Documentation on the family farm advisory (FFA) or farm management advisory (CGEA) method

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Introductory Note

This fact sheet was produced as part of the mapping study of innovative agricultural advisory methods and tools in West and Central Africa. This study was commissioned by CORAF (West and Central African Council for Agricultural Research and Development) and carried out by RESCAR-AOC (West and Central African Agricultural and Rural Advisory Services Network) in 13 West and Central African countries.

The overall objective of the study was to constitute a descriptive directory of innovative agricultural advisory methods and tools for scaling up agricultural technologies and innovations in West and Central Africa.

Several people within CORAF and RESCAR-AOC and outside these structures in all 13 countries of the study contributed to the success of this initiative. We extend our gratitude to everyone involved for their contribution.

1. Overview of the family farm advisory method (FFA)

Family Farm Advisory Services (FFA) is a comprehensive approach that strengthens the capacities of farmers and their families to monitor their activities, analyse their situation, plan and make choices, and evaluate their results (Faure et al., 2004). It is therefore a consultative approach to help farmers improve their decision-making process and crop management including, for example, better crop management to improve food security, adjusting input use to reduce production costs, household budget forecasts to avoid debt, and more efficient use of household labour (David and Cofini, 2019). FFA therefore takes into account the technical, economic, social, and, if possible, environmental aspects of farmers' activities (Faure et al., 2004).

FFA approaches have been promoted in French-speaking Africa with support from the French cooperation, and particularly the French Development Agency (FDA), for almost two decades (Legile and Faure, 2013). Supports from other cooperations (Dutch, Swiss, Belgian) and commitments from certain States have also made it possible to adapt the FFA approach to different contexts (Legile and Faure, 2013). FFA is developed in more than 10 French-speaking African countries, including Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali and Senegal in West Africa and Cameroon, Congo and Chad in Central Africa (Dugué and Faure, 2003; Legile and Faure, 2013).

2. Brief description of the types of beneficiaries who were supported with the family farm advisory (FFA) method

The beneficiaries who were supported under the Family Farm Advisory (FFA) method are family farms with an average of 5 to 8 people per household, with areas varying from 2 to 10 ha. The main categories of people: men, women and young people are taken into account in the FFA method. The production systems are mixed crops with the consideration of animal and forestry production. The main animal species raised by farmers supported with the FFA are cattle, sheep, goats and poultry. The main crops that the supported farmers produced and sold under the FFA are cereals and legumes.

3. Importance and objective of the family farm advisory (FFA) method

Family Farm Advisory (FFA) was introduced in a context where Governments had somewhat withdrawn from certain actions in favour of farmers, including the provision of agricultural inputs, facilitating access to credit for farmers and supporting farmers to facilitate the sale of their production. Farmers Organisations (FOs) therefore implemented strategies to facilitate farmers access to inputs and credit. This required an assessment of the amount of inputs per farmer and a good management of the inputs made available to each farmer. The FFA method was therefore used to help better manage the support provided to farmers, but also to better assess the cost of production, which would allow unions to better assess the setting of prices for collecting production from its farmers.
The objectives of the introduction of the FFA are mainly: (i) to improve the capacities of farmers in planning the activities of their farms, (ii) to improve the capacities of farmers in managing their farms, (iii) to improve the profitability of agricultural farms through a judicious choice of technologies and innovations according to farmers' needs.

4. Methodology for implementing the family farm advisory method (FFA)

Typically, farmers (one member per household) meet in a group facilitated by an extension advisor or agricultural facilitator every two weeks. An FFA cycle lasts on an average of 3 years and is implemented in six stages: (i) diagnostics to identify farmers' needs; (ii) group training on selected agricultural practices; (iii) management training (planning of cropping seasons, grain stock management, cash flow planning, income-expense accounting, etc.); (iv) individual advisory visits to the farm; (v) analysis of technical and economic results at both plot and farm levels by groups (computer-assisted, in some cases); and (vi) self-planning of the next cropping season based on past results and desired objectives (David and Cofini, 2019).

From discussions with some stakeholders in the field during the documentation of the FFA method, we note that the method was initially done individually with farmers, but has evolved to be done in groups for the needs of efficiency and interaction between farmers in order to improve the impacts of the method. The FFA in a group is done with an average of 25 to 30 farmers. The main activities of the process are:

- preliminary discussions with local authorities and resource persons in the area on the intervention on the FFA in order to obtain their support and buy-in;
- raising community awareness about the FFA through a Village General Assembly (VGA);
- identification of participants according to defined criteria (being a farmer, being a volunteer and committed to accepting innovations, agreeing to share knowledge with other farmers, being available to be trained in the activities, etc.)
- identification of farmers' needs through a questionnaire (training, equipment, technology, financial, etc.) in a focus group

Following these preliminary activities, a planning and implementation of the FFA group activities is done. This includes some of the following activities:

- capacity building sessions for relay farmers or facilitators,
- capacity building sessions for members on: production techniques for the selected crops; identification of technologies and innovations to be promoted; granary management, etc.
- inventory of farms through monitoring and advisory support for members;
- FFA notebook information
- Results feedback.

5. Impacts of the family farm advisory (FFA) method

FFA is a method integrated into advisory services provided by NGOs, FOs, cotton companies, or Government-dependent agencies and has reached nearly 100,000 farmers (Legile and Faure, 2013).

The FFA can have impacts on the farm; these impacts are assessed through technical performance criteria (production planning, family farm management and organisation, etc.), economic criteria (increase in income, productive investments) and environmental criteria (management of natural resources) but also on the farmer and his or her family (Grain de sel, 2019). A study carried out in Benin shows that the FFA has a positive effect on the yields and agricultural income of farmers (Ayena and Yabi, 2013). Indeed, Ayena and Yabi (2013) found an average net margin of farmers practicing the FFA higher by around 32% (91,577 CFA francs/ha) than that of farmers not practicing the FFA (69,040 CFA francs/ha). In Burkina Faso, for example, the average gross margin per ha per farmers practicing FFA is respectively about 68% for cotton crop, 94% for maize crop, and 6% for sorghum crop compared to farmers who do not practice FFA (Lalba, 2010). FFA therefore induces a dynamic of intensification of production in the farms of beneficiaries who manage to increase yields.

While documenting the FFA method in the field, the organisations promoting it and the beneficiaries expressed their satisfaction with the effects and impacts of the method. According to them, its adoption helps ensure: (i) better planning of farm activities by farmers (ii) better assessment of farm input needs by farmers, (iii) adoption of good agricultural practices through farmers capacity, (iv) better structuring of FOs for the production of organic manure in quantity to meet farmers' demands, (v) taking into account the real needs of farmers in agricultural extension activities, (vi) food security of farms and producer income through better management of farms.

According to the young people, agriculture today has become a business and nothing is done by chance. The FFA method allows them to take useful information to evaluate the economic profitability of their farming performance. Men and women also have a good appreciation of the FFA which according to their opinion allows them to improve their capacities on the management of their farms.

According to some advisory structures, with the FFA, there has been an improvement in agricultural yields. For example, for the USCCPA in Burkina Faso, the yields for maize crop increased from 2 to 2.5 tonnes/ha; 1 to 1.2 tonnes/ha for sorghum; 200 to 450 kg/ha for cowpea. These improvements are the result, among other things, to the adoption of technical production itineraries and good production and post-harvest practices, as well as the adoption of improved seeds.

During the focus groups, farmers confirmed these yield increases which are, according to them, had some corelations with the adoption of technical itineraries and improved varieties, the use of organic manure. According to them, maize yields increased from 1t/ha to 2.5t/ha for maize; 400kg to 1t/ha for cowpea; 800kg to 1.5t/ha for sorghum.

6. Technologies and innovations promoted through the family farm advisory (FFA) method

Satisfactory feedback has been received from advisory structures and farmers regarding the adoption of agricultural technologies and innovations through the FFA.

According to the agricultural advisory structures that promote the method, the implementation of the FFA as an agricultural advisory method has fostered among the beneficiaries:

- the adoption of improved varieties,
- the compliance with technical production itineraries,
- the adoption of good production and post-harvest practices,
- the adoption of certain techniques and/or technologies including organo-mineral fertilisation, microdose technique, conservation farming (scarification, rotation and association of crops), fodder crops (bracharia, mucuna, pigeon pea, andropogon gayanus, etc.).
- the acquisition of skills on the rational management of the financial resources of the farm, etc.

According to the feedback from the men during the focus group, the FFA allowed them to adopt technical production itineraries and improved seeds; evaluate the cost of production and take stock; produce organic manure and use it; know and use registered phytosanitary products.

According to the women, the FFA permitted them to know and acquire short-cycle varieties of maize, cowpea and peanut; better control livestock farming (chicken coop maintenance, hygiene and veterinary products); produce and use organic manure; better sell cowpea (sale in kilograms); master the cowpea itinerary and the use of Purdue Improved Crop Storage (PICS) bags.

For young people, the FFA approach allowed them to learn about microdosing; disturb the soil less (reduced ploughing); produce organic manure; use organic phyto products with chilli pepper, ginger (1kg/product with 5L of water enclosed for 4 days, add 10L of water, after 15 days distribute in 1L in 13L); know and use improved varieties of maize and soybeans; produce operating accounts.

7. Average Implementation Costs of the family farm advisory (FFA) method

The costs of implementing FFA include salaries and allowances for FFA advisors and managers, development of tools and methods, implementation of supportive activities (David and Cofini, 2019). The average cost of FFA programs in Africa is 20 to 80 USD/ farmer/ year including salaries and operating costs for facilitators, training of facilitators and supervision (David and Cofini, 2019). The use of facilitators for program implementation can significantly reduce implementation costs (Faure et al. 2015). Indeed, for FFA schemes that more strongly combine "technical group consulting for non-literate people" and "management consulting for literate people" or that heavily mobilise farmer facilitators, the consulting cost varies between 2 and 20 USD/year/farmer in terms of advice (Legile and Faure, 2013).
Discussions with some stakeholders who promote the method during the documenting phase allowed us to understand that the costs of implementing the method vary from one structure to another. However, certain costs are taken into account in the calculations of the majority of structures, including: the cost of catering for farmers during community meetings, the incentives cost for endogenous facilitators to monitor farmers, the cost of guided tour in the field and the cost of assessment and results feedback workshops. For example, in the case of the USCCPA in Burkina Faso, the cost per beneficiary for the deployment of the individual FFA varies from 75,000 to 100,000 FCFA/participant for a three-year cycle and from 5,000 to 10,000 FCFA/participant for FFA in group for a one-year cycle with cycle renewal possibility.

8. Strengths and weaknesses of the family farm advisory (FFA) method

The main strengths and weaknesses of the family farm advisory method identified during the national discussion and assessment workshops and during the interviews phases for documenting the methods and tools are:

Benefits of the FFA method

- obtaining quality data for good farm management
- awareness of beneficiaries for good management of their farms
- easy dissemination of technologies to farmers with the FFA.

Limitations of the FFA method

The main limitation of the FFA is related to the high cost of the individual approach.

9. Prerequisites for success and the parts of various stakeholders in the success of the family farm advisory (FFA) method

The critical factors for the success of the FFA are in connection with capacity building, sharing of experiences, provision of inputs and equipment on credit to beneficiaries, easy access to new technologies.

Research and technical services have contributed to the success of the FFA by facilitating access to technologies and innovations. The commitment of farmers in the conduct of activities in order to live with dignity on their occupation as farmers has also contributed to this success.

Key messages were formulated by the structures using the FFA approach including the following:

- the FFA method helps to raise awareness among farmers about the management of their farms and the judicious choice of crops;
- FFA performed in a group is less expensive and promotes the dissemination of agricultural innovations and technologies;
- the mobilisation of endogenous facilitators in the FFA system is less expensive than the recruitment of technicians for the facilitations;
- sharing experience strengthens the skills and motivation of farmers in the FFA;
- for a good appropriation of the management of farms, there is the need to support the beneficiaries of the individual FFA for three years;
- the introduction of management tools must be done gradually, starting with simplified and adapted tools at the beginning, which will be reinforced over time.

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