Towards a shared vision: action plans for adapted advisory services in West Africa’s rice irrigation schemes

Farmer organisations and government agencies managing large scale irrigation systems in West Africa need to collaborate to agree on a vision for agricultural services that increases scheme viability while meeting the needs of different types of farmers. However, there is no institutional mechanism in place that enables different groups of actors – with different levels of power – to engage at a strategic level or to negotiate and take forward such a common position. This briefing describes a process piloted in three large scale irrigation schemes in the region and draws lessons from this for future investments in irrigation.

Why the need for action plans? All is not well with West Africa’s large irrigation schemes – yet they are an important instrument in achieving the ambitious food security plans of national governments, as expressed in the regional rice initiative. Producing large surpluses of rice to meet growing domestic demand and reduce dependency on imports is high on government agendas in the region, and investment in large scale irrigation is intended to achieve it.

However, the performance of irrigation schemes has not been as expected, with yields below those projected during the design of the schemes, and high operational costs – partly due to poor management, including insufficient maintenance of infrastructure. Smallholder farmers cultivating the irrigated land often struggle to make ends meet, as production costs (including labour) are high and increasing, whilst prices for paddy are stagnating. Farmers blame poor agricultural advisory services (AAS) along the value chain for low productivity and profitability, and point the finger at the government agencies (“offices” in French) managing the schemes for not fulfilling their role. The offices in turn blame farmers for not following the agricultural calendar and neglecting their share of canal maintenance. In some cases, the relationship between farmers and their organisations on the one hand, and irrigation scheme managers on the other has deteriorated to the extent that effective communication is no longer possible. Yet the two groups remain inextricably entwined and interdependent within the same irrigation scheme.

At the same time, triggered by regional commitments to irrigation and rice production as well as global commitments to end hunger and poverty, investments in irrigation schemes continue. National governments, international development banks and bilateral donors include the rehabilitation of infrastructure, expansion of areas under irrigation, value chain development, farmer organisational development, and improvements in services/support to farmers in their development plans.

High performing investments require a strong participatory analysis of the current socio-economic, physical and environmental situation that involve the future users of the services or interventions. So while there is an urgent need for development actions and investments to address the current shortcomings of irrigation schemes, there is no mechanism to provide potential investors with a locally validated analysis of the actions required to achieve agreed development objectives. This requires joint analysis and a planning process that involves all stakeholders – something a standard project appraisal would not normally undertake.
Piloting new ways of working together

During an initial self-assessment of farmer organisations and management agencies in three large irrigation schemes in West Africa (Sélingué in Mali, Bagré in Burkina Faso and Anambé in Senegal), a number of challenges and opportunities for improvement were identified in the ways (1) farmers identify and articulate their demands for agricultural services, (2) government service providers respond to these demands, and (3) demand and supply for services are negotiated and coordinated. Participants proposed several areas of intervention and a number of specific actions for each, but it soon became clear that these required further analysis and refinement – including prioritisation, justification and definition of roles and responsibilities.

It was therefore agreed by the two key stakeholder groups (scheme managers and farmers) to form, in each site, a working group to review challenges and opportunities, define a shared vision, and then develop actions to overcome the challenges identified making use of existing and emerging opportunities. The working groups included representatives from irrigation scheme management, farmer organisations and ODRS collaborate and communicate properly and regularly. Respect of the scheme management rules, developed in a participatory manner, allows for better water management and reduces conflict in the scheme. Agricultural advisory services that are competent and with adequate means, meet the expectations of producers, who are becoming professionals. Households are well equipped and have irrigated plots, appropriate for their production capacities. Specific support to women and youth contributes to their empowerment and to reducing the exodus to artisanal gold mining."

Box 1. Shared visions for three large irrigation schemes in West Africa as articulated by the working groups

Sélingué, Mali
“Food security is ensured in the Office de développement rural de Sélingué (Sélingué Rural Development Office, ODRS) command area, and producer incomes are sufficient to meet their needs and improve their resilience to climate change. Producers, researchers and ODRS collaborate and communicate properly and regularly. Producers’ organisations are well structured and are functioning normally. Respect of the scheme management rules, developed in a participatory manner, allows for better water management and reduces conflict in the scheme. Agricultural advisory services that are competent and with adequate means, meet the expectations of producers, who are becoming professionals. Households are well equipped and have irrigated plots, appropriate for their production capacities. Specific support to women and youth contributes to their empowerment and to reducing the exodus to artisanal gold mining.”

Bagré, Burkina Faso
“Producers, having become aware of their responsibilities, have restored cohesion and trust between themselves. They have established well organised, competent structures that efficiently manage their assets and the assets of the irrigation scheme. They have acquired skills and capacities for self-promotion that allow them to develop beneficial partnerships. They manage their farms profitably and sustainably.”

Anambé, Senegal
“An agricultural advisory service that has the means and expertise in diverse fields is at the disposal of actors and works on their self-promotion and empowerment, in the spirit of respect for gender equity, good governance and environmental protection.”

The working groups then each held between four and six facilitated meetings over a period of six months to prioritise and elaborate activities within the thematic areas (see Table 1) identified in the self-assessment exercises. Techniques included visioning (participants identifying what they would like success to look like); brainstorming, grouping and ranking of ideas, and small group discussions to elaborate details, with feedback to and discussion with the whole working group.

The resulting action plans are living documents that reflect the priorities of stakeholders at a given point in time. They follow a fairly traditional hierarchical project planning design, with activities to achieve outputs that contribute to wider outcomes and changes. Care was taken to ensure that roles and responsibilities were clear and assigned for each activity, and that budget estimates were included. This made it easier for stakeholders who supported particular elements of the plans to identify activities they would like to follow through.

In order to ensure relevance and buy-in for the actions identified by each working group, a multi-tiered validation process was initiated. This included village meetings and local FM radio programmes to inform farmers about the working group process and its outcomes, followed by facilitated discussions via radio or at village level on specific topics. National level workshops’ were held in all three countries to present the action plans to a wider constituency, members of which could be expected to support components of the plan technically, financially or through advocacy.

Using the action plans to bring about changes

The action plans served two main purposes: (1) the process of developing them improved the relationships between stakeholders significantly, developing trust and a better understanding of each other’s roles. It also built the capacity of participants, in particular amongst farmer organisations, to articulate their needs and negotiate with other actors. (2) The plans themselves are being used as inputs in the
design of interventions by government agencies, donors and civil society organisations working with the irrigation schemes to inform their programmes. In all three sites, scheme management agencies and farmer organisations have included elements of the action plans in their official annual work programmes.

The plans were deliberately designed in a modular way with various thematic work packages to enable participants to use different parts for fundraising or proposal development. This has already shown some success. For example, in Senegal, the farmer federation FEPROBA and the national agricultural research institute ISRA developed a joint research and development proposal addressing some of the productivity challenges identified in the action plan. The proposal was successfully submitted for financing to the National Agro-Food Research Fund.

One unintended impact of the action plan process has been an increasing awareness by farmers of deficits in the governance, communication and management of their own organisations (cooperatives and unions), and the urgent need to reform these to meet both farmers’ demands for fairness and transparency and formal requirements such as the Organisation for the Harmonization of Business Law in Africa (to access credit and other support services.

### LESSONS LEARNED

Arguably, there is nothing particularly innovative about the planning process in each of these cases – it simply brought people and organisations to the table to discuss areas of mutual interest and concerns. More sophisticated assessment and planning processes, such as Participatory Rapid Diagnosis and Action Planning (PRDA) have been piloted and used previously. However, PRDA requires substantially more resources than the process used by GWI.

If all institutions involved had been functioning as intended, there would not have been the need for externally facilitated processes; coordination, joint planning and mutual accountability would happen routinely. However, the reality is that organisational capacity for self-analysis and planning around irrigation schemes is often weak (both amongst farmer organisations and service providers), appropriate processes and systems.

#### Table 1. Key thematic areas of the action plans as developed in the three study sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic area</th>
<th>Bagré</th>
<th>Sélingué</th>
<th>Anambé</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capacity development (of farmer organisations and AAS providers) – technical and institutional</td>
<td>Improve the performance of producer organisations</td>
<td>Farmer organisations are well structured and respond to the expectations of producers</td>
<td>Reinforcement of capacity (for both farmers and service providers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication, consultation</td>
<td>Improve communication</td>
<td>A communication system links the different AAS actors</td>
<td>Consultation, communication and advocacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rice value chain</td>
<td>Improve the rice value chain (production, processing and marketing)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Irrigation management</td>
<td>Improve management of water and irrigation infrastructure</td>
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<tr>
<td>M&amp;E</td>
<td>Help smallholders respect and take ownership of the rules agreed for their irrigation plots</td>
<td></td>
<td>Planning and M&amp;E</td>
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<td>Natural resource management</td>
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<td>Natural resource management</td>
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<td>Access to credit</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Financing system / agricultural credit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women and youth</td>
<td>Women and young people are effectively empowered</td>
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are not in place, and years or even decades of mistrust need to be overcome to foster cooperation. External facilitation plays an important role in catalysing such processes.

The process applied was in no way perfect and a number of weaknesses have been identified by participants and facilitators. These include in particular the poor expression of women’s concerns in the working groups – which reflects the dominant status of the male household head in large irrigation schemes, where plots are usually allocated to men. Women and poorer farmers were disadvantaged in the negotiation processes by their lower levels of literacy and conceptual understanding as well as limited capacity to make their voice heard within a mixed sex working group. The process attempted to combine elements of bottom-up participatory planning with more formal project design, but not all participants were comfortable with this. The facilitators made specific efforts to involve women and less literate participants in the discussions, including through sub-groups, but inevitably some of the more articulate and better educated participants found it easier to speak up. Last, but not least, there were logistical challenges in identifying a mutually convenient time and venue for working group meetings and in maintaining participants’ interest and concentration.

Despite these challenges, all involved agreed that the process was worthwhile, that the resulting action plans are very valuable, and that ideally it should have happened much sooner. It is recommended that participatory visioning, followed by joint planning processes, are incorporated in the programmes of all irrigation schemes, and in particular when contemplating major rehabilitations or other interventions. GWI project time and resources that supported the process appear entirely justified in relation to the large sums of money (running into billions of CFA francs, millions of USD) that are invested in irrigation infrastructure on an annual basis in West Africa.

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2. GWI undertook ex-post evaluations of large dams, which compared the expected returns (including agricultural production) with those actually achieved. See http://pubs.iied.org/G04006 (in French only) for Anambé in Senegal and http://pubs.iied.org/G04007 (in French only) for Bagré in Burkina Faso.
4. Feasibility studies for major investments would usually include an assessment of the economic and financial performance of an investment and its environmental and social impact. However, these assessments are undertaken by external consultants within a relatively short period of time (e.g. a month) and are not normally the outcome of participatory processes involving all stakeholders, including local people / farmers and their organisations.
5. For documentation on the self-assessment exercises in the three schemes and a review of national agricultural advisory systems in the three study countries, see http://pubs.iied.org/G03998 (in French only) for Mali, http://pubs.iied.org/G03999 (in French only) for Anambé in Senegal and http://pubs.iied.org/G03997 (in French only) for Burkina Faso and http://pubs.iied.org/G03998 (in French only) for Senegal.
6. For the full action plans see http://tiny.cc/gwi-selingue-fr (Mali, in French only), http://tiny.cc/gwi-fr-bagre (Burkina Faso, in French only) and http://tiny.cc/gwi-anambe-fr (Senegal, in French only).
7. For the reports of three national workshops see http://tiny.cc/gwi-atelier-burkina (Burkina Faso, in French only), http://tiny.cc/gwi-atelier-mali (Mali, in French only) and http://tiny.cc/gwi-atelier-senegal (Senegal, in French only).
9. The Organisation pour l’Harmonisation en Afrique du droit des affaires (Organisation for the Harmonization of Business Law in Africa, OHADA) is a system of business laws and implementing institutions adopted by 17 West and Central African nations. OHADA rules are increasingly applied to civil society organisations and businesses, including farmer organisations, to ensure a minimum standard of governance, transparency and management. http://www.ohada.com
11. In the region of USD 13,000-20,000 (approximately FCFA 7,600,000-11,400,000 at September 2016 exchange rates) which included the cost of national workshops, plus about 40-50 days of a facilitator’s time.

Notes
This briefing is based on research carried out by GWI West Africa in three existing dam sites and their irrigated perimeters: Bagré in Burkina Faso, Sélingué in Mali, and Anambé in Senegal.