

CONCEPT NOTE OF THE ELECTRONIC CONFERENCE

Country fora of agricultural extension services: What added-value and how to ensure efficiency and sustainability?

(10th - 31st October, 2017)

Summary. In the current context of pluralistic agricultural and rural advisory services (ARAS), Country forum (CF) are emerging progressively as a major actor with the potential to significantly contribute to more effective ARAS and vibrant agricultural innovation systems (AIS). However, the potential of CF is not yet well-known by most AIS actors, and preliminary lessons of its operationalization in West and Central Africa (WCA) raise excitements but also concerns about its efficiency and sustainability. RESCAR-AOC is organizing this e-conference with the objective to raise awareness on CF and facilitate learning and experiences sharing to gather useful elements for sustainable and full harnessing of the potential of CF. The conference will run for three weeks (10th – 31st October, 2017) and is articulated around three sub-themes: (i) Country forum: Added-value in the existing innovation systems, pathways for efficient establishment (theme 1); (ii) Efficient functioning of CF (theme 2); (iii) sustainability of CF and strategies for scaling and achieving greater impacts (theme 3). RESCAR-AOC operates under the tutelage of AFAAS and GFRAS with the vision of “efficient ARAS mobilized in line with the demand to facilitate sustainable development in West and Central Africa”.

To subscribe to the e-conf: ateliers@rescar-aoc.org For further information: Dr Patrice Djamen: p.djamen759@gmail.com

1 Background

Country forum of stakeholders of agricultural and rural advisory services (CF) are gradually emerging as a major organisational innovation that could revitalize agricultural advisory services and contribute to improving the performance of agricultural innovation systems. The potential added value of CF includes: better coordination and synergies between actors, knowledge management including scaling up innovations, and increased involvement of ARAS stakeholders in the preparation and implementation of policies and investments for agricultural development. It is on this basis that the West and Central Africa Network of Agricultural and Rural Advisory Services (RESCAR-AOC) whose vision is “Effective agricultural and rural advisory services mobilized in line with the demand to facilitate Sustainable Development in West and Central Africa” decided to make CF its operational branches at country level.

Few years ago, AFAAS developed a manual on the establishment of CF. However, CF and their roles are not yet well known to other actors of the agricultural innovation system. This situation results in weak mobilization / solicitation of CF and skepticism on their usefulness. In countries where process for the establishment of CF is under way, there are often several challenges related to, inter alia, integration into the existing institutional landscape, adequate

financial and human resources, strategies for implementation of activities and sustainability and scaling of results achieved.

Moreover, the deployment of CF should consider local realities. There are a variety of situations that give rise to more or less strong differences between the fora. In some cases, the creation of the CF might imply the establishment of a totally new organization. In other cases, the most relevant option could be to support an existing structure (agency or national directorate of agricultural extension) to develop the functions they lack to act as a forum. The definition of convergence criteria becomes necessary to facilitate the planning and coherence of interventions but also to allow harmonious and constructive interactions between the different CF irrespective of their formats.

Key factors for the effective functioning of CF are not yet clear. Nearly half of the ten CF in West and Central Africa are experiencing operational difficulties, thus raising concerns about their long-term sustainability. Nevertheless, there are already some success stories that can be shared and inspire other countries who are considering or have already begun the process of setting-up a CF. Stronger and more efficient CF would contribute not only to the revitalization of agricultural innovation systems in their respective countries but also to the efficient achievement of RESCAR-AOC's objectives. Open and inclusive exchanges would help to know more about these success stories, but also to share experiences and ideas on common or specific difficulties and ultimately to revisit the functions of the CF and to identify the conditions that would allow them to be sustainable and efficient. It is in this context that RESCAR-AOC, under the tutelage of AFAAS and GFRAS, is organizing throughout the month of October 2017 an electronic conference on the theme "*Country fora of agricultural extension services: What added-value and how to ensure efficiency and sustainability?*". The e-conference will provide a unique opportunity for discussions, learning and experiences sharing so as to raise awareness on CF, develop a common understanding on their usefulness and identify strategies and good practices for their efficient deployment and sustainability

2 Expected Outcomes

The expected outcomes of the conference include the following: (i) actors and stakeholders of agricultural innovation systems in West and Central Africa are more aware of the concept of CF and conditions for its successful operationalization; (ii) the efficiency of CF is improved; (iii) good practices and conditions for the sustainability of CF and scaling of their results are identified and used by actors. RESCAR-AOC is actively exploring means to organize later on a writeshop to fine-tune, validate and use outputs of this e-conference to develop manual and guidelines for successful and sustainable CF.

3 Articulation and guiding questions for the discussion

The conference will run for three weeks and is articulated around three sub-themes: (i) Country forum: Added-value in the existing innovation systems, pathways for efficient establishment (theme 1); (ii) Efficient functioning of CF (theme 2); (iii) sustainability of CF and strategies for scaling and achieving greater impacts (theme 3).

Sub-theme 1: Country forum: Added-value in the existing innovation systems, pathways for efficient establishment

1.1/ What is your understanding of Country fora? What are the key functions a CF should play and what is the specific added-value it should bring in the existing Agricultural Innovation System?

1.2/ In your country is there already a functioning organization who have similar or playing the role expected from a country fora?

1.3/ Is it preferable to create an organisation afresh that will play the role of CF or it is better to strengthen and widen the capacities of an existing organization to become a CF? What are the potential benefits and challenges of each of these two options? which case is best suited for you according to your experience?

1.4/ In most situations, CF at least at their earlier stage have to be hosted by an existing organisation who will provide them the legal cover, administrative and financial services. What should be the criteria for selecting such organisation? What are the guidelines to ensure efficient and harmonious collaboration between CF and its host?

Sub-theme 2: Efficient functioning of Country Fora

2.1/ What are the key competencies necessary for efficient facilitation of CF?

2.2/ How to ensure adequate representation and effective involvement of different stakeholders in the CF? How to promote ownership and commitment of members?

2.3/ What are the best settings for efficient governance: What can be roles and responsibilities of participants? what should be the adequate distribution of role and functions between the focal person, the chairman and the head of host institution (if any) in the functioning of the CF?

2.4/ What are the existing and potential opportunities for the sustainable financing of CF? How to improve and secure funding of CF? In most cases, CF are registered as non-for-profit organization. In this context, which activities a CF could achieve to secure funding? What are possible arrangements for CF to benefit from different supports (administrative, hosting, etc.) from member organizations for charge reduction?

2.5/ What are important partnerships and alliances to build? how to share activities and efficiently engage policy makers? How to get public sector (particularly the Ministry of Agriculture) on board and what should be its specific role in the establishment and functioning of CF?

Sub-theme 3: Sustainability of CF and strategies for achieving scaling and greater impacts

3.1/ What are the frequent traps and challenges to avoid when establishing and running a CF? What solutions can be used to avoid/managed them efficiently?

3.2/ How to ensure the sustainability of CF beyond the seed funding (generally external) and the determinant enthusiasm of champions/founding members who brought the initial leadership for the establishment?

3.3/ What are the best strategy for the scaling of outputs and achieving the greater impact?

3.4/ Do you have any success stories or good practices to share on the following: (i) Establishment of CF; (ii) awareness raising and engagement of decision makers; (iii) efficient functioning; (iv) outcomes and impacts of CF?

4 Participants and facilitation

The electronic conference is open to all rural development professionals who are interested and willing to share their experiences and views on country fora of agricultural extension and advisory services in WCA.

Anyone wishing to participate in the conference is kindly requested to send an email to ateliers@rescar-aoc.org with subject "*e-conf efficiency and sustainability of CF in WCA*". The message should also include the name, function and socio-professional category (producer, extensionist, policy maker, researcher, lecturer, private sector operator etc.) and place of residence of the participant. All members of the current mailing list of RESCAR-AOC are automatically registered at the conference, unless otherwise indicated by those who do not wish to participate.

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. At the end of each sub-theme, a synthesis of the main results, trends and emerging issues of the various contributions received during the week will be prepared in English and French and shared to all participants the next day.

The e-conference will be facilitated by Prof. Tunji Arokoyo, Dr. Ismail Moumouni, Dr. Nestor Ngouambe. The overall coordination of the process will be ensured Dr Patrice Djamen and Dr Mercy Akeredolu.

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