Concept Note of the electronic conference

"Transformations, potential and challenges of agricultural and rural advisory services in West and Central Africa “

(March 31 - April 25, 2014)

Summary. Knowledge on transformations occurred or ongoing in the sector of agricultural and rural advisory services (RAS) in West Africa and Central (WCA) are empirical and fragmented. This deficiency is a major constraint to the development and implementation of relevant strategic operations for the mobilization of the full potential of RAS that could thus contribute to meet the current food, economic and environmental challenges in WCA. The purpose of this electronic conference is to contribute to the revitalization of RAS in WCA through participatory diagnosis and generation of foresight elements to develop the strategy RESCAR -AOC whose vision is “efficient and sustainable RAS, effectively and fully playing their pivotal role in rural development in WCA”. The results of the electronic conference will be further complemented and validated during a workshop to be organized on the theme “Revitalization of RAS in WCA”. The RESCAR-AOC gradually puts up with the determinant contribution of the West and Central African Council for Agricultural Research and Development (CORAF/CORAF). This process is conducted under the supervision of the African Forum of Agricultural Advisory Services (AFAAS) and the Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS).

To subscribe to the e-conf: rescar.econf@coraf.org. For further information: Dr Patrice Djamen: p.djamen@gmail.com

A / Background

A1. The agricultural sector AOC changing

More than in the past, rural producers in West and Central Africa have to address the challenges of sustainable improvement of food security and living conditions. Production techniques that have shown some resilience in the past are increasingly challenged. The option of intensification of production systems to increase their productivity and competitiveness appears increasingly inevitable, but must be done in a sustainable manner. Urban agriculture is developing further making a growing contribution to the supply of urban food. There is an increase of agro- industrial farms and large and highly mechanized farms connected to the markets. These large farms bear innovation potentially profitable to small family farms, but their installation and the implementation of their activities are often accompanied by excesses on both social (land grabbing, agricultural wage labor etc.) and environmental (deforestation, soil degradation, high use of pesticides etc.). The management of these shortcomings requires the adaptation of legislative frameworks but also the provision of adequate rural advisory.

Moreover, the perception and profile of RAS users have evolved over the past decades and producers are increasingly educated, better organized, more empowered and connected to market players etc. The question of inter-generational succession or transmission of farms is still little addressed by the RAS. However, it is observed that youth and women are more and more developing their own agricultural activities, often with a more or less specific logic, which requires adaptation of methods and tools used in RAS. The dynamics of increased market integration poses the challenge to producers of new learning process to better control production costs, access to appropriate funding for their activities, interact effectively with other actors in value chains and manage market failures.

1 Network of agricultural and rural advisory services of West and Central Africa countries (RESCAR-AOC)
Globally, the diversification of the demand generated by the transformation of the agricultural sector justifies the use of different forms of agricultural advise (extension, management advise, technical advise, legal advise, facilitation, funding, organizational support, management of agricultural equipment etc.). However, it is important to have a better understanding of the current situation in order to define priorities in terms of type of advise and mechanisms for their efficient delivery to users.

A2. A more segmented and focused supply facing the challenge of meeting of a changing and variable demand

The evolution and variability of demand RAS require renewal and diversification / specialization of supply. In the early 2,000s, the end of large public funded RAS programs and refocusing the role of the state coincided with the emergence of new RAS providers with more or less specific roles: the private sector, NGOs, farmer trainers (FT) and producer organizations (POs). The private sector operates especially in market value chains hence supporting the growing momentum of intensification of production systems, the development of agricultural entrepreneurship and emerging issues related to standards and commercial private certificates and standards (certification, organic sector, compliance with sanitary and phytosanitary norms etc.). Farmer Trainers are increasingly mobilized to address the deficit of public extension agent in the implementation of some RAS functions. NGOs’ interventions are generally geared towards young people, women and generally small producers who are often vulnerable and forgotten, because operating in value chains with little market value. POs, including mainly umbrella organizations, are increasingly undertaking advisory activities for their members.

The relationship between the production, use and dissemination of knowledge is also questioned by the changing RAS landscape. An interest in participatory approaches such as Integrated Agricultural Research for Development (IAR4D) implemented through tools such as innovation platforms designed to foster increased involvement of stakeholders in the value chains is emerging since few years. An analysis of this trend, of concrete results achieved so far, the conditions of their out-scaling is potentially rich in lessons for improving the relevance, accessibility, adoption and ultimately the impact of innovations. The development of mechanisms for the dissemination of knowledge (research results, local knowledge, farmers’ innovations) beyond their places of production is an axis often mentioned but not yet sufficiently deployed.

The emergence of information and communication technologies (ICT) to which rural actors have more access provides opportunities to develop innovative RAS methods and tools all the most since the profile of producers has also evolved. The use of mobile phones has become widespread in recent years, video is increasingly mobilized in sensitization, training or communication operations.

The transformation of RAS landscape in WCA is widely recognized, but its magnitude and the pattern of its application in different contexts are still unclear. Moreover, the emerging pluralism of RAS providers offers the possibility of better coverage of farmers' demands which are increasingly variable and specialized. But it is observed that RAS in WCA are not yet very sensitive to gender, youth and women are still under-represented as well in the category of providers as in the group of RAS users. The adaptation of training curricula for technicians and extensionists to transform their activities from prescription to support and better respond to the variability of demand is a major challenge. Pluralism of RAS suppliers carries potential challenges which include: (i) the coordination and complementarity of different interventions to avoid duplication, contradictory messages and neglect of certain themes or territorial areas; (ii) the standardization of profiles and competencies of counselors according to their tasks; (iii) the sustainability of new extension approaches and methods both in terms of funding and institutional anchorage, and (iv) monitoring and evaluation of the effects and impacts of different RAS’ methods and tools used. There is still a knowledge gap on the mobilization of
the potential of the pluralism of RAS supply but also on the occurrence and magnitude of the challenges that might occurred from this dynamic.

A3. Institutional arrangements and priority actions to revitalize the RAS
Several WCA countries have undertaken reforms to revitalize public RAS or to adjust the overall national policy on agricultural extension. If these reforms appear to be necessary for the modernization of the RAS, the results are still expected in most cases. In addition, there is the question of the institutional integration of new approaches to agricultural advisory generated by the emergence of new players, the reforms of previous approaches or changing the context and perception of the role of RAS. Moreover, it is increasingly recognized that the development of RAS involves the identification and removal of institutional and political constraints, actual or latent. The low level of investment in RAS is part of constraints often mentioned. A discussion of various existing or potential funding mechanisms and sustainability is required. Despite a growing interest in RAS, policymakers can not commit large-scale actions to revitalize the RAS if a plea based on solid arguments effects and impacts of RAS is conducted efficiently. Finally, the analysis of the role of agriculture and rural council in the continental frameworks (CAADP) and sub-regional (case of common agricultural policy of ECOWAS) can help identify potential opportunities they offer in for the revamping of RAS in WCA following the principles of subsidiarity and synergy of actions.

B / Objectives of the electronic conference
This e-conference overall objective is to contribute to the revitalization of agricultural and rural advisory services in WCA. The specific objectives are: (i) to identify and characterize recent transformation in RAS actors, methods and tools in WCA; (ii) to assess the level of adequacy between the supply and demand for RAS and (iii) to develop elements of a strategy to better take into account recent developments, strengthen advocacy and make the institutional environment more favorable to developing the potential of RAS.

C / Articulation
The e-conference will take place from 31st March to 25th April 2014. It will be organized around three complementary themes:

Week 1: Systems, Actors, methods and tools of RAS (March 31-April 4)

1.1 / profile actors RAS Has it changed in recent years? 1.2 New systems of agricultural and rural council are they emerged in recent years? If yes, what are these new systems? 1.3 Has the rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICT) influenced RAS methods and tools used in RAS in your countries? What are the key innovations that have emerged? 1.4 Are Innovations registered in the systems, methods and tools for RAS sustainable and replicable at a large scale?

Week 2: Matching the demand and supply of RAS AOC (7 - 11 April)

2.1. How do the RAS users/beneficiaries express their demands? How do they access the results of agricultural research? 2.2. How is demand characterized by the suppliers? Is the current supply of RAS fully meeting the demand? If not, what are the topics, themes and/or categories of potential beneficiaries not or insufficiently taken into account, why? Who are the main suppliers of RAS? What are the main tools used? Are they easily accessible to the majority of farmers? 2.3. Are the profile of agricultural
counselors, skills of farmer trainers and training curricula in line with customer demand? What is the level of professionalization of the RAS? How can the standardization of profiles and services quality be ensured?

**Week 3: Institutional Arrangements and priority actions (14 - 18 April)**

3.1 What are the major changes in national policy / national agricultural extension system in your country? Are the current national policies appropriate for the development of RAS? How do you see the RAS today: public, private or public-private partnership? 3.2 How are public and private RAS funded today? 3.3 Do you have any experiences or literature to share with the recent and reliable data on the effects and impacts of agricultural advisory AOC? How to organize and conduct effective advocacy for RAS? 3.4 Are there any frameworks for dialogue between the different actors of RAS in your country? If yes what are the characteristics of these frameworks, are they really functional and efficient? In your opinion what are the five strategic actions to revitalize RAS? What could be the contribution of RESCAR -AOC in this context?

**Week 4: Further Analysis and Sharing of resources (21 – 25th April)**

The Week 4 will be devoted to further analysis, suggestions, comments or free reflection of participants on one or more of the three sub-themes of the conference or on the broader issue of RAS in WCA.

The facilitation and the different contributions to the e-conference might be in French or English. All registered participants will receive instantly the different contributions as the conference will be progressing. Every evening a synthesis summing up the main results, trends and emerging issues of the various contributions received during the day will be prepared in English and French and shared to all participants the next day.

The facilitation of the conference will be conducted Dr. Patrice Djamen, Dr. Ismail Moumouni, Dr. Mercy Akeredolu.

**D / Participants and facilitation**

The electronic conference is open to all rural development professionals with an interest and willingness to share their experiences and views on the systemic issue of RAS in WCA.

Anyone wishing to participate in the conference is kindly requested to send an email to rescar.econf@coraf.org with subject "e-conf transformation and challenges of RAS in WCA."

The message should also include the name, function and socio-professional category (producer, agricultural consultant, extensionist, policy marker, researcher, lecturer, private sector operator etc.) and place of residence of the participant.

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