Introduction: From agricultural extension to advisory services to family farms

In developing countries advisory services are undergoing radical changes. Today, agricultural development stakeholders may provide advisory services through diverse institutional arrangements, including public/private partnerships (Swanson 2008). In West Africa, new methods named Advisory Services for Family Farms (ASFF) have been under development for the past decades. The experimental programs to promote such methods have received methodological and financial support from several French cooperation institutions (Faure and Kleene, 2004). Some have been operating for over 15 years and have gone beyond the experimental stage to become imbedded in either public or non public institutions. Currently, ASFF are provided by NGOs (Benin), producers’ organizations (Benin, Guinea, Burkina), and cotton companies (Cameroon, Burkina). The ASFF approach aims to strengthen farmers’ ability to autonomously manage their farms. It is based on participatory methods providing (i) self-analysis to modify farmers’ and advisers’ representations of the problems addressed, and (ii) decision-support tools based on technical and economic records (book-keeping) to generate learning processes. The advisor carries out a joint analysis of results obtained by each farmer. Exchanges between farmers about their results are strongly encouraged through regular meetings (training, field visits, on-farm experiments, etc.), as these exchanges stimulate strong dynamics.

ASFF in action in Benin

Benin is one of the first countries where ASFF have been developed.

An ASFF implemented by NGOs

After a two years pilot phase to design the method the PADSE project entrusted the implementation of the ASFF to four national NGOs. Close to farmers and highly reactive, these NGOs worked in South and Central Benin with groups of young volunteer farmers. These NGOs adapted the advisory method to farmers’ needs by including technical advice. After a first analysis carried out by farmers, the advisors used computers to carry out complementary data analysis. These NGOs worked with around 30 groups of farmers. Each advisor worked with two or three groups including 10 to 20 farmers. The costs of the advisory services were high and financed by donors.
A move to involve more farmers

To support the scaling up of ASFF into new regions in 2000, the PADSE and NGOs (i) adapted more ASFF tools to specific contexts, (ii) translated them into many local languages and, (iii) involved former beneficiaries as farmer-advisors to train farmers group on issues each of them wanted to address. These farmer-advisors were trained and supported by the NGOs’ advisors to address simple issues (planning of the cropping season, gross margin, etc.). At this stage, various Farmers’ Organisations (FO) showed interest in this new advisory method and launched their own ASFF approach. The NGOs then had to play a new role to assist these FOs with the implementation of the ASFF. In 2005, 4 NGOs and 2 FOs working at the local level provided ASFF to 5,000 farmers in Benin with a total of fifty advisors and 500 farmer-advisors (PADSE 2005).

Based on ASFF experience, the Ministry of Agriculture launched in 2007 a strategic document called the “White book of agricultural advisory services in Benin” aiming at scaling up countrywide the approach in 2010. Within this institutional framework, from 2009 onwards, a new phase of the project was launched still carried out by FOs and NGOs. The objective is to adapt the method for non literate farmers either by teaching the use of management tools jointly to a literacy program or by creating tools for follow up without the use of writing. This phase is supposed to support around 18 000 farmers.

A deadlock due to funding

FOs and other national stakeholders did not contribute significantly to the running cost of the service. Farmers and FOs considered that (i) the annual cost of 230 € per participant is too high, and (ii) advice should be free as it has always been the case in the past. Financing became an obstacle to the development and sustainability of the ASFF (Moumouni et al., 2009). Since 2009, the Benin government with the recruitment of 250 public agents in charge of promoting ASFF, Cotton Interprofessional Association with a contribution to technical advice and development agencies with the implementation of new projects participate in the financing of ASFF. This support has made possible a new start of the ASFF with the aim of reducing running costs.

Lessons and implications

Three main lessons can be learnt from ASFF experience in Benin. First, there is a need to strengthen the capacity of stakeholders involved (farmers’ organizations, service providers, Ministry of Agriculture) to be able to adapt the method and institutional mechanisms depending on each context and period of time. Second, the construction of advice does not rely on a simple balance of supply and demand but rather on a long process of co-construction involving different stakeholders. Therefore specific mechanisms should be created to facilitate this co-construction (implementation of experiments with the actors, monitoring-evaluation committees at various levels, etc.). Third, the pathway of ASFF shows a succession of innovation, growth and blockage phases. Stakeholders should be prepared to autonomously and sustainably manage the whole advisory service system, especially overcoming deadlock situations.

Bibliography


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