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Theory and practice of advisory
work in a time of turbulences

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THEORY AND PRACTICE OF ADVISORY WORK IN A TIME OF TURBULENCES

Proceedings

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A PARTICIPATORY PROCESS APPROACH FOR DEVELOPING A PLURALISTIC, DEMAND LED AND MARKET ORIENTED ADVISORY SYSTEM – CASE STUDY OF NIGER

Magdalena L. Blum, Abdoulaye Mbaye - Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Keywords: Participatory stakeholder process, developing a pluralistic, demand led and market oriented advisory system.

1. Background

Niger has identified 8 priorities for public action from 2007 to 2009 within the framework of its Rural Development Strategy (Stratégie de Développement Rural, SDR). One of these priorities concerned the study for the implementation of an integrated advisory system for rural development. Mid 2007 the Government of Niger requested FAO's technical assistance and set up a National Steering Committee for this project.

The national agricultural extension system has gradually declined in terms of support for producers since the end of the Training and Visit Support Program which was financed by the World Bank until 1998. Thereafter, the rare organized initiatives have been carried out only through development projects. While some have been valuable, they have been very limited compared to the needs of the country (1.267.000 km²) and its large rural population (83 % live in rural areas) and a high rate of rural poverty (62 %). In consequence, there is very little formal support for rural producers in Niger through ongoing technical agricultural services.

2. The process approach

Convinced of the fact that a future advisory system can only be sustainable when it will be developed under national ownership and through the involvement of all stakeholders concerned and interested in advisory services in Niger, FAO designed a stakeholder process for assessing the existing and for developing the future advisory system with them.

The objective was hence to put the emphasis on the process and on considering the features of pluralism, demand and market orientation. There was no emphasis on a particular advisory model which gave room for developing a country-specific system based on existing institutional and organizational capacities and targeted to the poor and vulnerable producers. One of the main objectives of the initiative was to promote farmers' participation in the design process and their empowered role in the future advisory system.

The core process consisted of two main parts: (a) analysing and assessing the present extension system, and (b) designing a new advisory system, both parts were undertaken with the various stakeholders concerned. However, given the objective of farmers' participation and their weak capacity, FAO suggested a parallel *process of strengthening the farmers' organizations* to enable them to take their roles and position in the core process and in the future demand led advisory system. The *support process* in terms of technical and methodological advice to these two processes was provided by FAO. Additional support was provided by the donor community, particularly the EU who also contributed financially.

2.1 The roles of the various stakeholders in the core process

Government requested for technical assistance for developing a new advisory system, supervised the process through SDR secretariat and the National Steering Committee and will ensure in the future the support for the implementation of the developed proposal.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) participated in the National Steering Committee and in the regional workshops. They were well in support of a pluralistic system. Their perception/position was that no public extension services exist any more and that they are providing advisory services replacing government services. NGOs are mainly active in emergency activities, but they also employ officers of the public services in order to provide advisory services.

The *role of the private sector* was weak as they hardly provide advisory services. They see their main role in the commercialisation of inputs and agricultural equipment. Most of them are individual service providers, only in the water sector private consultant firms exist. Nevertheless, the private service providers used by the development projects, such as the PIP2 which was financed by the World Bank, participated in the process. Their role in the future advisory system was also determined through the experience in the main development projects and concerns water related services (irrigation), farm management as well as the commercialization of agricultural products and processing.

The *donor community* participated in all steps of the core process in the framework of the SDR and the National Steering Committee. They provided support to the process approach and to the new orientation of the extension system along the features proposed by FAO. However, in some instances the donors supported the Chambers of Agriculture in a biased way and less the overall Farmer Organizations' (FOs) community.

The *seven national consultants* are part of the core process as they represented the stakeholders who had suggested and agreed on them (see below). Their tasks were to undertake the information and data collection and primary analysis, to conduct the regional workshops and to assist in the development of the proposal.

2.2 The role and inputs of FAO in the support process

The support provided by FAO started with the review of the Government request and its TORs which focused only on the public stakeholders in extension. This was opened up for an integrated approach which included all advisory service providers (public, private, NGOs and FOs) for developing a pluralistic system. In addition, the features of a demand led and market driven advisory system were introduced into the TORs. In consequence, the five national consultants which were suggested by SDR and which belonged to the five Ministries concerned by the project (Agriculture, Livestock, Water, Community Development and Environment) were complemented by a national consultant for the NGOs and another national consultant for the FOs. The NGOs and FOs suggested their consultant. FAO provided training to all seven consultants with respect to a new vision of a pluralistic, demand led and market oriented advisory system. The training and continuous discussions changed their view on extension systems and their "public administration" mind. They have considered the new vision of the advisory systems during the analysis and guided the different regional workshops in a new spirit. The national consultants recognised that the old extension system no longer works. Furthermore, FAO supported the national consultants in developing assessment tools like a field investigation quiz which is an analytical framework to appraise the primary organizational goals, functions, resources, methodologies and linkages of all stakeholders (public and non public providers) of the current extension system. From the first mission onwards, FAO had meetings with the donor community and direct consultations with each donor implicated in the SDR. This allowed obtaining their visions of the reorientation of the advisory services and their feedback on the overall process and FAO input.

The core process which FAO developed with the main stakeholders included the restitution of the assessment and of the proposal to the various stakeholders. This was done through regional workshops conducted by the

national consultants held in French for public offices and NGOs and in local languages for farmers. The restitutions to the National Steering Committee were done by FAO. All stakeholders provided then comments and inputs to the reports on the analysis and assessment as well as to the proposal for the new advisory service system which were then incorporated into the reports. FAO further conceived the process in support of the farmers' organizations so that they could develop their future role and expectations with respect to the new advisory system. This was done through reflections in a series of regional workshops which were held in local languages (see below).

2.3 The role and inputs of the FOs

The FOs representatives participated from the very beginning when SDR called for meetings to announce the project for the review of the advisory system. Through their membership in the National Steering Committee and their own workshops, the FOs participated in all steps of the process from contributing to the terms of reference to the last version of the proposal of a new advisory system. They put pressure to establish a demand driven system and participated in the development of it. Every year the FOs in Niger have an audience with the President of the Republic. In 2008, one of the main federations of FOs used this opportunity to express to the Head of State their vision of an advisory system based on farmers' demands. This request was made in the presence of the Executive Secretary of SDR. This has changed the attitude of government offices which then participated in the process with a greater openness to a central role of FOs in the advisory system. Farmers and their organizations participated in a series of workshops: The first round of workshops (1), animated by national consultants, focused on the assessment of the current extension system within the core process. The second round (2) were part of the process of supporting the farmers' organizations. They were held at regional level and moderated by a farmer leader of the West African Farmers and Producers Organizations' Network (ROPPA). During these workshops the farmers defined the capacity development needs of the FOs to elaborate the demand for research and extension services and developed a mechanism for the expression of demand which builds upon farmers' consultations in each community, at departmental and regional level. This was complemented by a component of technical advice for the formulation of the demand and by a fund for financial support called "Fonds d'appui aux services rural régis par la demande" (FASRRD) to help farmers to pay for advisory services provided by NGOs, the private sector or public agents. This demand driven approach will be entirely managed by the FOs. The third round of workshops (3) concerned the restitution of the proposal of the new advisory system which was also commented by the FOs.

2.4 Data favouring the proposal development

The National Census of Agricultures and livestock which was finalised in 2007 gave a lot of insides like the typology of agricultural production in the different regions, the population contributing to the production of particular commodities, data about the FOs and their distribution within the country, the NGOs which are active in the agricultural sector and their distribution in the country as well as the level of production and yields of the different commodities. This contributed to clearly identifying the agricultural priorities in Niger for the markets and for subsistence agriculture. This allowed developing the advisory services in relation to the agricultural production in the different zones and the financial capacities of the population.

3. Experience and assessment of the process

3.1 Difficulties occurring in the process and what helped to overcome them

- The TORs which were first focused only on the public extension system. Resistance to open up and to consider a pluralistic, demand led and market oriented advisory system.

- Heaviness and delay of the process due to the secretariat of SDR who was spearheading the process, but who was overloaded with political and administrative tasks which made planning difficult.
- Weak analytical level of the national consultants.
- Rivalry between the national federations of FOs. At the beginning, it was impossible to discuss with them together. Each of them wanted to discuss individually with FAO missions and the national consultants.

This situation was addressed by several measures:

- Make them understanding that the new advisory system will help them to develop their own capacities and to occupy the driver seat for which they need to be a reunited force because none of them has the capacities on its own.
- Individual meetings were held first to prepare them for common meetings. The ROPPA leader moderated conflicts between the federations and then identified with them the needs to strengthen their capacities to occupy the driver seat in the new advisory system.
- The FAO mission and the ROPPA leader consulted the donors to identify financial support in order to organize consultations between the different federations to establish their priorities into a common program with the objective of reinforcing their capacities in participating in the process of analysing the existing and defining the new advisory system.

3.2 Strengths of the process

- Firm commitment by the national Government and the secretariat of SDR acting on its behalf.
- Regular meetings of the National Steering Committee and the involvement of all relevant stakeholder groups in the National Steering Committee of the project.
- Specific process to strengthen farmer organizations in developing their own position in the process of elaborating a new advisory system and of defining their role in the future advisory system.
- Regular consultations with and feedback to the donor community in the country under the umbrella of the SDR.
- Farmers contributed substantially in workshops specifically held for them in local languages.
- The process was placed in the framework of SDR which regroups all sectoral ministries as well as NGOs and FOs.
- Firm engagement of the FOs and their federations in the process, even with financial contributions to have their own workshops.
- Presence of NGOs in regions affected by the different food crises (2005) which allowed to foresee them as future advisory service providers in these regions.
- The legal framework in Niger allowed a pluralistic advisory system as extension services are not described as a public good, they are open to all providers (the text of all 5 ministries has been analysed with this respect).

3.3 Weaknesses of the process

- The assessment of farmers' needs with respect to the future advisory services was based on consultations with farmers, but not on a thorough participatory needs assessment.
- The TORs focused on the advisory system. The research system as well as agricultural and rural education system still need to be analysed and improved to make the advisory system sustainable.

- The quality of participation of the FOs in the process was weak and needed support. The FO representatives had often not the capacity to follow and make contributions in workshops with other stakeholders.
- NGOs are more specialised in emergency activities and in remunerative activities. Only few of them are specialised in agricultural and rural advisory services.
- Smallholder income is weak in Niger which makes financial contributions to advisory services difficult. In addition, there is no culture to pay for these services.
- The different roles and tasks of FOs and of the Chambers of Agriculture are not perceived by most stakeholders.

3.4 Results of the stakeholder process

- i) Breaking the system of planning and programming "top down" and instead relying on participation from the farming communities to help set directions. Changes in the kinds of technical support to be provided and the improvement of institutional and financial capacities on which the process focused.
- ii) Improving the quality of the technical agricultural support for both the "non-public actors" (NGOs and FOs) and for the poor in rural areas is a priority.
- iii) The elaboration of a strategy to improve the agricultural and rural training and to adapt the trainings to the current agricultural system. Key elements of the strategy are the demand led and market driven orientations.
- (iv) The elaboration of a strategic plan for agricultural research to improve the knowledge and the technical agricultural support.

3.5 Success factors for change

- Revue of the TORs of the overall task and of the TORs of the national consultants.
- The design of a stakeholder process and a support process for the farmers' organizations.
- Pressure by the FOs and their federations to have a central role in the future advisory system.
- Training of the national consultants providing them new visions of advisory services.
- Use of appropriate assessment tools favoured the assessment of the extension services of all stakeholders (public institutions, NGOs, FOs and private sector) involved in the current extension system.
- Consultations with the donors all along the process.
- Orientation which the donors provided in the National Steering Committee and their support to the technical recommendation of FAO.
- National and regional workshops with farmers and their organizations in local languages.
- The inputs of the farmer leader of ROPPA to conflict management and to the design of the demand led approach.
- Breaking with the sectoral vision and spearheading of the process by SDR and not by an individual ministry.
- Utilisation of the experiences from projects using private service providers.
- Intensive backstopping by FAO at the rhythm of progress made by the national stakeholders.

4. Conclusions and recommendation for the improvement of the processes

The assessment and redesign of an extension system should be done in the larger framework of agricultural services (research, education and training, extension) and their institutions. A process is required in which the various stakeholders are involved from the very beginning, i.e. with the elaboration of the TORs, in order to express their views and reorient the advisory system based on the capacities in the country and on lessons learned over the past decade. The support process to the core stakeholder process was critical in reorienting the extension system towards pluralism, demand led and market oriented services. In addition, the involvement of the farmers' organizations and support to them in the process was crucial in order to translate the idea of a demand led system into concrete mechanisms. The support through ROPPA brought also in experiences from other countries, an aspect which could be further strengthened in the process with respect to the entire innovation system.

Given the workload of the Executive Secretariat of the SDR, the coordination should have been seconded to a person within SDR and the technical coordination to the team leader of the national consultant team. The selection of the national consultants needs to be on a larger basis, not being limited to officers in the public administration, but to the consultant community who have specific qualifications and experiences to undertake this type of work and who would not represent an institution with particular interests related to the study.

A detailed farmers' need assessment would have given more insides to the content required for the future advisory services and hence also to the staff profiles required to respond to the farmers' needs and demands.

Overall, there is the need to consider the specificities of each country regarding (a) the level of structuring and organization of the FOs and their capacities, (b) the capacities of NGOs to provide agricultural and rural services, (c) the experiences and lessons learned in development projects, and (d) the potentials which the private sector might have and how they can be developed.

5. Conditions for a sustainable implementation of the new advisory system

The future system can only be sustainable, pluralistic, demand led and market oriented, if the implementation of the proposal is accompanied by an organizational development and change management approach. This includes support to accompany the institutions providing advisory services as well as their platforms and linkages within the entire innovation system to overcome their difficulties and to expand their potentials for improved performance, adaptability to up-coming challenges and for client satisfaction. Hence also in the future, a continuous process is required to clarify the roles and tasks of the different actors in the innovation system. This holds true with respect to the roles of the public, private and NGOs service providers, particularly with respect to who takes which role in a market oriented approach. It holds also true of the roles of FOs and their federative structures in a demand led advisory system. Given the substantial efforts needed for the capacity development of the FOs, a separate organizational development approach for the strengthening of FOs is indispensable in order to ensure the empowerment of the farmers' organizations in all aspects. This would include support to them in their respective roles in the implementation process of the new advisory services and their roles and position within the overall advisory system. In Niger, a review of the agricultural education and training needs to be done, in order to up-grad human capacities of the innovation system in the long run. As an immediate action, training programs need to be designed for NGOs and for the remaining public extension staff in order to be able to respond to demands for services and to provide up-to date information, technologies and knowledge. In addition, financial resources need to be foreseen for advisory services undertaken by NGOs and other private advisors.

Gradually, a culture of cost sharing for advisory services which would involve fees for services for remunerative activities needs to be developed, as this is already the case in the onion sector. However, given the weak financial capacities of most smallholders, long-term financial support will be needed by the public sector. While financial

support is required for the supply side, financial mechanisms are needed which enable smallholder farmers to pay for their services and to select their advisory service providers.

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