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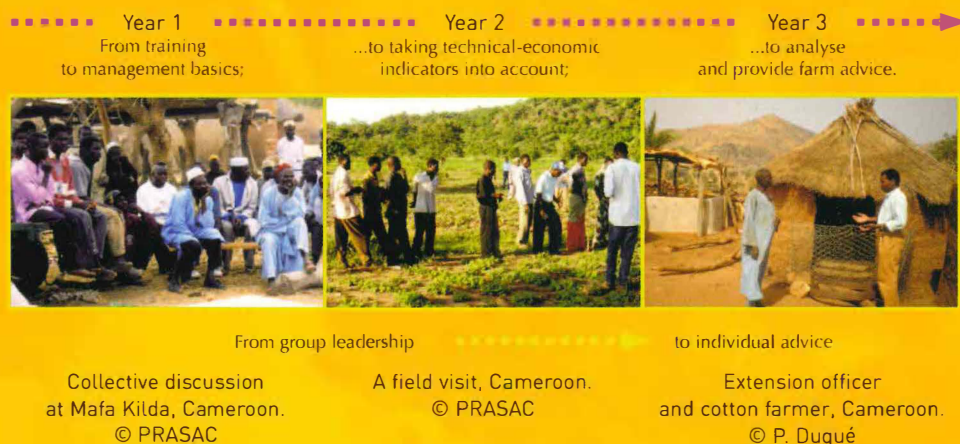


# Family farming advice in West African cotton-growing areas

The development of cotton production in Western and Central Africa began in the 1960s. Most farmers have acquired considerable technical skills concerning this crop, especially with respect to the use of animal draught, herbicides, weed and pest control. Current initiatives are geared towards improving farming system adaptability by providing better advice on technical and economic issues. CIRAD and partners are conducting development-oriented research to come up with family farming advisory systems that could facilitate farmers' adaptation to a diverse range of situations.

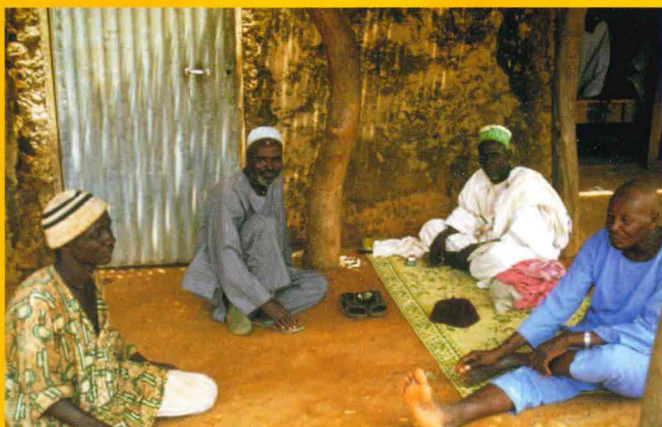
## A progressive approach

Family farming advice is aimed at developing farmers' decision-making capacities and responsibilities. Through a self-analysis approach, extension officers encourage discussion, initiatives and forecasts on both technical and economic aspects of overall farm operations.



## Farm management advice—the initial strategy

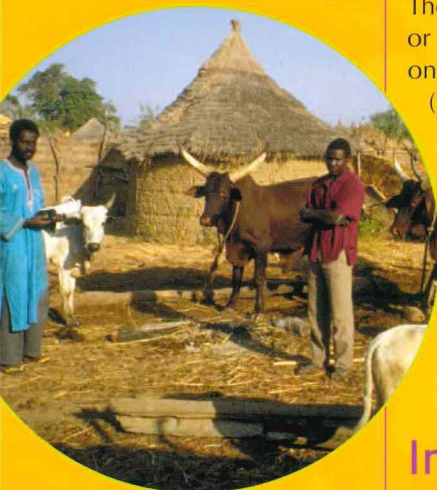
In cotton-growing regions of Mali and Burkina Faso, CIRAD and partners first developed a farm management advice strategy whereby extension officers trained farmers on the use of management tools. This farm management advice was designed for literate farmers who were instructed on keeping a management log book, which enabled them to calculate and analyse gross margins per crop (or per livestock unit) and manage the farm finances. This operational method worked if the extension officers were paid through a development project, but it was expensive since the groups handled by each officer were limited to around 20 farmers. Finally, some deviations were noted, e.g. extension officers were sometimes obliged to record data (normally the farm leader's task).



Farmers getting farm management advice, Cameroon. © P. Dugué



Farm advisor talking  
to a farmer on draught  
oxen care, Cameroon.  
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## The new strategy—farmer training oriented groups

Nowadays, family farming advice is focused more on promoting farming principles than on using standard management tools. Methodological manuals are available for extension officers. A log book is still used to record data, but the emphasis is on analysing the different steps of the decision process so that illiterate farmers will also benefit from the farming advice. The log book is used when the participants' decisions have to be based on accurate technical or economic indicators. This initiation to economic management is accompanied by advice on new technical practices used by farmers or other techniques that could fulfil their needs (innovations developed by scientists or farmers from other regions).

This advisory work on farmers' strategies, technical options and management tools involves groups of 10-15 farmers. The extension officer thus becomes a trainer whose task is to initiate discussions and in turn supervise dynamic collective and individual initiatives, e.g. experiments carried out by farmers or a village seed-production organization.

## Information exchange via farmers' socioprofessional networks

In western Burkina Faso, recent studies by CIRAD revealed that technical and economic information spread via socioprofessional networks based on key farmers. Village cotton producers' group leaders could be effective agents for transmitting this information. However, cotton extension systems currently depend on extension officers who just oversee a few farms. This system is now hard to finance because of the cotton crisis and the lack of funds available to pay extension officers. CIRAD and partners have initiated research programs in two directions:

- promoting greater farmer autonomy by focusing on training rather than on providing individual advice;
- promoting local information exchange dynamics through resource farmers supported by farmers' organizations so as to reduce extension officer interventions.

### Partners

**Burkina Faso:** SOFITEX, Société burkinabé des fibres textiles

- UNPCB, Union nationale des producteurs de coton
- INERA, Institut national de l'environnement et des recherches agricoles

**Cameroon:** IRAD, Institut de recherche agricole pour le développement

- SODECOTON, Société de développement du coton

**Mali:** PASE, Programme d'amélioration des systèmes d'exploitation en zone cotonnière

**Chad:** PRASAC, Pôle de recherche appliquée au développement des savanes d'Afrique centrale

## For further information

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