

THE COUNCIL FOR FAMILY-BASED AGRICULTURE IN THE OFFICE DU NIGER, MALI – THE CEF

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ABSTRACT

Since the early 1980s, family-based agriculture in the 'Office du Niger' zone in Mali has evolved from traditional rice cultivation to a diversity of activities. However, faced with multiple difficulties, the viability of their farms is of growing concern to farmers. This paper analyses how the *Conseil aux exploitations agricoles familiales* (CEF, family-run farms advice bureau) which was launched in 1997, has responded to concerns raised by farmers. The CEF approach was developed with the aim of increasing farmers' income. It involved 7,000 farmers, 95% of whom were women and was managed by the federation of Farafansi So centres and a private sector service-provider. The approach went through several phases: (i) testing of the method, (ii) group dynamics, (iii) withdrawal

of financial support, and (iv) project co-ordination. The four phases enabled the implementation of the approach, the creation of tools for advisors and farmers, and a programme of support measures for groups of farmers (members). Actions undertaken by the CEF have helped raise awareness among farmers. Practices have improved in smallholdings and farmers are now more vocal in expressing any needs they have. However, the CEF tools are not adapted to farmers' requirements as the majority are illiterate. Nonetheless, despite logistical, staff and financial constraints, the CEF has proved to be a dynamic approach.

To be more effective, the CEF should stay tuned to the farmers and the advisors, adapt the tools to emerging needs, and strengthen ties with

other services such as the adult literacy programme and agriculture financing schemes.

KEY WORDS: EXTENSION, APPROACH, PARTICIPATION, TOOLS, FARMERS, ADVISORS

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INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

The Office du Niger (ON, Mali) covers five irrigated schemes, the equivalent of approximately 70,000 ha, for a total population of 350,000 people. The primary farming methods are irrigated rice cultivation and, to a lesser extent, horticultural industries and livestock raising. In the 1980s, the State, confronted with increasing economic difficulties, implemented a number of reforms in compliance with requests from international financial institutions. Within this framework, the 1982–1994 ON reforms were accompanied by fostering of the accountability of agricultural organisations, structural modifications to the irrigated schemes and an influx of new players to provide services to farmers. In addition to this, in the case of agricultural extension services, the method used by the ON's *Service de Conseil Rural* (SCR, rural advisory service), based on technical advice for rice cultivation (i.e., improved varieties, transplanting, the use of mineral-based and organic fertilisers) contributed to an increase in average paddy yield, from 2.3 t/ha in 1987–1988 to 5.9 t/ha in 2000–2001 (Coulibaly *et al.*, 2006). Despite this, the method was called into question, as it did not address the needs of livestock farmers (Spinat *et al.*, 2006) or the economic aspects of family-based agriculture.

In effect, the land in these irrigation schemes is the property of the State and in general is reserved for family-based agriculture. From 1978 to 2003,

the number of plots of land allocated to family-run farms within the irrigated schemes rose from 5,000 to 26,000. The developed surface area increased only slightly, and the areas used for crop cultivation increased from 36,500 ha to 74,000 ha. This meant the size of each family farm decreased by approximately 50%. Production throughout the irrigated schemes (3.9 ha on average per farm) consists of rice cultivation on 85% of the surface area, while horticultural industries (market gardening) allows the smallholders to generate additional income (Coulibaly *et al.*, 2006). The average farm is made up of a dozen people (seven of them actively working) and is equipped with a pair of breeding cattle, a plough, a harrow, a donkey and a cart. The majority of smallholdings rear small ruminants (2 per smallholding). Cattle production capital is significant (350,000 animals). Threshing and husking the rice is performed with the aid of diesel-powered threshing and husking machines, which are the property of agricultural organisations, private owners and a handful of smallholder farmers. The reduction in available land and the deterioration of production conditions call into question the economic viability of many smallholdings. In an effort to cope with this, some are pursuing non-agricultural activities (crafts or small-scale trade), or have sold off their workforce or even rented out their land (Coulibaly *et al.*, 2006).

To deal with the changing context since the 1990s, the ON's SCR was divided into three sub-

divisions – (i) an agricultural organisation, (ii) an advisory service, and (iii) a women and development programme. In response to agricultural needs, new organisations have also developed agricultural advisory services based on participatory approaches (Havard *et al.*, 2006). However, these changes raise questions of adaptation methods and tools, and stakeholder participation in the implementation of these counselling approaches. This paper examines the CEF, established in 1997 by a federation of service providers (Farafansi So) and managed by farmers' representatives with the support of development organisations and private operators, and analyses how it has improved farmers' income and quality of life.

The paper defines and describes both the CEF and its methodology. It presents and discusses the principal results in terms of how its approach has been adapted for the ON, the human-resource capacity required for its application, and the effective functioning of its main vehicle – funding. In conclusion, it outlines the CEF's future outlook for the ON zone.

MATERIALS, METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

The agricultural council, management advisory services and the council for family-based agriculture

The Agricultural Council was established to help farmers reach their objectives (Chombart de Lauwe *et al.*, 1963). It had a management advisory



service (CDG), and its role was defined as: “A method which takes into account the situation in farming as a whole and attempts to create a dialogue with the smallholder, a long road to improvement, which can often extend over several years.” (Kleene, 1982). In 2001, some participants of an agricultural workshop, held in Benin, suggested the term CEF to replace CDG, which they judged too restrictive owing to its ‘accounting–management’ connotations (Faure *et al.*, 2004). The purpose of the CEF is to develop both the capabilities and responsibilities of the farmers, to ensure that relationships between advisors and farmers are more balanced and that knowledge is shared to a greater degree (Havard and Djamen Nana, 2010). The advisor (also called a ‘facilitator’ or ‘host’) is responsible for applying the CEF methodology. He or she should in no way act as an expert when confronting a farmer who is to undertake the methodology. He or she must be open to discussion and willing to support the farmer in the execution of any projects (Djondang and Havard, 2010). The CEF approach also aims to build supportive working processes for farmers with significant involvement of other agricultural organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and private bodies.

CEF decisions and objectives within the Office du Niger zone

On their path to supporting agricultural

organisations, project managers from the PCPS (Centre for Service Provision Project) decided it was just as important to consider household concerns as those of agricultural organisations. This led to the decision to include an activity ‘in support of family-based agriculture’ based on CEF methodology in a PCPS workshop in April 1997.

The objective of the CEF was to improve farmers’ revenue by increasing productivity, intensification and diversification of family-run farms. In order to achieve this, the CEF must respond to specific needs according to produce type and individual farmer (male or female), i.e.:

- irrigated rice cultivation led by a farming manager and off-season horticultural produce managed individually by both men and women
- herd management, dairy production and livestock feeding, managed by agro-pastoralists, who own the herds
- management of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) for husking, managed by farmers and small-business owners (male and female).

Conception and implementation of the CEF approach in the Office du Niger

The CEF approach was outlined in a project by the *Unité Recherche-développement – Observatoire du Changement* (URDOC) unit for research and development – change-monitoring centre. The approach is based on voluntary membership,

group dynamics, literacy and long-term engagement in the advisory process (2–3 years). Set up by the CPS (rural governance), it brought together advisors (agricultural and veterinary), service providers and public-service extension workers (SCR in the ON). The programme of activities was aimed at reinforcing the farmers’ (both male and female) situation-based auto-analytical capabilities and skills in self-evaluation of results. Members were asked to pay a fee as a contribution to the funding of the project (CFA 10,000 [€15] per year per member).

The CEF approach was broken down into four phases.

Phase I (1997–1999) was experimental. Piloted by URDOC and PCPS, the process was centred on technological and economic analysis. It was tested on 15 farming volunteers, who were given instruction in agricultural record-keeping and cash-flow monitoring. Training courses on working processes and their tools were organised for the advisors and organisation managers, who were then expected to apply them.

Phase II (2000–2003) focused on group dynamics, and aimed to include more family-run farms within the ON zone. In 2001, the service providers formed a federation (Farafansi So) that took control of the process. At the end of 2003, the 800 members of the CEF divided into 36 groups of men (385) and 23 groups of women (415). URDOC trained 14 advisors for the groups of men (6 from



the SCR, 5 from the CPS and 3 from private companies), and 9 advisors and hosts for the groups of women (6 from the SCR and 3 from the CPS) (URDOC, 2005). In addition to keeping records and organising exchange visits, more focused content was developed on themes specifically linked to rice cultivation, as well as themes concerning individual farmers and those economic interest groups (EIGs) involved in specialised activities (horticultural produce, livestock rearing, etc.).

Phase III (2004–2006) saw the withdrawal of both URDOC and PCPS funding, signalling the end of the advisors' fieldwork.

Throughout **Phase IV** (2007–2009), the process was led by six advisors from the Farafansi So federation and Nyeta Conseils (a private service provider within the framework of the *Projet d'Appui au Développement de la zone Office du Niger* [PADON, project to support the development of the ON zone]). The activities were structured around training CPS teachers and the identification and production of technical reference resources to improve advisory services. In 2009, a total of 357 men (31 groups), and 7,030 women (97 groups) were members of the CEF (Anon, 2009).

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data and information underpinning this study were obtained from CEF records in 2007 (Koné, 2007), as well as documents from

URDOC (2005), PCPS (Spinat *et al.*, 2006) and PADON (Anon, 2009).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Both the results and discussion are presented in terms of the key aspects of CEF implementation: the adaptation of the approach within a specific ON context, the various tasks performed by CEF actors, the necessity of having competent and motivated advisors on board, the importance of funding processes, and the impact of the CEF as a result of these factors.

Adaptation of the CEF approach within the context of the Office du Niger

The application of the CEF by Farafansi So was gradual. Initially, in 1997, it affected only a handful of farmers, reaching all of the CPS by 2001. By 2007, it was continuing on an even larger scale within the PADON framework.

The criteria for forming groups of members within the CEF are as follows: the member had to be in an agricultural organisation, show willingness, be literate, be the head farmer or work manager, and pay the contribution fee. Although apparently straightforward at first glance, these criteria led to difficulties in forming groups of 20–25 people; in practice, the groups tended to number around 10–15 members. Some groups refused to accept the contribution fee. The fees caused significant drop-out among the farmers – up to 50% of the

group members. A little more than a third of the members held positions of responsibility within their agricultural organisations or their CPS, and another 15% held a range of other leadership positions.

The activities of the CEF are based on the agricultural season and include:

- diagnostic studies of the land and holdings in order to target the needs of members
- classroom training to acquire new knowledge and methods – this also serves as a forum for the exchange of ideas, which is very much appreciated by members
- forms for record-keeping, support and help in the decision-making process, which is sometimes very restrictive for members, but appreciated by those who manage to master it correctly
- field visits, which constitute forums for interaction among members, where they can discuss practices and develop their observational skills
- tests and trials at the smallholdings, which give members the opportunity to apply previously learned or discussed techniques
- individual monitoring plans, offering the advisor the opportunity to work with the members when completing their forms – these also provide an opportunity for discussion with other members of the household
- advisors helping members and service providers build relationships (agricultural materials, financial institutions, research, etc.)

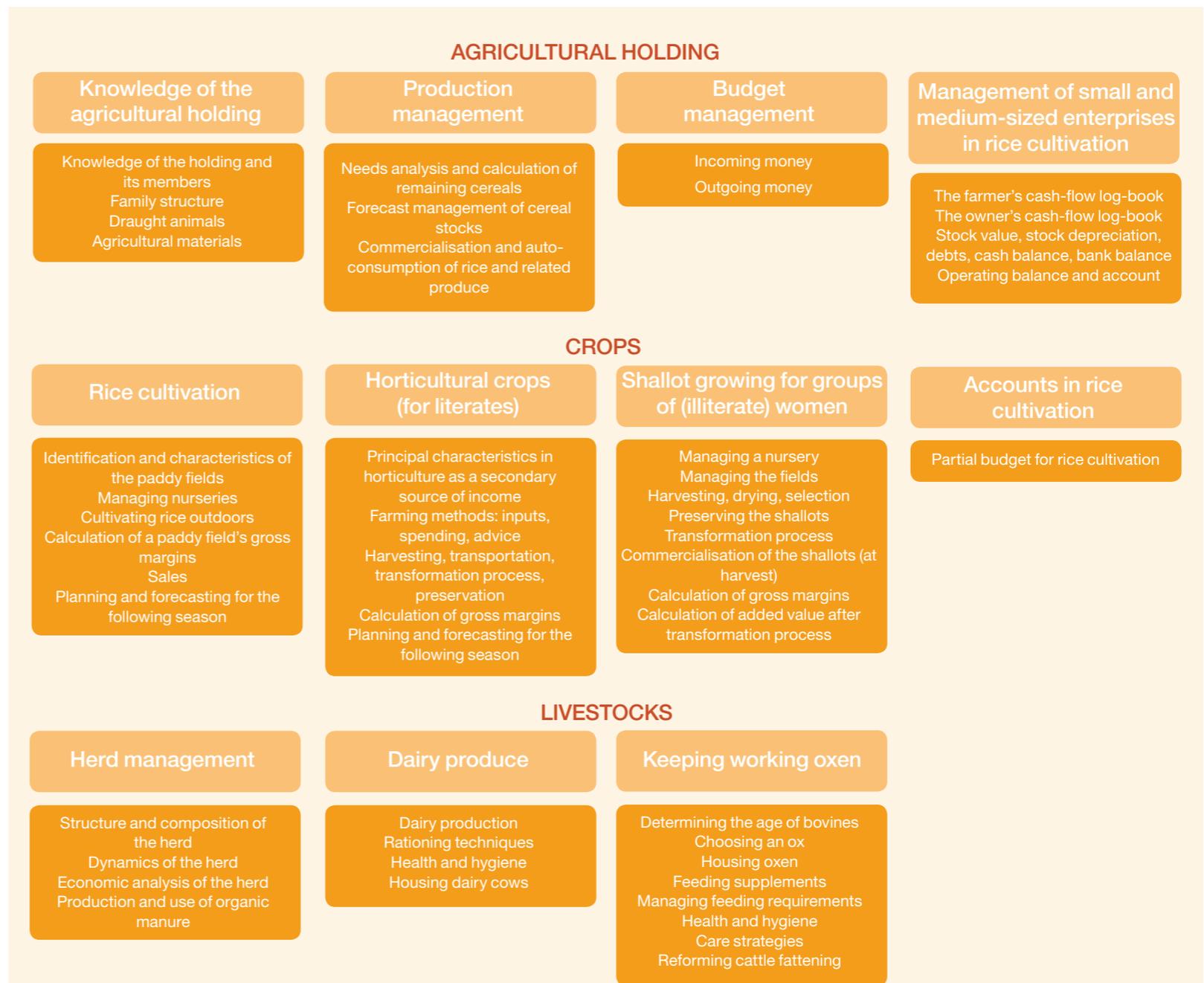


- exchange trips, appreciated by members, allowing a group of farmers to visit another group within the ON zone or elsewhere.

The CEF tools are aimed at all farmers whether they are students, neo-literates or illiterates. The tools are generally available in both French and Bambara, and they address farming needs through a broad range of modules and thematic courses designed by URDOC (Figure 1). These should be further improved to meet the needs of the current situation within farming (Koné, 2007). For example, training themes have already been adapted to suit the particular requirements of illiterate women (Figure 1). To successfully host these sessions, the advisors regularly take specialist training courses.

At the outset, advisors present the range of subjects to the members, who then choose those themes they wish to include in the year's programme. Each theme corresponds to a work scheme. There are tables to complete and sessions to attend (the number of sessions depending on the theme). Each member has a printed log-book (farming tool) to record the results of his or her work according to the theme (Figure 1).

Work remains to be done in terms of the design of the tools if they are to be suitably adapted to the members' level of education. The effectiveness of the tools for the individual holdings also needs to be determined, as not all farmers have the same needs, capabilities or experience. Farmers should



Source: Koné (2007).

FIGURE 1: EXAMPLES OF MODULES AND THEMES DEVELOPED FOR THE CEF IN THE ON ZONE, MALI



be familiarised with the design approach behind the tools, in order to facilitate their use and adapt them to their information needs. Finally, discussions with farmers are essential if they are to develop projects in the long-term (over several years) based on these objectives and ideas.

Tasks among the actors of the CEF

Various actors were involved in Farafansi So's implementation of the CEF: the *Chambre Régionale d'Agriculture* (CRA, regional chamber of agriculture) in Ségout and Mali's *Assemblée Permanente des Chambres d'Agriculture* (APCAM, permanent assembly of chambers of agriculture), the Farafansi So centres, Nyeta Conseils, agricultural organisations and members of the CEF. The co-ordination of the actors' activities and specific strategies was not easy, but was achieved through dialogue and regular negotiations.

The CRA and the APCAM, as delegated project managers for the CEF programmes, developed support strategies, monitoring processes and activity evaluations. However, they experienced difficulty in ensuring that the CEF collaborated with other advisory programmes operating within the zone (e.g., PASOP, *Programme d'Appui aux Services Agricoles* [support programme for agricultural organisations] and the ON's SCR).

Farafansi So's CPS were important actors within the CEF. They were responsible for

managing the advisors, needs analysis, activity monitoring, fee collection and contract development between the CEF and CPS groups. The elected members of the CPS (who were convinced by, and therefore committed to, the CEF) helped certain groups overcome their difficulties, monitored the work done by advisors of the groups, and encouraged relationship development between the groups and their CPS. Farafansi So supported both the CEF and women's groups.

Nyeta Conseils provided support to the CPS in the implementation of the CEF. It helped in designing advisory tools and in training of advisors on hosting CEF activities and mastering the tools. Between 2007 and 2009, Nyeta Conseils reproduced notes on advisory themes and translated them into Bambara (e.g., the arguments for and against fertiliser use for rice crop, the choice of varieties, improvements in parboiling rice). It also published the results of some of these activities, such as how the paddy fields within the ON zone were being transformed, the professionalisation processes of seed farming, the changes and developments in some markets concerning cattle, and improved shallot-drying processes. Furthermore, it published seasonal documents informing farmers of specific development problems in any given season, such as the use of chemical preservatives and the use of natural products as pesticides (Anon, 2009).

The agricultural organisations were charged with establishing groups of members within the CEF. Some managers, who believed strongly in the CEF, gave the benefit of their experience to help the CEF progress; typically, these were farmers who participated actively in meetings and discussions, and remained open-minded throughout. Others, however, preferred to act cautiously and wanted to see the concrete benefits of the CEF before committing to support its development.

The role of advisor is central to the dynamics within CEF groups. Not everyone can be an advisor: flexibility is required, particularly when it comes to working hours, and an ability to focus on relationship development with farmers. The advisors guarantee the quality of the services provided to the farmers (Faure *et al.*, 2011). Those from the Farafansi So centres initiated financial assistance from the *Banque Nationale de Développement Agricole* (BNDA, national bank for agricultural development) in 2008, which resulted in a 3-year loan of CFA 20 million [€30,490] which they used to buy cattle. This benefited 91 smallholdings.

The vitality of a CEF group is not linked to the number of members it has or the regularity of their participation in its activities. It is the presence of leaders within the group and their personal abilities to organise and motivate others, which creates a sense of unity, lengthens the life of the group, and



sustains the group in times of difficulty. A CEF member often sees this new service as a means of discovering self-worth and exploiting his or her newly acquired literacy. The low literacy level (30–40%) among CEF group members is a significant constraint when forming long-term bonds within the group. A CEF member must also convince the other members of his or her family of the benefits of participating in the CEF, because any time spent participating in the CEF is time spent away from the farm and from work.

Competent and motivated advisors are essential

Advisors, agronomists and non-specialist engineers were recruited to direct the CEF's activities with the farming groups. Using the criteria experience and education, human qualities, rigorous approach to work, time-keeping and professional achievements as a guide, four distinct types of advisors were formed (Table 1):

- Type 1. Advisors with interpersonal skills
- Type 2. Advisors with a rigorous approach to work
- Type 3. Advisors who respect working hours
- Type 4. Advisors who lacked rigour and were poor time-keepers.

The results obtained by the advisors were directly influenced by their motivational qualities and their attitudes towards the members of the group. Group members appreciated the work carried out by type 1 and type 2 advisors. However, they

TABLE 1: CLASSIFICATION OF ADVISORS IMPLEMENTING THE CEF IN THE ON ZONE

Qualities/skills	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4
Number of advisors	1	1	2	3
Interpersonal skills	Excellent	Good	Poor	Poor
Basic training	Good	Good	Good	Good
Rigorous approach to work	Good	Excellent	Good	Poor
Time-keeping	Good	Good	Excellent	Poor
Impact on farming	Significant	Significant	Average	Poor
Relationship with farmers	Excellent	Good	Poor	Poor

Source: Koné (2007).

criticised type 2 advisors for their lack of flexibility. The group members recognised the achievements of type 3 advisors, but perceived them as not receptive to their concerns and failing to maintain links with all members. The members did not find type 4 advisors satisfactory, as they did not respect commitments made to the groups.

Furthermore, the level of training was not sufficient to create the perfect advisor. Other criteria, often put forward by the members and seen elsewhere in different African contexts (Djamen Nana *et al.*, 2003; Djondang and Havard, 2010), are essential to be a good advisor (Koné, 2007): integration with their environment; relationship-building with farmers (listening skills, dialogue, support in decision-making); organisational skills within a working context (the ability to understand a farming calendar, respect meeting times); and skills (technical, professional, etc.).

The importance of ensuring adequate funding is in place

As with other development programmes managed by the CEF (Faure *et al.*, 2004; 2011), the projects undertaken by the CEF within the ON were financially supported by donors, as membership fees were not enough to cover the total cost of the projects. This dependence on external funding disrupted the continuity and sustainability of the projects. When funding was withdrawn in 2005 and 2006, work on the ground came to an end and advisors could no longer monitor the groups. Nevertheless, the CEF members continued to apply their newly learned techniques, yet few of them continued to carry out record-keeping. The problems throughout these projects (e.g., funding withdrawal, fee requests, members' expectations not being met, some advisors being dismissed) disheartened members, even those who had



‘always believed’ in the CEF (Koné, 2007).

In conclusion, as in many African countries (Faure *et al.*, 2011), members have to contribute to the cost of running CEF projects, yet are unable to cover the whole cost. Sharing the costs among various actors, including those who benefit from the projects’ results and the State, remains a topic of debate and will continue to do so until adequate solutions are found.

Impacts of the CEF

The effectiveness of the CEF is difficult to measure if all external factors are taken into account, as they can either enhance or interfere with its implementation.

The majority of members speak of the benefits they have gained from the CEF and perceive the difference between themselves and non-members, yet find it difficult to evaluate and quantify this. Among the advantages of the CEF, they list a substantial improvement in their mastery of cultivation techniques (e.g., applying the correct amount of fertiliser to crops, constructing nurseries for the rice plants, keeping oxen), the acquisition of basic management skills, and improved understanding of economic calculation methods (Koné, 2007). Many members say they can now make accurate forecasts, generate yearly estimates, and manage cereal stock to feed their families.

The advisors and advisory organisations also noted positive impacts of the CEF. Members are

now better prepared to take on positions of responsibility within various organisations (e.g., centres, the Federation, agricultural organisations, communities) and now realise that the choices available in agriculture require both reflection and reasoning.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The implementation of the CEF in the ON zone has resulted in development of the method, tool creation for advisors, and successful monitoring of agricultural groups. The members’ feedback concerning the advice given to them was positive. The CEF’s actions led to significantly increased awareness among the farmers, allowing them to improve the methods and practices on their smallholdings. They also now express new demands for advice and training linked to their diversified activities. However, the programmes developed by the CEF are not, as yet, suitable for illiterate farmers, who are still the majority. The modules and themes created by the CEF prepare the members to take on responsibility within their agricultural organisations. However, they also underline the constraints in logistics (a lack of training premises), staff (a lack of advisors) and funding (irregularity of fee payments).

Despite the efforts made, the Farafansi So centres still need to improve their CEF approach, particularly adapting their methods and tools to suit

the diversity of situations, reinforcing their capabilities, managing their advisors, and managing the process of governance within the council itself. In order to be effective, the CEF must follow any changes in context, remain open and ready to listen to farmers and advisors, and adapt the tools to meet the diverse needs expressed by farmers in relation to experience and knowledge gained on the ground. Co-ordination should also be improved with other services such as adult literacy programmes, agricultural product commercialisation and agricultural funding. It is now essential for farmers to engage in forecasting, planning and developing their own projects in the long term (5–10 years). Farafansi So must continue to find ways of improving farmers’ performance, as well as creating the conditions to ensure the longevity of its services, particularly those of the CEF.

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