

Communicating farmers' knowledge: AGRIDAPE and PROFEIS experiences

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Introduction

Chance or complementary effect of a certain awakening, the publication of "Farmers First" in the years 1980, coincides with a new approach of communication for development. Indeed, the paradigm of "communication and development" emerged in the years 1960¹, marked by the waves of independences and the then need to build national identities for the "new countries". That was thus impelled by a concern of mobilizing the instruments of sharing of information within a nation in a downward logic of federation even of standardization of identities, of sharing of national orientations and initiation of the "popular masses" to modernism.

Applied to the agricultural sphere, communication especially consisted, at that time, of informing the populations of the technical and strategic choices of the governments which they were to implement. Thus developed a directing agricultural framing with strict controls of the application of the national instructions and a total ignorance of the potentialities of the producers. In the optics of development, it was a question of making them evolve from a traditional mode of production regarded as late and ineffective to a modern agriculture.

The State, through its research centres, its institutions of popularization, its development companies, is thus the centre of communication. It thus has the quasi monopoly of the supply of information to producers. During decades the relationship between State/Researchers and small producers was characterized by a one-way communication without feedback if it is not for the execution or not of orientations. But the limits of such a model were quickly perceived as of the first years of independence in certain countries. Thus in Senegal, the famous farmers' feeling of general discomfort of the end of 1960 was only the translation of a dissatisfaction of the rural world against a particularly directing and heavy agricultural system.

The various droughts which begun in 1972 and 1980 worsened the crisis. In addition, with the series of structural adjustments of the beginning of the years 1980, the State considerably reduced its framing of the rural world from the access of inputs point of view as well as for the access to agricultural information. The African States have thus to share the fields of agricultural information with all the actors, NGO, private national and international contractors, and others, which could be engulfed in the channel of "less State, better of State"². For the producers, that is a great opportunity of reaching alternative information (and thus technologies and approaches) and to position for a new dialogue with the State and all the "new" actors of agricultural development.

Today, the development of information and communication technologies, the organisational reinforcement of producers and the globalisation of "their struggles" accelerated the multiplication of the sources of information. However, in French-speaking Africa and in Senegal in particular, producers remain above all consumers of information owing to the fact that they generate only very little of it. So in spite of the recognition of the existence of a local expertise, rich of its empirical knowledge, its capacity to innovate and its ductility, the stake of their participation and their taking into account in the generation of agricultural knowledge remains whole.

It is in this axis that we revisit the work Farmer's First published there is about a score of years ago on the basis of various experiences having in common the concern of wanting to position the producer in the centre of decisions and orientations of development concerning him. The experiences of IED Africa through AGRIDAPE and PROFEIS programs will be the illustrations of the initiatives taken within the framework of the reinforcement of the farmer's participation in the generation of agricultural knowledge. In other words, how to communicate farmers' knowledge?

¹ The book « Mass Media and Communication » by Wilbur Schramm (1964) is regarded as the work which systematizes the communication concept of development.

² It is a slogan which, in Senegal, symbolized the end of the welfare state.

The dialogue for the establishment and the reinforcement of synergy is undoubtedly the central aspect of development communication. The conditions of this multi actors dialogue rest on 3 of the key elements of the communication diagram of Shannon and Weaver. It acts first of all on the context which since the years 1980, evolved positively in regards to opening to the farmer's contribution to the generation of agricultural knowledge. Another element is the coexistence of two or several speakers whose relations are marked by the representations that each one has of the other. Lastly, messages or the object of communication which must be modulated according to the "intrinsic" characteristics of each actors and the specific communication context.

Developing a new image of the small producer

The interventionist even coercive and not very open character of the agricultural popularization experiments of the first 20 years of independence, slowed down the introduction of an innovative dialogue between the various actors of the agricultural development. That contributed to crystallize a certain number of stereotyped representations which are factors of blocking. So in a general way, the research institutions are perceived by farmers like holders of a certain "monopoly" of the right and scientific knowledge. On another hand, while jealously preserving their expertise or at least their strategies of ductility, farmers developed a passive acceptance attitude of the often unsuited agronomic models. Thus, a kind of dialogue of the deaf was established which is not favourable to innovation and agricultural development.

Always in the same optics, there are only few information aids supporting an equal exposure of the knowledge from the two groups. Scientists publish in scientific reviews and in a language inaccessible to producers. Producers have their traditional sharing mechanisms with their peers which are rather far away from the spheres of research. It is undoubtedly one of the first interests of the magazine AGRIDAPE French edition of LEISA which offers a space of expression for all.

First of all, it is important to recall that the magazine AGRIDAPE (like all the LEISA magazines, I believe) is more than one simple newspaper of information, it forms part of a voluntary step of promotion of alternative and sustainable agricultural approaches which are rooted in farmer's knowledge and suitable technologies. Each number is a thematic sales leaflet, based on the practical experiences of producers, the purpose of which is to share knowledge with other producers, development agents, researchers and political decision-makers.

Within this framework, one of the contributions of AGRIDAPE is to give another image of the small producer as having capacities of analysis of his problems, of mobilization of his knowledge and complementary search for partnership, finally of design and implementation of effective strategies. Indeed, the experiences diffused in AGRIDAPE have, in general, as entry door: producers supported or not by external organizations. So their diffusion has a positive effect on the multi actors relationship by developing the group which until now tends to be marginalized. An unexpected effect of this choice is the increasing interest of African institutes of research for AGRIDAPE. That is translated initially, by a keen demand of subscription on behalf of the institutes of research, but also of a will to share experiments which they undertook and of which the added value, beyond the innovation itself, is to have known how to associate the communities at the base of the research³.

Box 1: Evolution of AGRIDAPE

2003-2006 was the installation phase of the magazine within the framework of the partnership between LEISA and IIED/IED Africa. It was marked by a development of knowledge of IED Africa on the problems of sustainable agriculture (LEISA), of improvement of the editing capacities (to reach a standard quality at the international level) and of better comprehension of the major constraints of the dissemination of the innovations of French-speaking Africa.

2007-2011 is the strategic development phase of the magazine, where it is really a question of sitting the promotion of sustainable agriculture by reinforcing capacities and the sharing of experiences on various scales establishing national networks.

³ The research centre on Mushrooms/UCAD in Senegal, ISRA, etc.

It should be said that since the years 1980, the institutes of research make the effort of going towards the communities in the analysis of problems and the search for solution and this approach is perceived today as a developing element for researchers. Under the producers angle also, it appears that there is more insurance in the dialogue with the research institutes and decision makers; as proof the standpoint of the farmer organizations in the international negotiations, but also vis-à-vis to major problems like genetic properties, equitable trade, etc. The numbers of AGRIDAPE devoted to the influence of policies and country organizations abound in examples going in this direction.

PROFEIS also forms part of this step of valorization of small producers since it also engages for the recognition of the relevance of knowledge and the innovating capacities of farmers in the process of development. This first year was marked by the identification and the characterization of the innovations in Senegal and Mali. It is a question of better knowing the innovation and the innovator by a detailed and documented description. In Mali, 25 innovations, which relate to millet and sorghum, the fertility of the grounds and agroforestry, were identified. In Senegal, 20 experiments were identified. The number of innovation characterized in the framework of PROFEIS which was implemented in the beginning of the year 2007 is an indicator of existing dynamics.

The work of characterization brought together multi-field teams with farmer organizations and institutions of research. One of the major reports is the "surprise" of the researchers because of the capacities of small producers to analyze their problem and to find solutions sometimes simpler and more accessible than theirs.

Box 2: Specific objectives of PROFEIS

- to reinforce the capacities within the institutions of research, of agricultural council, NGO, community organizations and local communities for an effective support of experimentation and farmer innovation in the management of natural resources;
- to accelerate the propagation of processes of innovation generating good production and centred on the sustainable and environmental conservation of resources towards the farmers low in resources for an improvement of the means of existence and food safety of the households;
- to promote political and institutional arrangements which recognize the relevance of knowledge and the innovating capacities of farmers in the process of development;
- to forge a national and sub regional partnership for the sharing of knowledge, experiences and good practices.

Building messages and sharing spheres

In fact, the capacity to represent the experience lived into language accessible to the various actors is a challenge of development communication. Seen under the angle of small producers, the principal need for the sharing of knowledge is the capacity to be documented and draw from the lessons of the experiences. Indeed, experiments exist in French-speaking Africa, but their horizontal diffusion as well as vertical remains stammering. It often poses the problem of the precise description of the process and its analysis.

However, it is necessary to be able to represent the experiments which they are carrying, it is necessary to make visible one's experiences and one's contribution to the generation of agricultural knowledge. Nevertheless, few organizations, a fortiori of small producers have a system of collection and development of their experiences for lack of time, means and often competences.

Under the angle of the institutions of research also arises the question of the accessibility of information for a public outside the milieu except in the case of popularization where it is in general a question of giving receipts to the small producers without taking the trouble to share the process of research or the elements explanatory. Thus, on all the levels, the capitalization of the experiences is an aspect to be reinforced.

Capitalization is a process of acquisition, collection, organization and analysis of information relative to a given experiment, in order to draw lessons and to share them by using adapted aids.

Thus AGRIDAPE registered in its 2007-2011 program, a section of reinforcement of the capacities in capitalization of the experiences which is based on the development of national networks actors. The methodological workshop which was held in October brought together various actors (research, NGO, FO) who reviewed the approach of capitalization suggested within LEISA's network. The grids of capitalization should facilitate the process of capitalization of the experiments for the exchange since they stress elements of description of the experience, criteria of simple analysis and tracks of development of supports accessible to different public.

The idea of this meeting is to create a framework of training common to different profiles in the agricultural sector and to install a mechanism of capitalization in which the various actors find themselves independently beyond their particular characteristics. The participants in this process reviewed the methodology of capitalization suggested in the light of their practical experiences.

In the same way, the PROFEIS begins its activities by characterization which is a detailed description of the experience. It is arisen from the first characterizations a need to reinforce the questions of analysis and it is within this framework that the first bringing together between the two programs is carried out: the methodological articulation in the capitalization of experiments. Indeed, AGRIDAPE and PROFEIS share these two problematic of the capitalization of experiences and their diffusion through networks of actors on various scales. Thus the organizers of the PROFEIS in Senegal are associated the working group on capitalization.

The first lesson drawn from this experience by the participants, it is that the same grid of analysis can be applied as much to the experiments carried out by the small producers as for those resulting from traditional research. That can appear to be trivial but actually, that is determining in the relationship and the reading that one can have of the other.

Another essential conclusion of this meeting is that capitalization is a process which also requires a dialogue between actors. To take the full measurement of an experiment, to extract the elements from knowledge, to analyze the various results, and to reinforce it is important at one given time to have a scientific and/or practical glance according to the carrier of the experiment.

It is all the interest of the joint experimentation which PROFEIS promotes which, in more of supporting the exchange between actors, offers the conditions of a complementary joint work on experiences. Beyond the sharing of experiences, the idea is to join together complementary competences around an innovation in order to reinforce the analysis, the up-scaling, and on separate activities. Thus a farmer's innovation will be the object of observation and scientific analysis to examine its base, its durability, its conditions of replicability and to implement them with the innovator.

This process is, of course, based on the farmer's conditions with an identification of the constraints relating to the problems or the potentialities offered, starting from characterization. It is about generating concrete questions of research that the farmer asks himself, constraints felt and expressed by the farmer. The experimental protocol is also negotiated starting from criteria formulated in a comprehensible language for the farmer. Each recipient must find there its account and the follow up and the evaluation are also made in a joint way

The joint experimentation is thus a framework of dialogue and training around an innovation, a kind of network of actors around a specific experience in order to produce all knowledge relative to it. This framework widens in the installation of networks of innovators on a local and national scale within the framework of PROFEIS. At this level also the two programs meet insofar as AGRIDAPE offers an international platform to the innovations capitalized within the framework of PROFEIS.

Beyond their specific objectives, AGRIDAPE and PROFEIS share the will to put the farmer at the heart of the process of generation of knowledge and communication of the learned lessons. These projects thus act at various significant points of communication: on the lifting of presuppositions, the analysis and the documentation of the experiences, the installation of spheres of exchanges on various scales. These programs also share the methodological knowledge which they generate in order to be reinforced mutually. It is hence a dynamic of integration of two programs rather innovative which rests on, from the point of view of the methodological approaches, networks of actors, communication aids.

The few lessons learned from the setting implementation of these programs lie first of all in the capacity of farmer contribution in the generation of agricultural knowledge. Their strong ductility, their capacity of adaptation and innovation are elements which consolidate the relevance of these two programs which aim to make emerge this potential of lessons to share. Another major element is that the collaborative work based on levelling relationship between researchers and producers is possible and that it even became a criterion of relevance and of success of the research projects. However, the impact of such processes will depend mainly on their institutionalization through their integration in the processes of formulation of the agricultural policies. However the development of strategies of influence of policies also constitutes another field of communication which calls on tools and techniques of plea to bring the decision makers to understand well the impact that the best taken into account of the processes of innovation set up by the farmers can have on the improvement of the performance of the agricultural sector and the living conditions of the rural populations. However this plea should not be simply limited to communicating results; it must, as the programs PROFEIS and AGRIDAPE try to, be based on an implication of the decision makers in the various stages of the implementation of the programs.