The Business of Extension Reform: Cotton in Mali

Jim Bingen

Department of Resource Development,
Michigan State University East Lansing, Michigan

Edmond Dembèle

Center for Capacity Building Studies and Research in Africa (CERCA)
Bamako, Mali

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Overview of the Reform

The reform of the cotton extension (conseil agricole) program in Mali is driven by a broadly accepted recognition that the traditional cotton extension program had not only become too costly, but was also no longer responding to the production needs of most cotton growers. Moreover, it is generally believed that a significant reorganization of the current cotton extension program is required to deal with continued declines in both cotton productivity and soil fertility. In order to meet these multiple objectives, the extension reform struggles to balance a system that operates in response to growers’ more general agricultural needs and interests and a system that allows the government and the parastatal cotton company to retain its economically strategic interest in controlling the quantity and quality of cotton production as well as cotton marketing.

In other words, the reform program seeks to balance the continuation of publicly funded and delivered services designed to help meet the country’s economic objectives and a privately supported system that is more responsive to growers’ needs.

In order to achieve this balance, cotton extension in Mali will be divided into two types of services. One commercially oriented parastatal company service will be based on a client-supplier contractual relationship with growers for the production and marketing of cotton. A second, independent, private service will offer and be prepared to respond to growers’ broader needs for agricultural information. Clearly this type of reform requires a profound change in both the traditional (“command and control”) role of the encadreur vulgarisateur or moniteur and in the village-level structures or paid individuals who serve as the primary points of contact for these new agricultural agents or counselors.

Background to the Reform

Beginning in the late 1960s, the Malian Cotton Company (CMDT, Compagnie Malienne pour le Développement des Textiles) modeled the well-known encadrement system of agricultural system that was used throughout Francophone Africa. In this distinctly “top-down” and paternalistic system, village-level technical agents guided and supervised the application of specified cultivation and harvesting practices in order to meet specified production quotas and quality standards. The company’s monopoly on cotton marketing facilitated the collection of a grower levy to offset some of the costs of this parastatal system (see Bingen, 1985). This tightly organized system of control over peasant farmers has been a key factor in assuring the company’s success in the international cotton market (Bingen, 1998: 272ff), and in enabling cotton farmers to become some of the most advanced users of agricultural technology in Mali. At the same time, however, it has been known for several years that this system has not successfully addressed the issue of soil degradation nor the concerns of an increasing number of growers who no longer need close supervision of their cotton production and harvesting practices (Bingen et al., 1993; Bingen et al., 1995). Furthermore, for several years both the government and the CMDT have been seeking ways to develop a “win-win” approach to cotton extension, rural development and marketing that would conform to the country’s economic structural adjustment agreements.

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1 The CMDT was created in 1974; its extension approach had evolved from programs directed by the CFDT, the Compagnie Française de Développement des Textiles, (now DAGRIS), since the 1950s.
**Brief Description of the Reform**

The cotton company contract service essentially puts the traditional cotton extension structure on a business footing. Based on contracts negotiated with each village associations (AV), the company will assure the supply of required supplies and equipment and it will continue its monopoly and guaranteed marketing of all cotton. In addition, approximately 9,000 village-based agents of the company will be responsible for collecting and compiling information and data related to cotton production.

The agricultural advisory services on the other hand are designed to respond to help some farmers – especially long-standing and larger cotton growers – diversify their crop production, as well as to promote other income generating activities such as livestock production, or collecting honey and tamarin, as well as village-level food processing. Over time, it is expected that the advice received by these farmers will enable them to become real farm businesses (vérifiables entreprises).

Two principal types of advisory services are planned. The first is based on village-level professional associations that are capable of requesting and paying for specific advisory services from a local agricultural advisory service center (CPS, Centre de Prestations de Services). The second type relies on the capacity of small farmers to hire individual advisors through an NGO or a specialized consulting agency. In addition to dealing with income-generating activities, it is expected that advisors will also be available for “public activities” such as roads, water irrigation schemes.

It is expected that the implementation of this system will occur over a period of five to six years. During this period of time it will be important to: 1) strengthen village-level farmer associations; 2) establish advisory service centers; and, 3) train advisory service village representatives.

**Impact of the Reform**

Three somewhat comparable agricultural advisory projects offer some basis on which to assess the probable impact of the cotton extension reform program.

In 1992 the French Development Agency (AFD) started financing a Rural Management Project (Projet de Gestion Rurale, PGR) designed to strengthen the role of village associations in managing cotton input supply and marketing services through newly created Management Centers (Centres de gestion, CG). After 10 years, 1,634 village associations are organized around 26 CGs that are in turn federated into four regional unions; 40 advisors (with post-secondary diplomas) have received one year of training and each one is assigned to support from 30 to 40 village associations.

Each center receives a direct and fixed allotment from CMDT marketing earnings and each village association as well, is expected to make a formula-based contribution to its center. Many centers are not yet financially autonomous and several have been unable to cover the costs of their advisors. Explanations for these problems vary, but it does seem clear that many cotton growers – even after 10 years of experience remained unconvinced of the value received from paying for this agricultural advisory service. Moreover, the employment statute for these agricultural advisors does not provide social security or retirement benefits and thereby jeopardizes the long-term commitment of these advisors to the program.

In the Office du Niger, the Niono Service Center Project (Projet Centres de Prestation de Services de Niono, PCPS) was launched in 1995 and over 40% of the farmer organizations are now affiliated with a service center (CPS). The Centers are responsible for several managerial and organizational support activities to the farmer organizations, including marketing and contracting for functional literacy training, while the Office du Niger retains control for all technical advisory services related to rice production.
However, the centers are able to cover only 25% of their operating costs and the advisors seek positions elsewhere that at least offer social security and retirement benefits. In addition, relations between the centers and village associations continue to be seriously constrained by the overall low level of literacy among rice growers. Perhaps most important is the perception by many growers that the centers simply represent another way for the Office du Niger to reduce its administrative costs and manage rice production and marketing rather than truly share decision-making responsibilities with them.

Finally, the Private Sector Livestock Support Project (Projet d’Appui au Secteur Privé pour l’Elevage, PASPE) financed by AFD in the Sikasso, Mopti and Keyes regions, focuses on supporting private livestock advisors and facilitating collective purchasing of veterinary supplies and products. Given the long history of fee-for-service arrangements in the livestock sector, it appears that the PASPE system responds effectively to the needs of the participating advisors as well as the livestock producers.

**Is the Reform Sustainable and does it Promise to be Replicable?**

In order to address issues related to the sustainability and the replicability of the cotton extension program in Mali, it is useful to review briefly the somewhat similar, albeit recent, reforms in Bénin, Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire. The economic structural agreements in each country had led to major cutbacks of field-level advisory personnel and a significant re-organization of cotton advisory services.

In Bénin, a professional cotton business association (Association Interprofessionnelle du Coton, AIC) that includes a federation of cotton producers unions (Fédération des Unions de Producteurs au Bénin, FUPRO) and a professional cotton giners association (Association Professionnelle des Egreneurs du Bénin) contracted directly with former cotton technical agents to provide the required advisory services. The advisors follow a Training & Visit methodology and limit their work to cotton production and marketing. This system appears simply to have transferred advisory responsibility from a government agency to the AIC.

Through their National Union of Cotton Producers (Union Nationale des Producteurs de Coton du Burkina, UNPCB), Burkinabé cotton growers are 30% shareholders in the national cotton company, SOFITEX. This share does allow growers some choice in the operation of the company’s field level technical advisory system. In response to grower interest, a grower-company partnership tested a more multi-functional advisory service in 2000. The difficulties encountered in this effort highlight the critical role in training the advisors for their new extension role.

In Côte d’Ivoire the growers are organized through a cooperatives, of which the largest is the Savana Regional Union of Cooperatives (Union Régionale des Entreprises Coopératives de la zone de Savane de Côte d’Ivoire, URESCOS-CI). While this cooperative includes 80% of the country’s cotton growers, all advisory services are still managed by two private and the reorganized state company; all advisory activities focus on cotton.

These reforms in Francophone West Africa appear comparable to other extension reform efforts (see Farrington et al., 2002). While they are relatively recent and thereby provide little evidence for assessing their sustainability, they do help to address two critical questions in extension reform. First, Mali’s reform program retains contractually-based and company-focused program to assure and protect the important role of cotton in generating foreign exchange earnings for the country. Second, a more broadly-oriented and separately financed service could be responsive to the changing livelihood contexts (beyond crop diversification) of those living in the cotton zones (see Farrington et al., 2002).
Lessons Learned

Despite the immediacy of the concerns with reforming and assuring agricultural advisory services – to fill-in the gaps left as a result of personnel cutbacks, to respond to pressing agro-ecological problems, or to maintain foreign exchange earnings – it appears there is no substitute for the longer term investments in human capital. Most reform experiences to date illustrate the fundamental importance of grower literacy and numeracy skills as well as new approaches to training and supporting field-level advisors for a more responsive and accountable approach to agricultural extension.

The employment status for new advisors affects their commitment to working in reformed extension programs.

Most reform programs have not yet become self financing. In some cases this situation appears linked to growers’ concerns about the immediate value received from directly paying for an advisor. The one “privatized” system with livestock producers appears to work since it is based on a concretely identified fee-for-service basis.

Opportunities for direct farmer involvement in the design and management of extension reform programs seem dependent upon the establishment of a corporatist relationship between farmers, government and production and marketing companies. Governments, parastatal and private companies appear more comfortable with “professional organizations” than they do with “claim-making” producer unions.

Guidelines for Others Interested in Replicating the Reform

There are at least five general guidelines that deserve more consideration in both current and future reform initiatives.

Extension reform discussions curiously appear to take place independently of governmental decentralization programs and policies. Progress toward decentralization varies widely across the continent, but more reform programs could begin to identify advisory responsibilities that could be transferred to decentralized local authorities. As different, but related work on farmer associations in Rwanda and Senegal shows, farmer involvement at the local level represents a heretofore untapped resource for rural and democratic development (Bingen and Munyankusi, 2002; N'Diamé et al., 2002).

The critical connection between extension reform and on-going agricultural research needs to be re-established. The critical and continuing contribution of agricultural research to cotton programs throughout West Africa is widely known, but seems to have dropped out of current deliberations on extension reform.

Training and continuing education for farmers and for new advisors deserves considerably more attention in reform programs.

The employment status of new advisors needs to be reviewed and seen to be competitive with alternative employment opportunities.

Most of the current reform discussions rely on a contractual relationship between an agency or advisor and growers as the means to assure accountability between growers and advisors. A more direct policy and program decision-making role might provide an important incentive for grower financial support for extension reform.
References


Biography

**Jim Bingen**, Professor, Department of Resource Development, Michigan State University, has spent more than 30 years working primarily in Francophone West Africa on agricultural and rural development issues. His work is focused on issues of farmer empowerment and agricultural development. During 2000-2001 he was a Visiting Expert with the FAO Rural Institutions and Participation Service where he coordinated a seven-country study of farmer organizations, decentralization and agricultural development policy in sub-Saharan Africa.

**Edmond Dembélé**, Director of the Center for Capacity Building Studies and Research in Africa (Bamako) and a participatory development specialist. He was worked as the head of the World Bank liaison group with NGOs in Bamako and the head of the applied research unit for natural resources NGOs in the Malian CCA/ONG. He currently serves as the principal advisor to the farmer organizations that are participating in the cotton sector reorganization process in Mali.