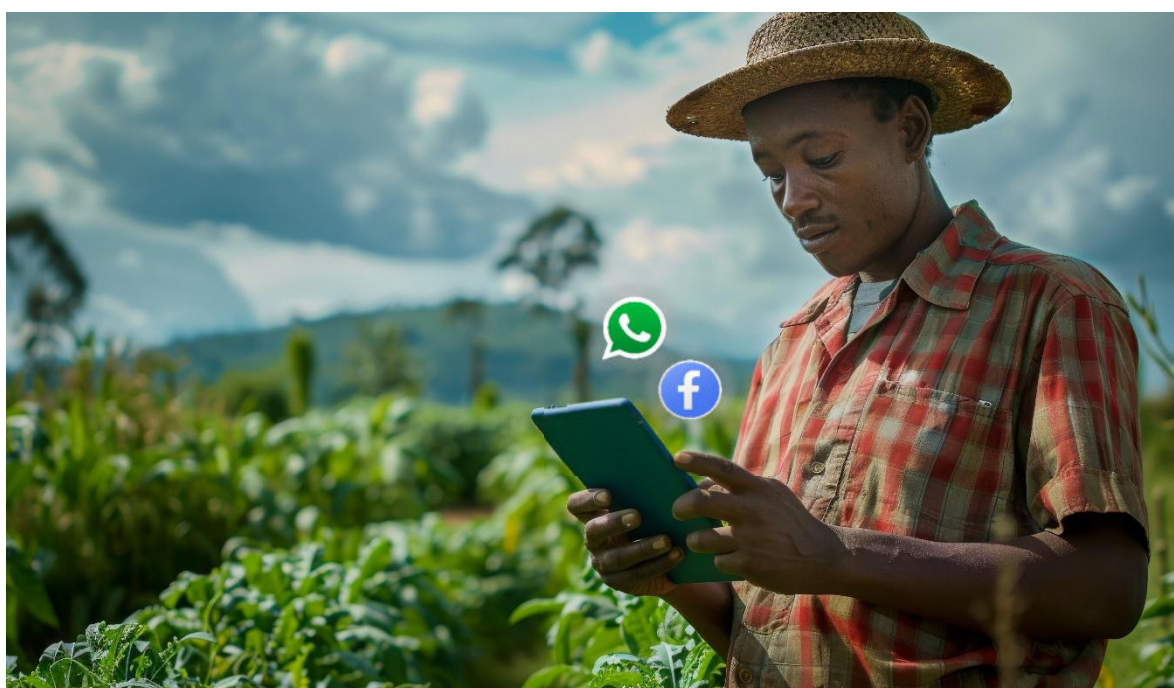




Documentation on social networks as farm advisory tools:  
Facebook, WhatsApp



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## Introductory Note

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

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

Several individuals within CORAF, RESCAR-AOC, and beyond, across the 13 countries covered by the study, contributed to the success of this initiative. We extend our gratitude to everyone involved for their contribution.

### **1. The use of social networks as a farm advisory tool: Facebook, WhatsApp**

Social networks are increasingly being used as farm advisory tools. Facebook and WhatsApp, for example, are used extensively by many farm advisory organisations. They use these two tools in farm advisory services in the following ways:

- (i) identifying a topical theme of interest to farmers;
- (ii) creating and sharing a registration link on Facebook for the training session;
- (iii) registering and validating participants' registrations;
- (iv) creating a group for the training session with registrations that have been validated on WhatsApp;
- (v) sharing the training link on the WhatsApp group that has been created;
- (vi) running the training session

At the end of the training, management rules are put in place to maintain and operate the WhatsApp group. These rules include:

- Interdiction to share other links on the group
- Interdiction to publish anything outside of agricultural development (agricultural development is all about agriculture, livestock farming and the environment): share videos, technical fact sheets and other technologies within the groups.

- Self-management of the group is encouraged
- Around 15 to 20 administrators for all the groups, including nationals and foreigners, are in place to ensure that the group's management rules are complied with.

Social networks are E-extension tools, but they are also used by a number of other methods such as the field school, SHEP approach (Smallholder Horticulture Empowerment and Promotion), the VBA approach (Village-based Advisors), the Farmer Business School, etc. Other tools used with social media include data fact sheets, videos, etc.

## **2. Brief description of the types of beneficiaries supported using social media: Facebook, WhatsApp**

Social media are used in farm advisory services to support all categories of farmers: men, women, young people, people with disabilities, etc. The most important thing is that the farmer has a phone that enables him or her to connect. Once they have joined a group, especially on WhatsApp, the ability to read and write is not compulsory, as messages can be passed in the local language in audio format.

## **3. Necessity and objectives of using social media: Facebook, WhatsApp**

The main objectives of using social media in farm advisory services are: (i) to facilitate the large-scale dissemination of information, (ii) to maintain exchanges between participants in a given activity, (iii) to facilitate exchanges between various stakeholders on a specific issue related to farm advisory services, (iv) to facilitate farmers' access to markets, (v) to limit the travel expenses of extension agents.

Social media enable rapid and interactive dissemination of information, decision-making and changes in farm management (Phillips et al., 2018), thus contributing to the adoption of new farming practices.

## **4. Impact of the use of social media in farm advisory services**

The use of social media facilitates the sharing of information, knowledge and experience as well as innovations and technologies among farmers and between farmers and technicians as well as research. Through these exchanges among farmers and between farmers and technicians, farmers have access to innovations and technologies, which

facilitates their uptake and adoption. According to the farmers, discussions in these groups enable them to access and adopt technologies. This is the case for technical itineraries, the use of organic manure, improved seed varieties, and the places where agricultural inputs are sold, etc. The adoption of innovations and technologies helps to increase agricultural yields, and hence the quantities of agricultural produce and the incomes of farmers. Also, through social media, farmers have access to new markets, according to their testimonies. This is the case with information on agricultural fairs, where participation gives them new customers. Also, through discussions in the various groups on supply and demand for agroforestry products, farmers have access to new markets.

Documentary sources have also mentioned the impact of social media in agricultural advisory services. In Senegal, for example, farmers use WhatsApp groups to exchange voice messages in local languages, sharing advice on farming practices, weather conditions and solutions to common challenges ([warimag.net](http://warimag.net)). Many farmers use Facebook to market their products, share videos of their harvests and attract new customers, increasing their sales and visibility ([dakar-echo.com](http://dakar-echo.com)). Platforms such as Agribusiness TV use Facebook to broadcast videos showcasing agricultural entrepreneurs, inspiring other farmers to adopt new technologies and practices. ([shs.cairn.info](http://shs.cairn.info)). *La Cause Rurale* in Burkina Faso uses social media to disseminate information on various issues relating to farm advisory services and facilitate the sharing of experience among farmers and between farmers and technicians. Its Facebook page has more than 224,000 members, the Facebook group more than 14,000 members, more than 14 groups on WhatsApp with more than 7,000 members and a website with a library of more than 3,000 documents, including technical fact sheets ([www.lacauserurale.com](http://www.lacauserurale.com)).

### **5. Technologies and innovations promoted through social media: Facebook, WhatsApp, etc.**

A number of innovations and technologies are being promoted through social media. These include :

- Phytosanitary management of pests, with guidelines on the phytosanitary products or good cropping practices to be adopted for pest management;
- Production techniques and good practices;

- Irrigation through the promotion of drip irrigation;
- Itineraries and good practices in fruit growing;
- Sharing agro-meteorological bulletins;
- Sharing technical fact sheets on different crops and improved varieties;
- The sharing of videos relating to specific farm advisory topics;
- Information on agricultural markets (availability, prices, sales outlets); etc.

#### **6. Average Costs of setting up social media: Facebook, WhatsApp**

The use of social media for agricultural extension offers significant benefits in terms of cost and effectiveness. These networks enable agricultural information to be disseminated quickly and interactively, reducing the need for physical travel and printed material. The costs of using social media as an agricultural advisory tool are mainly the cost of procuring an android phone, connection fees and the cost of incentivising administrators to regulate exchanges on the groups. Apart from the costs of motivating administrators, the other costs are borne by farmers, but not just for farm advisory services, but for their needs in general.

#### **7. Strengths and limitations of social media: Facebook, WhatsApp**

ICTs facilitate access to agricultural information and improve farmers' decision-making (Aker, 2011). The use of social networks including WhatsApp and Facebook reduces the need for extension workers to travel, thereby lowering associated costs (World Bank, 2017). They also make it possible to reach a large number of farmers, including those in rural areas with an internet connection. WhatsApp enables rapid interaction between farmers and extension workers through text, audio and video messages (Munthali et al., 2018; Chhachhar and Hassan, 2013; Mwalukasa, 2013).

The lack of physical interaction can be a limitation to these networks. Agricultural extension very often relies on practical demonstrations, which are difficult to achieve via social networks (Davis and Sulaiman, 2014). Also, limited access to the Internet in some rural areas reduces the effectiveness of these tools (FAO, 2018; Aker and Mbiti, 2010). The dissemination of erroneous or unverified information is a major risk on these platforms (Zanello et al., 2019). Some farmers have difficulty using these tools because of digital illiteracy or the language in which the platforms are used (Meera et al., 2004).

The main strengths and limitations of social media identified during the national discussion and evaluation workshops and during the interviews to document the methods and tools are as follows:

***Strengths of social media: Facebook, WhatsApp***

- The applications are free and inexpensive;
- the ease with which farmers can use these tools and the fact that they are now being adopted by all categories of farmers, even those who cannot read or write a language (as in the case of WhatsApp);
- the ease with which stakeholders can be put in touch and the ease with which they can interact with experts;
- the availability and accessibility of information and technologies at all times;
- the ease of sharing of experience among farmers and between farmers and technicians;
- Discussions are based on the needs and interests of farmers;
- the wide geographical coverage and reach of social media (large number of farmers reached);
- the possibility of viewing videos and images on agricultural technologies and innovations

***Limitations of social media: Facebook, WhatsApp***

- The information shared is not controlled;
- Compulsory access to an android phone and the internet is a limitation for farmers, who have limited financial resources;
- Discussions are often unfocused and not very fruitful;
- The low level of literacy among farmers is a limiting factor;
- The lack of staff dedicated to leading and managing the groups.

**8. Prerequisites for the success of social media (the case of WhatsApp groups)**

The use of social media such as WhatsApp and Facebook for agricultural extension requires a number of essential conditions to be put in place to ensure their effectiveness. These include adequate infrastructure, such as access to electricity and a reliable internet connection, especially in rural areas. Without these elements, the use of digital technologies remains limited (African Union, 2023). The costs associated with Internet

access and the acquisition of compatible devices must also be affordable for farmers. High tariffs can be a major barrier to the adoption of these technologies (Trendov et al., 2019). Also, users (farmers) must have the necessary skills to use these platforms effectively. Training programmes on the use of social media can facilitate this adoption (Trendov et al., 2019).

According to the data from the interviews conducted during the documentation phase, the use of social media in farm advisory services requires: (i) the existence of sufficient technological infrastructure, the existence of a stable socio-political context, and the involvement of users in the design of media content. Innovations are also needed for their use, including: (i) capacity-building for users to make it easier to understand and use social media, capacity-building for social media managers on specific topics: digital transformation, online community management, multimedia content creation, digital education and pedagogy, data analysis, management of change, networking and partnerships, and so on.

Successful use of social media is mainly associated with:

- self-regulation of the groups by volunteer administrators
- running a training session before the discussion groups are set up.
- Most of the technologies and innovations in the groups are disseminated by the members themselves.

Farmers and other stakeholders (research, technicians) have played a role in the success achieved. Farmers are committed to learning more in order to improve the implementation of their activities. In addition, the commitment of the members, with their various profiles, to support the farmers is noteworthy.

The key lessons and messages to be drawn from the use of social media (as in the case of WhatsApp groups) are as follows:

- these networks are easier for farmers to use;
- They allow farmers to be trained on specific topics;
- IT skills are needed to manage exchange and sharing forums on social media;
- There is a need for time to run discussion and sharing forums on social media, hence the need for resource people to run the specific thematic sessions;
- It is important to undergo training on a given topic before setting up certain discussion forums such as WhatsApp groups;



- The content of social media should be adapted to the needs and interests of farmers, to ensure their active participation;
- There is a need to organise capacity-building sessions for social media users and content managers, to ensure that they take fuller ownership of these networks and disseminate the technologies more effectively;
- It is necessary to involve farmers in the design of network content, so that their real needs can be taken into account.

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