiting skilled but expensive advisers and less qualified ones but of lower quality. The combination of employee advisers and endogenous ones, tried out in many situations, appears to meet the needs of members and field constraints. The employed adviser provides basic training and oversees the most important events. The endogenous adviser continuously monitors members, provides ad hoc assistance in filling notebooks, and can even deliver more specialized advice corresponding to his personal experience. However, the status of endogenous advisers remains problematic.

Fourth, there are the difficulties related to economic models that have to be invented to provide an advisory service. On the one hand, members' low farm incomes and the lack of direct evidence of the economic gains accruing from MAFF do not encourage members to pay for advice. On the other hand, the POs struggle to develop economic activities (sale of inputs and marketing of members' products) which would allow them to finance other services such as advisory ones. With very few exceptions, the POs remain heavily dependent on donor aid and thus, to some extent, on advisory models imposed by the entities supporting them. They cannot evolve at their own pace and explore advisory methods which would better meet the challenges they face. Furthermore, it was noted that

elected officials often have little knowledge of issues related to MAFF, which limits their abilities to defend MAFF and identify financial solutions to sustain the service.

4) Challenges in improving the efficiency and sustainability of PO advisory services

Based on the findings of the Bohicon workshop of 2012, the following five broad recommendations were made to actors who support POs in their agricultural advisory activities.

Supporting the POs in the co-construction of the advisory service

If the MAFF service has to help the PO achieve its goals, it has to be designed as a service which is complementary to the PO's other activities and not as an isolated service. Therefore an overall vision of the PO's strategy and activities becomes necessary, not only in order to define the objectives of the advisory service and the methods to use, but also the skills to mobilize (advisers and managers of the advisory mechanism), the mode of governance and the funding of the service. The transposition of standard advisory approaches developed for other situations has shown its limits. It is a matter, therefore, of supporting the POs and working with them over time to identify advisory models most suitable to each situation. This finding argues for building sustainable capacity in countries in order to provide local support to POs and advisory service stakeholders.

Making POs part of agricultural advisory networks

A major factor in making PO advisory services sustainable is the recognition by policy makers of PO skills and the added value of a PO advisory service. Arguments need to be built around the impact of MAFF and to raise awareness amongst technical, institutional and financial partners on the efficient role of POs in the scaling up and scaling out of advisory services. There already exist several networks in which the POs can contribute their views and proposals: at the national level are the advisory platforms managed by governments or private actors such as the '*Réseau Gestion*' in Burkina Faso; at the sub-regional level, the RESCAR-AOC network; at the continental level, AFAAS; and globally, GFRAS.

Building monitoring and evaluation systems and measuring MAFF impact

In order to orient and refine the offer of advisory services, produce results which demonstrate the MAFF's positive impacts and build arguments which could be used to convince donors and politicians, investments need to be made in (i) the capitalization and analysis of data collected during the advisory sessions and (ii) the creation of rigorous survey and feedback systems combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. For the former, it is important to build up the capacity to support POs in managing monitoring-and-evaluation systems that would be useful to its operations. For the latter, significant support from research will be necessary to come up with methods that could provide compelling evidence of MAFF's effectiveness.

Devising new economic models

The overdependence on donor funding by PO-managed advisory mechanisms raises doubts on the sustainability of these mechanisms. Since the wide diversity of POs precludes a one-size-fits-all solution, new economic models have to be created on a case-by-case basis. They have to combine modest member contributions, self-funding by the PO and external support. It is obvious that the latter will continue to be a necessity for the foreseeable future. Self-funding is essential in ensuring that the advisory service retains a certain independence from external actors and for it to be financial sustainable. In the case of particular sectors, self-funding can take the form of member levies, as in the case of cotton, or can be part of related services provided by the PO (advice and supply of inputs, advice and credit, advice and marketing). Such an approach will have a strong impact on the contents of the advice and the methods used to deliver it.

Building adviser profiles and toolboxes

When POs implement advisory services, the issue arises of adviser profiles (employed or endogenous) which must be adapted to the PO's needs (type of advice expected) and values (valorisation of local knowledge and of the local culture). Ongoing training courses (initial academic training, vocational training) remain to be identified for these two types of advisers in the countries concerned. Emerging initiatives, as in Benin and Senegal, are to be encouraged. Similarly, there is a pressing need to create a capacity for ongoing experimentation to adapt advisory methods and tools not only to the new advisory needs that arise but also to the skills of the employee adviser, endogenous adviser and participant profiles (literate vs illiterate). It is not a matter of necessarily inventing new methods but of finding the right combination of existing ones (field visits, classroom training, video media to share, etc.).

Conclusion

In the current context of agricultural development, POs thus appear to be suitable entities for providing efficient and sustainable advisory services. In fact, the POs can easily expand the reach of advisory services to a wider audience (all their members), better co-construct the offer due to their proximity to farmer needs and realities and to local economic and social issues, and devise economic models adapted to the constraints of rural development. Nevertheless, most of the POs are still weak and long-term actions to build their capacities therefore remain necessary.