

NOTE 8: Management Advice for Family Farms to Strengthen Entrepreneurial Skills

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There is plenty of information available in the public domain that covers various aspects of extension and know-how about new methodologies for implementation. However this information is often scattered and presented in complex academic language. Hence practitioners, who often have very limited time and/or may only have basic formal education, find it difficult to make use of this information.

The Global Good Practices Initiative aims to bridge this gap by providing information about extension approaches and methods in easy-to-understand formats. As part of this effort, it makes "Good Practice Notes" available to all on a downloadable website. This Note contains one of the extension methods included in this series.

Introduction

In West Africa, during the 1990s, new innovative advisory methods were used that broke with the tradition of top-down public extension focusing on production, and instead helped meet the diversity of producers' needs by using participatory methods. Management Advice for Family Farms (MAFF) is one of these approaches. MAFF has been adapted for diverse contexts and is today implemented by a wide range of actors, including non-government organisations (NGOs), producer organisations, cotton companies, and government agencies, in several African countries, reaching approximately 100,000 producers. MAFF has recently been further adapted to other contexts, including Myanmar (South East Asia), and Malawi (East Africa).



Philosophy and principles

MAFF is an advisory approach based on learning and decision-making processes. MAFF principles are derived from the management sciences. The main objective is to strengthen farmers' capacities to manage all the resources of their farms (land, labour, inputs, money, crops, and livestock) and other activities (off-farm and non-farm). Participatory methods are used to enable participants to conduct self-analysis of their practices concerning various farm dimensions (production, processing, marketing, etc.) by considering the different phases of the management cycle (analysis, planning, monitoring, adjustment, and evaluation) and their economic and social environment. MAFF is based on the use of decision-support tools that enable farmers to analyse their technical and economic results; in most cases based on record keeping.

As a result, producers gain a new understanding of their farming systems. They become able to autonomously improve their lives, through the development of new projects or improvement of their agricultural, managerial, or social practices. Based on these principles, MAFF can be adapted to various agro-ecological, institutional, and organisational settings. MAFF is complementary to other advisory approaches (specialised advice or advice supporting collective actions).

MAFF in action

To implement MAFF, tools and methods have to be designed according to the local context, governance mechanisms, and financial and human resources available: thus, there is not one standard model. Two different examples are presented in Boxes 1 and 2.



BOX 1: MAINSTREAMING MAFF IN BENIN SINCE 1995

Benin started implementing MAFF in 1995 through pilot projects. Now it is integrated into the national agricultural advisory policy.

MAFF is implemented through the following phases, facilitated by advisors:

1. Farm-diagnosis to identify farmers' needs.
2. Organisation of group training on agricultural practices based on identified priority needs (fertilisation of maize, cotton pest control, etc.).
3. Management training (crop-season planning, grain stores management, cash flow planning, revenue–expenditure accounts, etc.). Farmers are taught to use specific tools (records and analysis) for each topic and advised on how to incorporate performance criteria (gross margin, cost/income ratio, etc.) to assess their results and make decisions.
4. Individual on-farm advisory visits.
5. Analysis of the technical and economic results, both at plot level and farm level, with groups of farmers. Some advisors use computers to perform additional processing on the data. These more accurate results are then presented and discussed with each farmer.
6. Self-planning of the next cropping season based on the past results and the objectives farmers want to reach.

Collective activities and exchanges are encouraged: group meetings to discuss results, field visits, trials in farmers' plots. The tools used to support farmers have gone through several adaptations and are contextualised in each region. A key improvement in recent years has been the design of management tools for illiterate farmers.

The MAFF service is provided by a dozen NGOs, farmers' organisations, and by the Ministry of Agriculture, which has recruited more than 250 advisors. One advisor works with 7 to 9 groups, each group gathering 10 to 30 farmers. A farmer-facilitator is trained in each group to undertake some of the advisory tasks. Almost 20 000 farmers are now taking part in MAFF activities in Bénin.

BOX 2: RECENT DEVELOPMENT OF MAFF IN MYANMAR

Gret (a French NGO) has been implementing MAFF in Myanmar since 2011. Due to the lack of farmers' organisations in Myanmar, Gret is implementing the MAFF approach with its own staff in collaboration with a local NGO. MAFF (called *Malasaka* in Myanmar language) is now delivered in three regions of the country, with tools inspired by West African experiences but adapted to the national and local contexts. MAFF is developed in a participatory way, involving farmers in the design of the tools and the provision of services. The main challenge has been to train advisors who could understand and implement the principles and tools of MAFF. The approach started through individual advice. The process is gradually strengthening closer interactions between advisors and farmers and a greater diversity of advisory tools are being designed. In 2014, besides offering individual advice, a collective touch was introduced through group meetings and the promotion of MAFF farmer-facilitators. MAFF in Myanmar is now directly reaching 580 families in more than 111 villages and 74 MAFF farmer-facilitators are operating.

Capacities required

The quality of the advice provided depends mainly on the advisor's skills. Advisors should have mastery over the content (production techniques, farm management), the modalities of delivering advice (participatory methods, learning processes, facilitation of links with other service providers), and the ability to build personal relationships (listening, empathising, and approachability). Specific training is also needed for farmer-facilitators depending on the tasks they perform.

Due to financial constraints and time limitations, advisors are often trained within the framework of projects. To support more sustainable training mechanisms, MAFF actors need to participate in broader initiatives to train advisors – or, more broadly, rural development agents – within the framework of public and private organisations at the national level (e.g. University of Parakou in Benin). In addition special efforts should be made to train all the

actors involved in the organisation of MAFF, including office managers of advisory services, who implement and monitor the activities, and elected farmers who guide, assess MAFF, and carry out lobbying activities. Support and training mechanisms are gradually being established to build the capacity of advisory service providers able to implement MAFF but work is still needed to institutionalise this support within sustainable national institutions.

Costs

Advisory services have significant costs: costs for advisors and MAFF managers (salaries and operating costs); and costs for training and the various back-stopping activities. Total advisory costs are US\$20–80/year/farmer for most MAFF programmes in Africa, depending on the number of farmers per advisor. Where MAFF combines management advice for groups of non-literates and literates or those that rely heavily on farmer-facilitators, the cost is much lower (between US\$2 and US\$20/year/farmer).

MAFF still relies heavily on international aid for funding when implemented by NGOs and producer organisations. It remains a challenge to get direct contributions from farmers because many of them are not able, or willing, to pay for training. Asking for contributions from producer organisations is more realistic when the latter undertake commercial activities (marketing of agricultural products or sale of inputs to members). But these contributions by producers and producer organisations currently cover only a small part of the cost of advisory services and this situation is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Currently, the most promising possibilities for funding appear to be: (i) contributions from downstream actors from well-structured value chains (direct contribution or levies at the marketing stage); and (ii) the establishment of national or regional development funds aimed at supporting rural development, including advisory activities.

Strengths and weaknesses

The strengths of MAFF are:

- The point of view of family farmers is at the centre of the approach. This ensures a good match between the farmers' needs and the provision of advisory services.
- It takes into account all the farmer's activities, which helps farmers to make more accurate decisions concerning their farms and their families.
- Farmers are empowered by methods that build their strategic and systemic thinking.
- Due to the diversity of activities linked to MAFF, farmer-facilitators can play a significant role with the support of advisors.
- It may provide data at farm level that can be processed and used by producer organisations to improve the provision of other services or to carry out advocacy activities.

The weaknesses of MAFF are:

- Farmers with more resources (knowledge, equipment, innovativeness, land, etc.) are usually over-represented.
- MAFF requires service providers with strong capacities to adapt and implement the method and tools.
- Investment and time are needed to support in-depth training of farmers and advisors to improve their analytical and managerial skills.
- The cost of the advisory services per participant is high except when farmer-facilitators are well represented.
- Due to the intensive level of support to farmers, access to MAFF remains limited and there is a need to complement the MAFF approach with more simple advisory methods and to improve tools for illiterate farmers.

Best-fit considerations

Although MAFF is better suited for contexts where farmers are already active in markets and benefitting from various economic opportunities, it can be adapted to a large range of farmers. For example, in Myanmar, fisherfolk and livestock breeders are joining MAFF, along with rice producers and subsistence farmers.

MAFF farmers have some specific personal characteristics. First, those who join MAFF do it on a volunteer basis

(incentives are inefficient), reflecting their desire to change and to improve their farming and management practices. Second, MAFF is mostly based on record-keeping – even if there are interesting experiences with illiterate farmers – so participants are generally literate or involved in functional literacy programmes. MAFF tends to more easily reach proactive and literate farmers, as they are the ones who will more easily adopt a management mind-set and use record-keeping tools. When introducing MAFF in a new area, service providers may rely on these categories of farmers for quick adoption. Then they can adapt the approach to reach other categories (e.g. non-literate or less innovative farmers) with the use of specific management tools and facilitation methods. However, in some cases, service providers started with illiterate farmers.

Governance

Many actors are involved in providing MAFF: donors, government agencies (either implementing and/or coordinating advisory services), projects implementing or supporting service providers, NGOs, producer organisations, etc. As a result there are numerous governance mechanisms in order to fund, monitor, and assess the service provision. To a large extent, such governance mechanisms depend on the nature of the main organisation providing advice, the history of the advisory service, and the funding arrangements.

Producer organisations play a special role in the implementation of MAFF. Advisory services implemented by producer organisations can be expected to be more in line with farmer needs. However, in some countries, producer organisations do not have the human and financial capacities to provide such services.

Various mechanisms are used for coordination between the various actors (contracts, steering committees) and usually one actor plays the role of broker to facilitate the interactions.

Finally MAFF is generally linked to other advisory services such as specialised advice and it is therefore part of the wider advisory system where coordination is needed but often is still lacking.

Change induced by MAFF

In different countries where MAFF evaluations have been undertaken, farmers attributed several kinds of changes to MAFF that can be summarised under three categories:

- **Agricultural techniques:** new variety adoption, sowing techniques, compost use, crop rotation, etc.
- **Farm management practices and family budget management practices:** better measures of farm and family earning and expenses, profitability calculation, storage planning, cash flow planning.
- **Strategic management:** MAFF enables farmers to realise that they can change by themselves, anticipate, and have a better understanding of what they want, what they can do, and how they can do it.



MAFF can change the social relationships within families and villages because participants develop entrepreneurial skills at the individual level. MAFF also has an impact on non-participants because participants and non-participants exchange knowledge within their networks. However, the changes related to new managerial practices are more difficult to disseminate because non-participants do not experience a full learning process. MAFF is also an approach to strengthening producer organisations because some participants then become leaders in their producer or other organisation, which then gets the benefit of the management skills acquired through MAFF.

Conclusion: a gradual scaling up and scaling out

MAFF has been adopted by many actors and adapted to diverse contexts. However, there is a need to scale up and out the approach. Regarding scaling out, options include mobilising producer organisations and farmer-facilitators or improving coordination at regional level among advisory services providers in order to promote synergies. Regarding scaling up, prospects include designing a mix of solutions to fund MAFF in the longer term and implementing suitable training mechanisms for advisory actors. However, public policies must better define the strategy regarding advisory services and the place of MAFF within the advisory system. Solutions need to be developed in conjunction with all stakeholders involved in MAFF: NGOs, producers, producer organisations, and local and national government).

Training material

For advisors, supervisors, managers, and training centres AFDI. 2012. *Guide Pratique. Quel accompagnement proposer à une organisation paysanne pour choisir une activité de conseil à l'exploitation familiale (CEF) ?* Paris: Groupe Gestion AFDI.

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Gret. 2015. *Manual of Malasaka tools.* Yangon, Myanmar: Gret.

For farmers

Sofitex, Faso Coton, Socoma, UNPCB. Undated. *Mon livret de conseil.* Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso.

Further reading

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MAFF page of the FERT network. Available at: <http://www.fert.fr/en/tag/conseil-exploitation-familiale/>

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