

Summary

In Burkina Faso, the Union des groupements pour la commercialisation des produits agricoles de la Boucle du Mouhoun (UGPCA/BM) has run up an advisory service for the management of family farms (ASMFF) for its members since 2009. This was achieved through support from several technical and financial partners. The aim of the service is to promote the training and education of farmers, with special emphasis on imparting technical and economic farm management skills in four main areas: forecasting, implementation, analysis and evaluation.

The UGCPA/BM is a producers' organization (PO) founded by farmers in 1993 to increase and protect their income through the collective marketing of their products. The PO generally collects over 2,000 tons of grain (maize, sorghum and millet) and legumes (cowpea) from 800 producers and markets them on local outlets. The UGCPA/BM also works with over 1,000 women farmers who deliver 40 tons yearly of bissap (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*), certified « organic » and « fair trade » which the organization then exports to Europe. More recently, the PO has diversified member services to cover production credits, mineral fertilizer supply (100 tons/year), production and distribution of certified seeds (30 tons/year), and advice on farm management through the ASMFF (240 members in 2012).

After three years' experience with ASMFF, the Foundation for World Agriculture and Rurality (FARM) decided to assist the UGCPA/BM in a stock-taking exercise to reflect on the future course of ASMFF operations. This undertaking was based upon several studies and workshops held in 2011 and 2012 by UGCPA/BM and partners, in particular FARM, EWB (Engineers without borders – Canada) and Cirad (*Centre international de recherche en agronomie pour le développement*).

Developing farmer management skills in order to improve farmer income

In West Africa, the agricultural extension services in place up until the late 1980's did indeed enable a large number of farmers to obtain tangible results in various fields such as fertilizer use, draft animal power use, introduction or intensification of maize growing and so forth. But all of this was predicated on a top-down approach in which producers' needs and crucial skills acquisition were not accorded much importance. In addition, this extension work was very technically oriented and neglected aspects such as better farm management.

In the wake of structural adjustment programs and the disengagement of government from the agricultural sector, several stakeholders followed a new path aimed at better identifying opportunities and limits concerning agricultural production, and clarifying the expectations and needs of farmers. Because of their precarious living conditions, West African farmers tend to adopt short-term strategies to solve the most pressing problems. Consequently, they find it difficult to come up with a development project for their farms in the medium and long term. Now, certain learning methods attach great importance to understanding farmers' strategies and reasoning when it comes to their everyday techniques and management methods. With this aim in mind, farm is seen as a global system that combines different activities, utilizing factors of production and management of natural resources in order to meet objectives and short and medium term needs. This approach, which emphasizes the management aspect, is usually labeled as “management advice for family farms”.

The ASMFF puts the accent on a progressive, mutual and permanent learning process based on the producer's determination to carry out change. This is the kind of approach that the UGCPA/BM has now opted for in organizing its services.

Challenges faced by producers' organizations in training farmers

In addition to their withdrawal from the role of regulators of agricultural markets in the 1980's, governments also significantly reduced funding for extension services. In reaction to this, these services evolved in two different ways. Either the international donors (the World Bank in particular) continued to fund public agricultural services, or the producer organizations, usually in tandem with NGO's and some bilateral donors, proceeded to set up training and advisory services for their members.

Nevertheless, the PO's put the emphasis on setting up services that would enable farmers to increase their production through better access to inputs, and to enhance their market value. But PO's can also play a part in training farmers, especially when disseminating new and innovative practices among members. The learning processes for farmers involve a host of different technical, economic, social and environmental elements that PO's, thanks to the knowledge and experience of their members, can help identify.

Building an advisory service for the management of family farms at the UGCPA/BM

The advisory service at UGCPA/BM is very recent, having been built up gradually since 2009. In 2012, 160 male farmers and 80 women farmers took advantage of this new service, led by an employed coordinator from the PO working with a network of advisers and local facilitators who are also farmers. Although the majority of ASMFF members are literate, their profiles are very different in terms of age, level of basic schooling and means of production.

Teaching methods are based upon a combination of individual and group approaches. In the individual approach the aim is to assist the farmer in the management of his operation based on his own technical and economic results, and in particular on his gross margin per crop. The farmers use simplified management tools designed by UGCPA/BM and its partners. The overall results obtained by members are centralized in a database managed by the PO, and this allows for lively discussions to be held between the adviser and the farmer, and between producers themselves at the end of every growing season. The group approach consists of holding four to five training courses per year on technical and managerial subjects chosen by members themselves, and, in addition, the convening of a session for analysis and exchange of ideas on results obtained by farmers during the year.

Initial positive impact on farming practices

It is difficult to measure the impact of advisory services on farmers' incomes. However, following three years of ASMFF operation, members have modified certain technical and managerial practices. For instance, about 75 % of members joining the service now utilize improved seed varieties, even though these are more expensive than farm-saved seed. Half of them now practice reversible plowing instead of the traditional ridges or beds, which is faster but which is not as effective for weed control. It should also be noted that 25 % of the membership have begun to use manure at a time when the UGCPA/BM began efforts to supply farmers with mineral fertilizers.

As far as improving the planning and management of agricultural activities, the majority of producers involve more and more family members in decision-making, for instance, when organizing the participation of family workers in preparation in the growing season. The producers also tend to favor spending linked to child education and family health, but also in preparation for the growing season.

Lessons learned about the advisory service

For a producers' organization, undertaking an analysis of the viability of an advisory service is more complicated than evaluating economic services in the narrow sense, because the main criteria for evaluation in this instance cannot be profitability. The experience gleaned with UGCPA/BM has enabled us to draw up a classification of factors of viability to measure an advisory service provided by a producers' organization.

An agricultural advisory service will be all the more economically viable to the extent that the PO also develops economic services, as is the case with UGCPA/BM. For farmer members, an advisory service will be more attractive if the PO is able to provide them with adequate inputs. The ASMFF can thus contribute to improving the profitability of economic services and therefore the overall economic viability of the PO. The ASMFF at UGCPA/BM is a recent creation. In the future, it will be necessary to flag existing differences between members that have joined the service and those that haven't, in terms of quantities of grains delivered, meeting delivery deadlines and other criteria.

The advisory service should be commensurate with the needs and capacities of farmers. In principle, the ASMFF strives to take account of the diversity of farming situations by identifying problems farmers face, then teaching farmers to diagnose and manage these problems themselves. This is the empowerment approach that the leadership of UGCPA/BM wishes to gradually put into place. The methods and tools currently used, however, are fairly standardized and are not always adapted to the needs and capacities of all members who may be literate or not, have small or large farms, etc. This tends to compromise their adoption by farmers over time. It is by carrying out regular evaluations that the demand for advisory services can be better defined and the ASMFF service fine-tuned. This implies involving farmers in designing the scheme, and having a true cooperative effort when building the scheme between the PO and its technical and financial partners.

Management services as they have been developed in France for the past 40 years, such as accounting, balance sheet analysis, or legal and financial advice, would be too costly in Africa and would only reach a limited number of PO members. A crucial point in Africa is the low level of primary education of most farmers. An advisory service focused on training and group-learning processes that develop the technical aspects and certain management principles seems more economically viable.

Whatever the approach chosen, the adviser seems to have a central role to play. The UGCPA/BM opted for a scheme based on a network of local farmer advisers and facilitators. This option has the advantage of multiplying the supply of advice at the lowest cost. Nevertheless, it requires a larger investment in agent training and capacity building, which is indispensable if they are to provide correct and pertinent advice. The adviser must move beyond the role of «prescriber» to become an «adviser/trainer», who is close to the producers.

Lastly, the issue of funding is crucial. On the one hand, the financial viability of a service depends on the PO's capacity to optimize costs (which depends on the advisory scheme and the approach that has been adopted), and on the other hand, its capacity to harness funding.

In 2012, the MAAF cost the UGCPA/BM a total of 95,000 CFA Francs (150 euros) per member. This figure has considerably dropped since 2009, mainly due to the finalizing of a network of local farmer advisers and facilitators. Areas for further cost compression (allowances and travel for agents) are now limited, especially if a certain degree of individual approach is maintained in the service. On the other hand, the training costs for advisers and facilitators, which represent over 20% of the service's expenditure, could be further shared with other PO's. In Africa there are significant examples of this sharing of know-how and adviser training, such as the Management Network (*Réseau gestion*) in Burkina Faso, that deserve support.

The securing of funding remains a complex issue. At UGCPA/BM, the ASMFF service is highly dependent on support from a small number of partners. The members of the ASMFF only cover 6 % of the service's costs with their individual membership fees. It is clear that the members cannot assume responsibility for full costs except for very individualized and specialized services, which are not yet offered by UGCPA/BM. Even in industrialized countries, only a fraction of the agricultural advisory services are directly funded by the farmers themselves.

The PO's that run profitable economic services can earmark a share of their profits to fund the ASMFF service. In fairness for all members, that orientation will be all the more realizable if the ASMFF service can prove its effectiveness, and if it seems to have a positive impact on the PO and on a majority of its members. In the case of UGCPA/BM, the question is clearly to know whether members of the PO are ready, through a levy on their grain deliveries, to fund a service which so far only reaches a few members. Estimations made with UGCPA/BM show that resources coming from economic services will only cover a part of operational costs of the advisory service if the PO is not to compromise its own capital and investment capacity.

Whatever the case, PO's will have to continue to harness funding from outside sources like technical and financial partners or governments. This support will have to be diversified to limit risks linked to dependency on a small number of partners. The viability of the service is also based on the PO's capacity to coordinate the different partners so that their action is complementary, shared, and fits the strategic vision of the organization.

Growth prospects for the CEF at UGCPA/BM

The current weak structural demand for advisory services suggests adopting gradual implementation of the ASMFF. Indeed, producers, and even leaders of the PO, find it difficult to identify their advisory needs, due to their lack of experience in this field. The only way to build up an appropriate advisory offering, and to constitute quality technical and economic references, is to take account of the successes and failures of previous projects and to build the approach step by step as it is implemented, making yearly adjustments.

Several options are envisaged for UGPCA/BM to improve and eventually reorient the proposed advisory services:

- Splitting the advisory services: the PO could provide (i) «basic advisory», accessible and affordable for all members. This service, which would feature group training and awareness building, would enable a clearer identification of needs and could be a source of feedback on appropriate group advice; (ii) a «technical and economic advisory service», similar to the one currently offered, for farms that have a grasp of basic management techniques and which are open to change, while putting the accent on a group approach in order to limit costs, and using improved learning and training tools; (iii) a «custom-tailored advisory service», to assist a small number of members in realizing investment projects on their farms and whose costs would be principally met by these same farmers;
- Having a better understanding of the farm with a systemic approach, by reworking current advisory methods and tools, and strengthening advisers training so that they may fine-tune their approach. Sharing responsibilities and fostering exchanges between advisers and leaders of different PO's should be encouraged;
- Placing emphasis on technical and organizational innovations, by adopting a scheme that facilitates the design and adoption of technical innovations produced jointly with R&D institutions and farmers (tests, experiments in rural farm areas, dissemination of findings);
- Strengthening the monitoring and evaluation system to better focus on the demand for advisory and adjusting the service provided;
- Diversify funding sources for the ASMFF service by earmarking a share of the profits made by the PO's economic services to cover part of the running costs of the advisory services.

Government participation in funding PO advisory services is a crucial challenge. For the past few years, public authorities have taken a significant new interest in farmer training schemes thanks to the growing attention paid to increasing agricultural production in response to food security concerns. The scope of agricultural advisory services has evolved: the accent is now on accompanying producers, even though the term «extension services» is still used. Some West African countries plan to set up different mechanisms and provide credits for agricultural advisory services, yet the real amount of funding and the inclusion of PO's in these mechanisms is still unclear.

In Burkina Faso, the National Agricultural Extension and Advisory Support Services System (*Système national de vulgarisation et d'appui-conseil agricoles - SNVACA*) aims at providing an advisory support service that includes a greater global farm management component. It is designed to grant more responsibility to local actors and to take better account of local know-how and knowledge. This indicates a basic shift in the approach to advisory services. The program's first phase is based on a network of advisers from national agricultural services; their interlocutors are heads of farming operations with a satisfactory level of basic training.

Although the government of Burkina Faso has stressed its determination to coordinate with PO's in the development of advisory services, it is still not clear whether the PO's will be able to access financial assistance to set up or strengthen their own ASMFF's, or if funding will be reserved solely for government agricultural entities. The fact is, over the past 20 years producers' organizations have developed strong skills in terms of advisory services. It is therefore important to recognize their value, use them, and encourage the initiatives that they foster in this field.