

# NOTE 10: Rural Resource Centres: A Community Approach to Agricultural Extension

Compiled by: Ann Degrande, Zac Tchoundjeu, Roger Kwidja, and Guillaume Fongang Fouepe, July 2015

There is plenty of information available in the public domain that covers various aspects of extension and know-how about new methodologies for implementation. However this information is often scattered and presented in complex academic language. Hence practitioners, who often have very limited time and/or may only have basic formal education, find it difficult to make use of this information.

The Global Good Practices Initiative aims to bridge this gap by providing information about extension approaches and methods in easy-to-understand formats. As part of this effort, it makes "Good Practice Notes" available to all on a downloadable website. This Note contains one of the extension methods included in this series.



## Introduction

In a rapidly changing world, farmers need a package of innovations and services, in addition to continuous access to knowledge and information. Having all this under one roof and in a rural setting can greatly accelerate adoption of innovations and increase benefits to farmers.

Farmer training centres have been initiated by many actors, under different forms; for example, Maisons Familiales Rurales<sup>1</sup>, Songhai Centres,<sup>2</sup> and Agribusiness Development Centres. These initiatives focus on training young individuals and preparing them for a career in agriculture. However, they are less useful in serving

the wider farming community for large scale adoption of agricultural innovations. Therefore, new models of community-based extension are under development, such as the 'Small Farm Resource Centre' approach promoted in South Asia by ECHO<sup>3</sup> and the 'Rural Resource Centre' concept, further described in this note.

Agroforestry<sup>4</sup> requires specific attention from extension because it is knowledge intensive, highly context-specific, and provides benefits in the long term. Therefore, the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF) has been developing rural resource centres (RRCs) since 2006; first in Cameroon,<sup>5</sup> and later in Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, and Nigeria. This good practice note uses the RRC experience to demonstrate how a community-based extension approach can complement public-run agricultural extension so that local realities are taken into account and to better meet farmers' expectations.

## Philosophy and principles

**What are RRCs?** RRCs are training and demonstration hubs that are managed by grassroots organisations and often operate outside the formal extension model. They create opportunities for farmers to share experiences and to receive technical guidance and services that are tailored to their livelihood needs. Emphasis is put on access to knowledge, interactive learning, and networking among farmers and between farmers and other actors. Farmers are encouraged to learn how to do their own testing,

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.mfr.asso.fr/mfr-dans-le-monde/pages/les-mfr-dans-le-monde.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.songhai.org/index.php/en/home-en>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.meas-extension.org/meas-offers/case-studies/sfrc-asia>

<sup>4</sup> Agroforestry is the deliberate introduction or retention of trees on farms to increase, diversify, and sustain production for increased social, economic, and environmental benefits.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmIf7Mir1sQ>



adopt successful technologies, and extend them to their fellow farmers. A 'typical' RRC comprises of a tree nursery, demonstration plots, a training hall, a small library, and office spaces. Accommodation, catering facilities, and agricultural processing units may also be part of the RRC depending on available resources, opportunities, and needs.

**Roles and services of RRCs?** RRCs provide a multitude of services and products (Box 1). In Cameroon, farmers value the training, information, and awareness-raising role of RRCs the most, followed by technical assistance. Young people in particular also expect RRCs to play an active role in rural development in general.

#### BOX 1: KEY SERVICES PROVIDED BY RURAL RESOURCE CENTRES

- Seeds, seedlings, and other inputs
- Training of farmers in areas such as nursery practices, tree propagation, soil fertility management, group dynamics, financial management, book-keeping, and marketing
- Information on new technologies and innovations
- Links with market actors, particularly the private sector
- Access to market information and micro-finance opportunities
- Forum for exchange of information among farmers, and between farmers and other stakeholders

**How are RRCs different from other extension approaches?** Compared to public-run agricultural extension systems, RRCs have the following advantages: greater accessibility, increased relevance of innovations thanks to a technology evaluation and adaptation process, better quality of services, relatively high number of women and youths reached, and better networking with other rural actors. Moreover, activities are not necessarily limited to agriculture, but may include other socio-environmental development aspects such as: infrastructure development projects, watershed management, citizenship, local governance, community empowerment, etc. Their major advantage, however, is that they are rooted in a local context and have gained farmers' confidence, so that new techniques are readily adopted.

#### Implementation

The creation and implementation of the RRC model can be summarised in 6 steps (Box 2). The growth of RRCs is gradual and driven by the capacities and resources available to the centre, but also determined by the needs of the farmer community and other stakeholders. Nevertheless, their ability to build strategic partnerships with other institutions, such as government services, local councils, charity organisations, research centres, universities, non-government organisations (NGOs) and development programmes, is a key element in ensuring the viability and sustainability of the centre.

#### BOX 2: THE 6 STEPS TO CREATING AN RRC

1. Conduct feasibility study: diagnose the information and training needs of farmers in the area.
2. Raise awareness amongst farmers and identify 'champions' for RRCs, i.e. organisations already involved in some farmer training and agricultural extension activities.
3. Train RRC staff on technical aspects but also on adult learning, communication, and extension skills.
4. Create tree nursery and gradually develop training and demonstration facilities.
5. Organise demonstrations, training, field visits, etc. for interested farmer groups; and update and refine extension knowledge to remain relevant.
6. Establish links and partnerships with other institutions to increase scope of intervention.

#### Capacities required

Creating and sustaining RRCs requires visionary and dynamic leadership. The centre also needs a motivated technical team with a diverse skill set, including training and extension methods, farming practices, management, and finance. Some staff may be engaged on a temporary basis. It is important to build local capacity and have a clearly defined staff development strategy for when external support is no longer around (see Box 3).

Successful RRCs are not islands. Instead, they must develop and maintain strong and diversified partnerships. Connections with research organisations, universities, NGOs for capacity development and technical guidance, and with institutions that can support them financially and politically, are necessary.

#### BOX 3: MANAGING CIEFAD RRC

Le Centre Intégré d'Expérimentation et de Formation en Agriculture Durable (CIEFAD) in Bangangte, West Cameroon, was established by APADER, a local NGO. A management committee was set up that initially comprised a farmer group, contributing land and labour, and APADER bringing in financial resources. When activities of CIEFAD expanded to farmer training, service delivery, large-scale production of tree seedlings and seeds, organisation of exchange visits, etc., a technical director was appointed and the management committee was enlarged with the following: mayor, village chief, representative of a micro-finance institution, and the president of the agroforesters' union. Today, CIEFAD is a reference centre for the production of improved planting material and training of young entrepreneurs, recognised by the Ministry of Agriculture. However, it is important that the technologies and practices promoted are beneficial to farmers, at least to gain their interest in the early stages of the RRC.

## Costs

RRCs rely on a physical location for their research, demonstration, and training activities. They thus require upfront investment in land and buildings. Because RRCs develop gradually and one centre is different from another, it has been difficult to estimate investment costs. However, acquiring a suitable space may be expensive and there may be problems with land tenure. Some grassroots organisations have obtained a suitable place in their community through traditional land tenure arrangements, but it is recommended to formalise 'ownership' as soon as possible to avoid later claims on the land and/or infrastructure.

RRCs also need operational funds to run their activities. Staff salaries are usually the most expensive component of an RRC's operating costs. Therefore, managers should consider alternative approaches, such as working with volunteers, temporary engagement of trainers, and building the capacity of farmer-trainers for multiplier effects. RRCs often focus on on-farm demonstrations and centre-based training and offer little extension whereby agents from the centre travel to other communities to extend support. The main reason for this is that they do not have adequate means of transport. However, increasing the scope of intervention beyond the community is vital for RRCs to remain relevant in the face of evolving needs.

RRCs are generally financed by a combination of:

- cash from supporting organisations (NGOs, development programmes, charity organisations, churches)
- sales of products (seeds, seedlings, farm products)
- service delivery (for-fee training programmes).

Supporting organisations usually provide the majority of the start-up costs and continue to contribute significantly to yearly operating costs, at least during the initial years. Most RRCs engage in farming activities that generate income to supplement other sources of support. RRCs also conduct 'for-fee' training programmes to clients seeking this service. In Cameroon these three sources of finance were more or less equally contributing to the operations of the RRCs. However, when an RRC focuses more on increasing its sales, less effort goes into training and extension.

## Governance and management

RRCs are generally under the ownership of a grassroots organisation, registered as an NGO or a farmers' association, and usually having other activities than running the centre. While the overall governing structure (General Assembly, Board of Directors) often remains under the umbrella organisation, the day-to-day management is generally delegated to a technical director. Based on the centre's needs and available resources, staff may be taken on to be responsible for training, communication, production, marketing, public relations and partnerships, fundraising, etc.

## Best-fit considerations

To be effective, RRCs should be sensitive to the local environment in which they operate, and reflect the

particular needs of the local community. In this case, one size does not fit all. RRCs try to achieve some kind of specialisation and excellence in a few technologies or services that are highly relevant to their zone of intervention. This distinguishes them from other centres. For example, in Cameroon, one RRC puts emphasis on soil fertility improvement and targets women farmers in particular. Another RRC specialises in good cocoa practices and collaborates primarily with cocoa cooperatives. However, all of them also have other activities in their portfolio.

**Target groups:** In Cameroon, RRCs have successfully addressed gender issues and included young people in their activities. This has been achieved by working specifically with women's and youth groups, but also by offering a range of agricultural information and technologies of specific interest to women. Young people are often attracted to RRCs because of the employment opportunities they offer.

**Type of information and technologies:** Through their engagement in the evaluation and demonstration of technology, and partnerships with research institutes and universities, RRCs have the potential to extend complex and innovative technologies. RRCs promoted by ICRAF primarily focus on agroforestry, which requires a good understanding of ecological processes and multiple skills. Agroforestry typically only generates benefits after a couple of years. In such circumstances demonstrations are important to convince farmers, and technical support must continue for some years; these are things that RRCs can offer. RRCs can play an important role where a competing voice in agricultural development is needed (e.g. focus on sustainable production over cash-oriented agriculture), and/or community needs are not met by traditional extension services.

**Institutional environment:** RRCs are filling an important gap by providing information, techniques, ideas, and material help to poor farmers. Generally they thrive well where government extension systems are non-existent or not functional. Even in areas where public extension is effective, RRCs can complement other rural advisory services thanks to their proximity to the community. Moreover, they have a more diversified portfolio of products and services that aim at improving livelihoods and not only agricultural production or income. They also focus on vulnerable populations. Successful RRCs understand that working within existing legal frameworks is important for building legitimacy.

## Evidence of impact and potential scalability

One of the weaknesses of many RRCs is a lack of systematic reporting and monitoring. This makes evaluating their impact in the field difficult. RRCs are significantly contributing to improving livelihoods of farmers in their intervention areas. A majority of beneficiaries of RRCs in Cameroon are satisfied with the information, technical backstopping, and training provided. RRCs are also helping communities to get access to high-quality tree planting material at affordable prices. Between



#### BOX 4: STRENGTHS OF RRCs AND CHALLENGES

The RRC approach is in line with recent reforms of agricultural extension in many developing countries. RRCs propose advisory services that meet specific needs and demands, are run by actors that have strong anchorage in the rural milieu, and also explore modes of financing other than subsidies. However, the long-term success of the RRCs will depend on:

- Capacity of staff to ensure effective advice in a large range of domains that often go beyond purely technical aspects (e.g. agroforestry) to include group dynamics, leadership, marketing, and even rural development as a whole. Would it not be better for the RRCs to keep their identity and specialise in fewer domains, rather than disperse efforts?
- Capacity to pursue activities when external funding stops. Can farmers and other target groups participate in the funding of RRCs? In what way? Is there a risk that the search for income generating options overshadows the primary role of RRCs, which is training and extension?
- Capacity to develop synergies and partnerships with other agricultural extension services or even more generally with development organisations. Is the institutional and policy context favourable to such synergies and complementarity? What strategies are needed to position RRCs on the national agricultural extension arena?

2011 and 2013, five RRCs produced more than 370,000 tree seedlings, of which 67% was sold. The other plants were distributed to farmers and planted in public places such as schools and hospitals, and to protect watersheds, showing the social dimension of RRCs' activities.

An important condition for scaling of RRCs is ensuring their long-term financial viability and sustainability. To become sustainable, RRCs have to develop other funding mechanisms than external support. Several RRCs generate enough income to cover a substantial portion of their expenses. Nevertheless, many continue to rely on support from a parent organisation. Further technical and organisational assistance is needed to strengthen RRCs in order to increase their production capacity, skills, visibility, and credibility. In that way they can better sell their products and services and become autonomous enterprises. The RRC model should be promoted more widely. Where possible, it should be integrated in national extension strategies to complement other methods. Partnerships between RRCs and other actors, in particular government programmes, development organisations, and local authorities should be actively encouraged.

Another difficulty in scaling the approach is the context-specificity and large variability between RRCs. There is a need to better understand the institutional set-up and processes required to make RRCs effective in different socio-economic and political contexts.

#### Training materials

CTA. 2015. *Rural resource centres: bringing agricultural services closer to farmers*. Fact sheet, guidebook and poster. Wageningen: CTA.

#### Further reading

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Author information: Dr Zac Tchoundjeu is Regional Coordinator West and Central Africa, and Dr Ann Degrande is Senior Scientist Socioeconomics at the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF). Roger Kwidja is the president of ANACRAD (Association Nationale des Centres de Ressources en Agroforesterie et Agriculture Durable). Fongang Fouepe Guillaume is an agro-socio-economist and Senior Lecturer at Dschang University (Cameroon).

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