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Changes in agricultural policy and services as a drive for effective extension?

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In many parts of the world, agricultural policy is being restructured to promote changes which advance new mechanisms of financing knowledge-based services. In Bénin, a Project for Restructuring Agricultural Services (PRSA-Bénin) is achieved. This study considers this project journey and the recent changes in agricultural policy. A key concern of the Béninese government in advancing these changes, as argued in this article, is to make it a better policy instrument for more intensive involvement of farmers and other private sector organizations in funding arrangements. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, and reconstruction ex-post of activities undertaken were used to investigate the project journey. Additionally, to support our analysis, we made use of the results of evaluative studies, documents and project reports, and findings of meetings of a specified forum designed for three days. Results show that the perspective and management of agricultural policy and knowledge-based services changed. Several private sector organizations have interests, including farmers' organizations, NGOs, commercial companies and micro-finance institutions. New mechanisms of financing agricultural policy and services are institutionalized. Results also question the conventional understanding and practices of agricultural knowledge-based services.

Key words: Agricultural policy, knowledge-based services, privatization, financing mechanisms, private sector organizations, demand articulation, Bénin.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, there is a change in agricultural policy and services in many parts of the world in response to the rapidly changing conditions of agricultural production chains in competitive global markets and policy debate. Traditionally, agricultural policy have been funded from public sources (including donor funds) and delivered by government organizations in many developing countries. The general trend towards inadequate funding

arrangements and financial constraints, structural adjustment policies, and reduced support for subsidy in many government organizations, have led to the virtual collapse of publicly funded agricultural knowledge-based services (Carney, 1998; Leeuwis, 2000; Zijp, 1998; Rivera, 1996). Furthermore, the limited impacts and high recurrent costs, the unsatisfactory effectiveness and efficiency of conventional public-funded extension and the lack of fiscal sustainability have led to a redefinition of the state's role in agricultural policy and knowledge-based services that could be more efficiently provided by the private sector organizations. Evidently, this poses several challenges with regard to appropriate changes to improve extension effectiveness. In the face of these

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challenges, changes in agricultural policy are being promoted internationally by a range of academies, policy-makers and funding agencies (Feder et al., 1999; Kidd et al., 2000; Neuchâtel Group, 2002). The core is that farmers and other private sector organizations should be involved in funding arrangements, and eventually support the costs of knowledge-based services.

This is equally the case in Bénin where a project, called 'Agricultural Services Restructuring Project' (PRSA-Bénin¹) was to promote changes in agricultural policy and services. The project was carried out by the Béninese government with the technical and financial support from the international institutions supporting agricultural development, in particular the World Bank, the German Government-Funded Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ; ex. GTZ) and the French Government-Funded Agency for Development (AFD). The achievement of PRSA-Bénin, involving how the understanding and practices of agricultural policy changed and how knowledge-based services worked, further highlights the importance of changes in agricultural policy and services as a 'drive' for extension effectiveness. As such, it advanced to establish pluralistic services, with mixed funding and undertaken by both government and farmers' and other private sector organizations. Then, making agricultural sector a better policy instrument for more intensive involvement of farmers' and other private sector organizations will critically depend on the nature and extent of changes in agricultural policy and services that the Béninese government are promoting.

Given this perspective, this article gives an overview of the changes in agricultural policy and services that are being experienced in Bénin. The analysis starts by outlining concerns motivating the arguments for changes in agricultural policy and services in Bénin. The focus is on the history and experience of publicly funded agricultural policy in Bénin, including the organizations that played a major role, the approaches used, and the most important critiques formulated against these approaches. It also briefly outlines the thinking that underlies the current trend toward changes in agricultural policy and services. Second, the major changes that emerged in the PRSA-Bénin journey are described. Some reflections regarding this endeavor are not only important for policy-making in Bénin, but also for most developing countries where similar changes are promoted and, as such, discussed and analysed subsequently in this study. This article concludes with suggestions on knowledge-based service effectiveness.

Concerns motivating the arguments for changes in agricultural policy and services in Bénin

History and experience of publicly funded agricultural policy and services in Bénin

Agricultural policy and services in Bénin trace its origins

to the colonial periods. In these periods, agricultural policy and services were major components of rural development strategy aimed at developing cash crops (such as cotton, groundnut, tobacco, castor, coffee, and palm oil) destined for French industries and other countries in Europe and USA. It was funded through public funds available from the Ministry of Agriculture (MAEP) and French Companies², and delivered through government organizations for this purpose (Daane et al., 1991; Dissou, 1970; Ronen, 1975). The approach used was commodity-oriented model in which a coherent set of interventions to stimulate the development of a particular cash crop is conceived and organised according to French demands. In these processes, agricultural extension aimed to play an intermediary role, which typically involved providing new technologies, and educating farmers about how to apply 'innovations' geared towards increasing agricultural production. There is a continued commitment among the MAEP and French companies to this orientation with the view that provision of farmers with new technologies through mechanisms of extension would enable the Béninese government to increase agricultural production and gain important income, as Bénin is a country almost without mineral resources, and with a weak fiscal system (Allen, 1989; Pickering, 1987).

Some organized attempts to institutionalize extension organizations started after the country became independent in 1960. From the early post-colonial period that ended with the creation of the Regional Action and Rural Development Centre (CARDER) in 1975, the policy discussion emphasized the promotion of food crops (maize, yam, sorghum, rice, etc.) in addition to cash crops production. Farmers' organisations were the primary focus of agricultural extension. During the colonial period, extension efforts remained to typically communicate technical messages and educate the farming communities about how to apply new technologies, based on 'transfer of technology' model (Boon et al., 1997; Von de Luhe, 1991; World Bank, 1992). The late post-colonial period from the 1975s to the promotion of privatization policy in 1990 saw the government embarked on numerous agricultural projects aimed at achieving greater local control over the agricultural sector, and to reduce the extent to which relationships were monopolized by French companies. Support of financial allies was obtained, and considerable funds were provided to the achievement of these projects. A study by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) shows that more than 80% of funds of agricultural projects developed by the government were supported by the international institutions such as the World Bank and GTZ (MDR, 1996).

Publicly funded extension shift from the commodity-oriented model to Integrated Agricultural Development (IAD) in which government organizations provided

several services in all the development blocks. These services included organising farmers into cooperatives, supplying farmers with inputs, organising the primary collection of agricultural products and providing credit facilities to farmers. Some care was taken by the extension authorities to devote attention to farmers' demands and needs. However, extension was treated as public service, with only the government organizations in the battle-field for knowledge-based services funding and delivery (Figure 1); the focus was on spreading the reach of services to all villages in the country through numerous programs. The strategy of intervention used was most definitely top-down. Tossou, (1995) observed that the services provided are a means of negotiating with farmers and in a way, a means of coercion of farmers to comply with the recommendations of extension. A kind of unspoken agreement was established with the farmers.³ By this agreement, the micro-finance institutions³ supplied with loans in kind and in cash, and the extension agents of the CARDERs collect the production, but farmers have to adopt the recommended technologies.

The late post-colonial period has been also marked by the idea of reversing this situation and increasing public services effectiveness. Training and Visit (T&V) System was introduced and promoted as the main extension model with technical and financial supports of the World Bank. In theory, extension agents in the T&V system while devoting considerable attention to making a diagnosis of the farming systems and incorporating feedback from farmers, must attempt to formulate appropriate recommendations and create a coordinated framework for greater impact of the promoted technologies on farmers' livelihoods and economy'. In reality, the T&V system experience in Bénin is that it brought unified command for extension that focus on delivery of selected technologies developed in research centres. In this system, the MAEP and CARDERs' authorities decided on the technologies, which the extension agents were supposed to transfer to farmers. Like previous periods, the government organizations were alone in financing and managing offered services. The extension agents were not expected to make their own decision on what they were transferring and how they operated. The farming communities also had few opportunities to impact the technologies that were proposed to them and the strategy and approach used. These circumstances led the World Bank experts to characterise the Beninese T&V system as an *embryonic* (Montaldi, 1992; World Bank, 1996). Although widely adopted, albeit in modified forms⁴, the withdrawal of the World Bank in the last fifteen years has proved that the Beninese T&V model is not sustainable.

Global trends towards changes in publicly funded agricultural policy and services

However, governments in many developing countries

have traditionally sought to promote efficient and dynamic agricultural development and innovations through publicly funded agricultural knowledge-based services, these policies are now considered poorly suitable to the challenges posed by the agricultural production chains in competitive global markets. As such, many governments have advanced changes in agricultural policy and services in an attempt to develop practical solutions to failures and disappointing effects afore discussed (Bardhan, 2000; Neuchâtel Group, 2002). Changes included the privatization of agricultural input supply, marketing and credit, and knowledge-based services provision. According to many advocates, these changes date back to the widespread imposition of neo-classical economic perspective on State-led interventions by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in the 1980s (Boubakri et al., 2008; Maxwell, 1998; Parkinson, 2009). Privatizations of agricultural input supply, marketing and credit, and knowledge-based services provision have many understandings that differ in theoretical background, originating context and level of analysis. Nevertheless, all are characterized by a greater diffusion of power, which is usually shown by the intensive involvement of farmers' and other private organizations into services delivery that in the past was considered of government organizations. However, several studies indicated that the government has several roles to play without which the promotion of effective services cannot be realized (Feder et al., 1999; Katz and Barandum, 2000; Rivera and Qamar, 2003; Tossou and Zinnah, 2005). These studies asserted that the government should promote decentralizing and contracting mechanisms, rules to control and regulate the implementation of services, advance institutional responsiveness, and monitor and evaluate result quality.

Furthermore, changes in publicly funded agricultural policy and services assign financial decision-making power to farmers' and other private sector organizations, allowing the farmers' and their organizations to select services they seek from effective providers. Advocates put into evidence that funds are, then, assumed to be more likely to be used where they have the greatest impact and, as little as possible, is spent on organizational maintenance (Klerkx et al., 2006; Rivera and Sulaiman, 2009). In addition, competition between private sector organizations is assumed to ensure improvements in the quality and results thereof, and fostering gradual development of a market economy for knowledge-based services delivery. Assumed benefits include also the potential for increasing a demand-oriented character and provider accountability through farmer participation - technically and financially; entail a better services quality and greater flexibility, and better work and management practices. While most of studies reveal that these changes appear to have numerous assumed advantages, they also argue that these policies are associated with several disadvantages. van den Ban

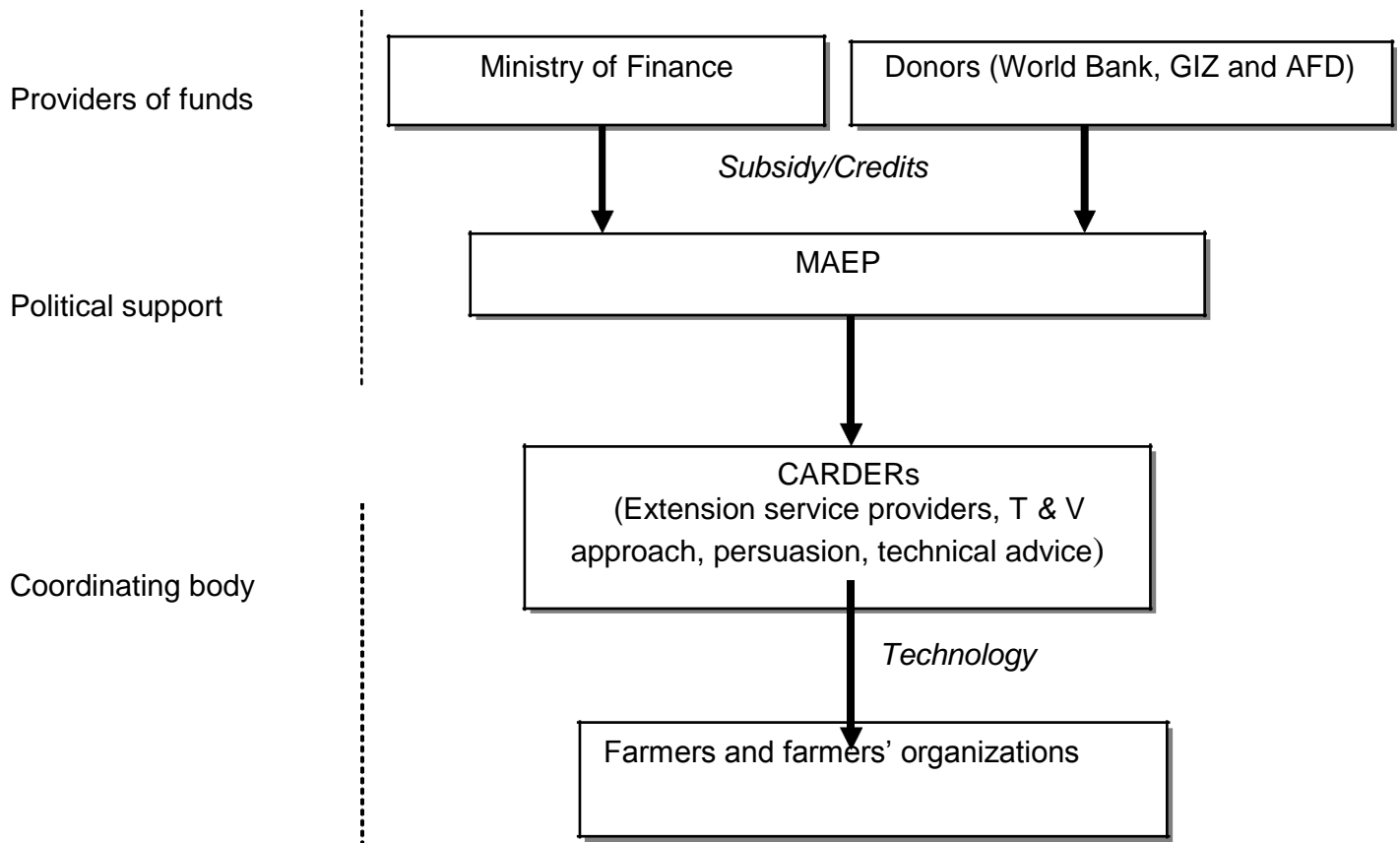


Figure 1. The traditional map of agricultural policy funding and delivering in Bénin.

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(2003) for example, showed that the privatization may lead to underinvestment in knowledge-based services that serve the public needs, while Kidd et al. (2000) found that resource-poor farmers and public interests (such as poverty reduction, food security, environmental protection and sustainable natural resources management and HIV/AIDS) appear to be less or not addressed by the private sector organizations. Studies generally confirm that farmers are willing to financially support public interest issues if the benefits are easily appropriated⁵.

In spite of these disadvantages, changes in agricultural policy and services are being promoted over the past thirty years to help achieve policy goals, as they appear to have the greatest potential for overcoming failures and disappointing effects as aforementioned. As several scholars cited above concluded, the main expectations that underly these changes are (1) reducing the participation of the government organizations in agricultural extension policy and services, (2) increasing involvement of farmers and other private sector organizations in funding arrangements and (3) creating structures which ensure financial sustainability of agricultural extension policy and services. These three expectations which have influenced the promotion of any

given change in publicly funded agricultural policy and services, such a policy, remains effective and popular because it affords farmers' and other private sector organizations the opportunity to partake in funding arrangements and knowledge-based services management. These three expectations are then helpful in the analysis of changes in agricultural policy and services.

Emergence of PRSA-Bénin

This section introduces the PRSA-Bénin, one of the first neoliberal agricultural reform initiatives undertaken in Africa to promote liberalization and privatized services (ADE, 1993; World Bank, 1992). Indeed, the PRSA-Bénin emerged as a result of self-assessment and political debate about the role of the government as a mechanism for improving State-led interventions, and how publicly funded knowledge-based services should be pursued. Since late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a strong drive to promote privatization policy as a strategy to promote agricultural intensification and food crop diversification, and increase the contribution of the agricultural knowledge-based services to the socio-

economic development. This featured prominently in the statements by policy makers as well as in documents of the MAEP and international institutions supporting agricultural development in Bénin. Furthermore, PRSA-Bénin emerged as a response to the global trends towards changes in agricultural policy and services. Moreover, the 1990 national conference forced the Béninese government to take seriously widespread discontent with the impact of the wider liberalization and privatization of agricultural input supply, marketing and credit provision (Gbêhi, 2004; MAEP, 1999; Tossou, 1996a). On May 31 1991, a new Policy Paper for Agricultural Development was elaborated and published. In this policy paper, the government states (MDR, 1992):

'The Republic of Bénin undertook some reforms to allow much greater involvement of farmers and other private sector organizations (NGOs, commercial companies, etc.) in agricultural policy. The government no longer control the prices formation, the supply of agricultural inputs and the commercialisation of produces. The government should withdraw from commercial services (that is, inputs, credit, etc.), privatize enterprises that are operating at loss, and transfer commercial activities to private sector and farmers' organisations. The government should concentrate on public functions, improve state interventions and reduce the costs of the services'.

In the following months, a process of self-assessment took place, and was carried out by the government. Prior to the PRSA-Bénin, the three political commissioners from the MAEP and of the Ministry of Finance established guidelines for the valuation of State-led enterprises. A list of enterprises to be preserved or restructured (not to be privatized) has been drawn. Another list of enterprises to be selected for sale or be liquidated has also been drawn (ADE, 1993; World Bank, 1992). Based on these guidelines, the international development institutions such as the World Bank and other partners (such as FAO and PNUD) began working with the Béninese government. One major action implemented was the project called PRSA-Bénin. Between 1992 and 1997, the members of PRSA-Bénin worked on the changes in agricultural policy and services. Three major changes include the transfer of commercial services to private sector organizations and privatization of agro-industries, the strengthening of farmers' organizations and NGOs, and the institutionalisation of new mechanisms of financing agricultural policy and services.

MAJOR CHANGES THAT EMERGED OUT OF THE PRSA-BÉNIN JOURNEY

Aims and Methods

The PRSA-Bénin journey was documented in several

evaluative studies, documents and project progress reports (ADE, 1993; Boon et al., 1997; Chaboeuf et al., 2004; Dossou-Hessou and Mongbo, 2000; FAO-PNUD, 1990; Floquet and Mongbo, 2000; Gbêhi, 2004; IMF, 1998; MDR, 1993 and 1992; MAEP, 1999, 2004; Mongbo, 1995; Montaldi, 1992; Sogbohossou et al., 2005; Tossou, 1996; Tossou and Zinnah, 2005; van den Ban, 1997; Vodouhè, 1996; World Bank, 1996, 2003). In spite of the available information, pleas have been made for further investigations. Indeed, most of these focused on inputs/output type analysis. While recognizing the importance of studying these dimensions that provide information about the content and direction of the effects of the PRSA-Bénin, this section aims to explore the process nature of changes that emerged from PRSA-Bénin journey. This then feed a discussion about how promoted changes can increase the role of farmers and other private sector organizations in publicly funded agricultural policy and services, and sustain extension effectiveness.

This article draws the findings that are reported and discussed subsequently from a range of sources including key informant and semi-structured interviews, and reconstruction ex-post of activities undertaken. Eventually, interviews and discussions were conducted with four government officials and extension authorities, seven managers of PRSA-Bénin technical committee, six representatives of farmers' organizations, three of commercial companies, two micro-finance institutions and two managers of NGOs. The checklist for these interviews was developed around the actors concerned with the reforms, the majors activities carried out, the promotion of farmers' and other private sector organizations, the new mechanisms of financing agricultural policy and services, and the experienced challenges in PRSA-Bénin journey and developed solutions. Furthermore, results of evaluative studies, documents and project reports were used for background information to triangulate the information and support the analysis.

The transfer of commercial services and privatization of agro-industries, cooperatives and marketing agencies

The findings of reports and interviews with managers of PRSA-Bénin alike revealed that the government privatized state owned agro-industries, cooperatives and marketing agencies. In addition, many commercial services previously assumed by the governmental organizations have been transferred to commercial companies, micro-finance institutions and farmers' organizations. These commercial services included, in particular, the importation and distribution of agricultural inputs (seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides), the provision of credits and marketing of agricultural products (Table 1). Extension authorities interviewed acknowledged this transfer was crucial but difficult. They claimed that one

Table 1. Role and importance of organizations in inputs and credit supply and marketing of produces.

Services	State	Commercial companies	NGOs	Farmers' organisations
Importation of fertilizers and pesticides	+	++	--	--
Distribution of fertilizers and pesticides	-	+	--	++
Production of seeds	+	--	--	++
Distribution of seeds	-	++	+	++
Provision of credits	-	++	++	+
Marketing of produces	-	++	-	++

Note: --: Very insignificant; -: Insignificant; +: significant; ++: Very significant.

major problem that confronted the government remained how to create a workably competitive input markets in such a highly risky sector - as the timely provision of inputs and marketing of agricultural products have been recognized as crucial for effective promotion of privatized extension services. Prior to the assessment of the range of the services to be transferred and the state owned enterprises to be privatised, some 'input supply zones' (ZDIs) were allocated to selected commercial companies - zones which constituted cases of arrangements for local-level provision of inputs and commercialization of agricultural products. Examples of selected commercial companies include Input Distribution Company (SDI), Yara-Bénin, and Marlan's Cotton Industries (MCI). These commercial companies were provided with farmers' organizations inputs and marketing agricultural produces in their allocated ZDIs of jurisdiction. However, the CeRPAs⁶ and the National Agricultural Promotion Company (SONAPRA) still have much of its control, in particular for input quality control⁷.

In all, extension authorities noted that the transfer of commercial services and privatization of agro-industries took place under contrasting views - focused around the legitimacy as they had little intrinsic belief in, and how the process were conducted. Certainly, extension authorities described the discouraging and sometimes frustrating period of transferring commercial services and privatizing agro-industries. During this period, they were reluctant to participate fully in the PRSA-Bénin activities, the provision of inputs and the marketing of products by the commercial companies and farmers' organisations. They explained that the commercial companies were too underdeveloped to replace the facilities currently offered by the CeRPAs and SONAPRA; also, farmers' organisations were not capable of taking over the services that were transferred.

Extension authorities also expressed frustration at the privatization of the micro-finance institutions (such as CLCAMs, CRCAMs and FECECAM), and the transfer of their assets to private sector organizations. Although acknowledging that these micro-finance institutions have given rise to entirely new systems, or remodeled to suit private ownerships, extension authorities felt that the privatization of these micro-finance institutions is at risk of

not supporting technology transfer. The biggest challenge described by the managers of these institutions, however, was operating a credit system in an unfamiliar and difficult environment. Whereas most of them had the experience of conducting competing private bank and have provided security for loans, these micro-finance institutions were established to serve agricultural sector, of which a large part of the portfolio should be allocated to farmers. This means that these micro-finance institutions could not be viable as agricultural credit provisioning is associated with several risks. To overcome associated risks, a particular agricultural credit system called '*prêt à caution solidaire*' was developed. The system was set up as 'group credit' where new credits to a group were conditional on in-timely recovery of repayments on earlier loans. However, this system proved a source of frustration among some representatives of farmers' organisations, many of whom describe some disappointments at not being able to build trust.

However, in spite of these problems, when the transfer of commercial services and privatization of agro-industries concluded in 1996, they were judged to be a success, with the managers of PRSA-Bénin noting that common to the success has been the re-organisation and empowering of the commercial companies and farmers' organisations, and the ability to provide farmers with inputs and other counsel services at that time. Managers of PRSA-Bénin describe the transfer of commercial services and privatization of agro-industries as a valuable reduction of the government staff in extension service delivery, and ultimately the operating costs and salaries. The government staff working had dropped to about 50% - from 765 field agents in 1993 against 400 agents in 1997 and 300 in 2001, while retiring staff was not replaced (Gbêhi, 2004; Sogbohossou et al., 2005). The members of the commercial companies and farmers' organisations acknowledged that they co-finance the promotion of agricultural inputs and participated in extension service delivery. Funds provided serve to recruit and train highly qualified and dedicated field agents, and for equipment and supplies. They noted that there were good reasons to do so, because the promotion of these inputs boosted their business. They

pointed out that they will make profit only if farmers' needs and demands are met.

Strengthening farmers' organizations and local NGOs

Respondents also acknowledge that apart from the transfer of commercial services and privatization of agro-industries, cooperatives and marketing agencies, there are some activities achieved to strengthen farmers' organizations and local NGOs. First was the institutionalization of farmers' organizations (called GVs⁸) for inputs supply and marketing of agricultural products. In spite of the enthusiasm generated at the inception, the process of organizing these groups into legally constituted organizations (that would provide them with the legal status, authority, and operational capacity to enter into arrangements with the government, commercial companies, and NGOs), progressed more slowly than hoped or planned. The members of PRSA-Bénin were explaining through the suspicious relationships that have been developed between the GV and the CARDERs and the SONAPRA during the early and late post-colonial periods as determinant; yet at the same time the PRSA management worked with the GV leaderships and, in 1993 facilitated the creation of a national federation called Federation of Producers' Unions (FUPRO). A repeated comment from both the members of PRSA-Bénin and of farmers' organizations alike revealed that the process included technical and financial assistance, institutional development, and organizational capacity building, so that overall levels of promoting farmers' organizations might be described as having been consolidated. This federation is made up of a general assembly, a managerial committee, and a board of managers. Although these were supposed to be controlled by elected bodies, the reality is that they were managed by retired staff of CeRPAs and/or by young university graduates because they know 'how to read and write'.

At the end of 1990 and early 2000s, the number of national federations operating grew from one to a dozen, both to share experience and lobby the government for a more hospital policy framework. The managers interviewed explained that the emergence and performance of national federations were the consequence of the increase of cotton production. Analysis of project reports revealed that cotton production increased from 52,000 tons of cotton lint in 1990-1991 to 152,000 tons in 1997-1998 and 330,000 tons in 2002-2003 (MDR, 1992; MAEP, 1999, 2004). This increased the commercial services farmers' organizations achieved, and also the financial resources gained. In addition to the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of agricultural projects, national federations provided a wide range of support services including the provision and distribution of inputs to farmers, and the commercialization of agricultural produces. They influenced and controlled all

aspects related to the management.

Second, the period from 1990 also witnessed several agricultural projects exemplified in unprecedented deluge of NGOs. Some of these are called foreign (or international) NGOs (such as USAID, Plan-Bénin, Africare, Sasakawa Global 2000, Oxfam Quebec, SNV, AFVP, etc.), as they are registered under the jurisdictions of other countries, mostly Europe and America. These NGOs largely rely on contributions of money, time and goods from individual contributors. Archive analysis categorized these NGOs in two groups according to their objectives and motivations. Some could be treated as church related organisations which for religious reasons aim to improve the welfare of poor people. Others consisted of individuals who for political reasons help to increase the power of low status people in order for them to be able to influence their own future. In addition, a frequent comment from both the authorities of the Ministry of Planning and managers of NGOs alike was that these NGOs fund and provide services, thus supplementing government organizations. Comment also revealed that these NGOs develop partnerships with the government organizations, and thus complement the government in the funding and provision of services.

Others are national NGOs initiated by Bénin citizens and registered in State books for the purpose of receiving government and/or donor funding. Studies by the Ministry of Planning and Development estimate and identified more than 7.500 NGOs in 2007. Like farmers' organizations, national NGOs were staffed by retired extension agents of the CARDERs or by young university graduates. In one sense some national NGOs were less beholden to government agents, and thus free to seek technical and financial assistance from other sources. In another sense, however, others were left with few options, many existing in name only. Many respondents remarked that several factors contributed to the development of the national NGOs in Bénin. Some attributed this to the end of the Marxist-Leninist regime in 1990, the regained right to form associations and the Structural Adjustment Programmes. Others argued that at the end of the 1980s, national NGOs attracted attention as potential services providers because of the global changes in international development policy. As government organizations failed in provision of effective agricultural extension, national NGOs were seen as the most appropriate (Alex et al., 2004; Bierschenk, et al., 2001; Floquet and Mongbo, 2000; Uphoff, 1993; Tossou and Zinnah, 2005).

Rearticulating new financing mechanisms at a national forum

The meetings that took place in July 1997 represent a turning point in the achievement of the PRSA-Bénin. The encounter brought together representatives from the government, farmers' organizations, NGOs, commercial

companies and micro-finance institutions. In addition to the meetings on the resources that were organised on how outputs and lessons from the PRSA-Bénin would actually be achieved, two sets of negotiations took place including formal discussions among government and private sector organizations; and subsequently, in this regard, there was a meeting with the managers of the PRSA-Bénin on the development of initial broad-based platforms regarding the future of agricultural policy and services. It is worth highlighting the main theme that came out of these meetings because it conveyed the central argument and understanding of the different participants. This theme is 'financing mechanism' of agricultural policy and services. The point highlighted by the representatives of government made a deliberate move away from a monopoly by the government organizations. As one reported:

Two broad-based platforms as private right organizations with expanded power to administration board were suggested during the meetings. One, at the MAEP level, comprising FUPRO, SDI, FECECAM and MAEP, should deal with the conception and coordination of policies, regulation and control of agricultural services, monitoring and evaluation of agricultural policies. It was proposed that FUPRO and SDI should keep 50% of the share, against 50% for the government. The ultimate decision-making authority rests with some local bodies institutionalized at the CeRPAs level. These bodies should ensure financial support that guides the actions of a range of farmers' organizations, NGOs, commercial companies, and micro-finance institutions working in the ZDIs.

However, interviews with the representatives of FUPRO revealed that while the proposed platforms proved a source of enthusiasm, they also called to attention the mistake in embedding farmers' organizations within private sector organizations, and treating them in the same way as SDI. They felt that if by reference to the proposed mechanisms of financing agricultural policy and services, they could be treated as equals in terms of co-design management, monitoring, evaluation and decision making within the two levels of financing mechanisms, then functional platforms were more likely. On the other hand, the proposed platforms proved a considerable source of contestation among the commercial companies, many of whom lamented that the mechanisms opposed their long-standing activities in the ZDIs, and further argued with reference to the weak relationships the government organizations have developed with them during the past five years. Some commented that the government organizations wonder what interests lead the commercial companies to want to take over the

opportunities and contribute to agricultural policies; how the government organizations think to establish collaborative relationship with the commercial companies, they claimed. The response to these inquiries, they believe, is the key for establishing appropriate *win-win* partnerships.

Interviews with extension authorities revealed, however, that developing *win-win* partnerships with the commercial companies was the major reason they became involved in the meetings, many also highlighted the negative aspects of the commercial companies as merchants, with financial power, and buying almost the whole production often at a price below the production cost, and selling it sometime at a price a tenfold higher. In this sense, extension authorities responded to their experiences with commercial companies who provided farmers with inputs and credits, and collected the outputs. The arguments developed by extension authorities were constantly repeated during the meetings, and supported by the representatives of farmers' organizations:

Financial resources are fundamental to the design and implementation of information service components (exchange visits, training and advices) which are essential elements in promoting certain technology development components (seeds, inputs and credits). As such, agricultural knowledge-based services should be recognized as part of the business of the commercial companies and considered as the only means of taking on the challenge of defining the levels of interactions. Financial resources should be provided in all its forms (cash or in nature).

Despite these tensions, when the meetings were concluded, the negotiations were judged to be a success, with all respondents noting that the meetings and discussions were determinant in the establishment of a comprehensive framework as originally intended. A repeated comment from both government authorities and representatives of farmers' organizations and commercial companies alike highlighted that this has been a positive experience and that it was suggested the creation of broad platforms for financing agricultural policy and services where the farmers' organizations and commercial companies should play increasing roles. This meant that any agricultural extension service provides for and involves expertise of the commercial companies and farmers' organizations (Figure 2). The representatives of the commercial companies agreed that 1 to 1, 5% of the total selling price of inputs would be destined to fund agricultural knowledge-based services. In addition, other sources of funding were forecasted and included donors, international NGOs, religious organisations, farmers' organisations involved in the distribution of inputs and the commercialisation of cotton and farmers benefiting

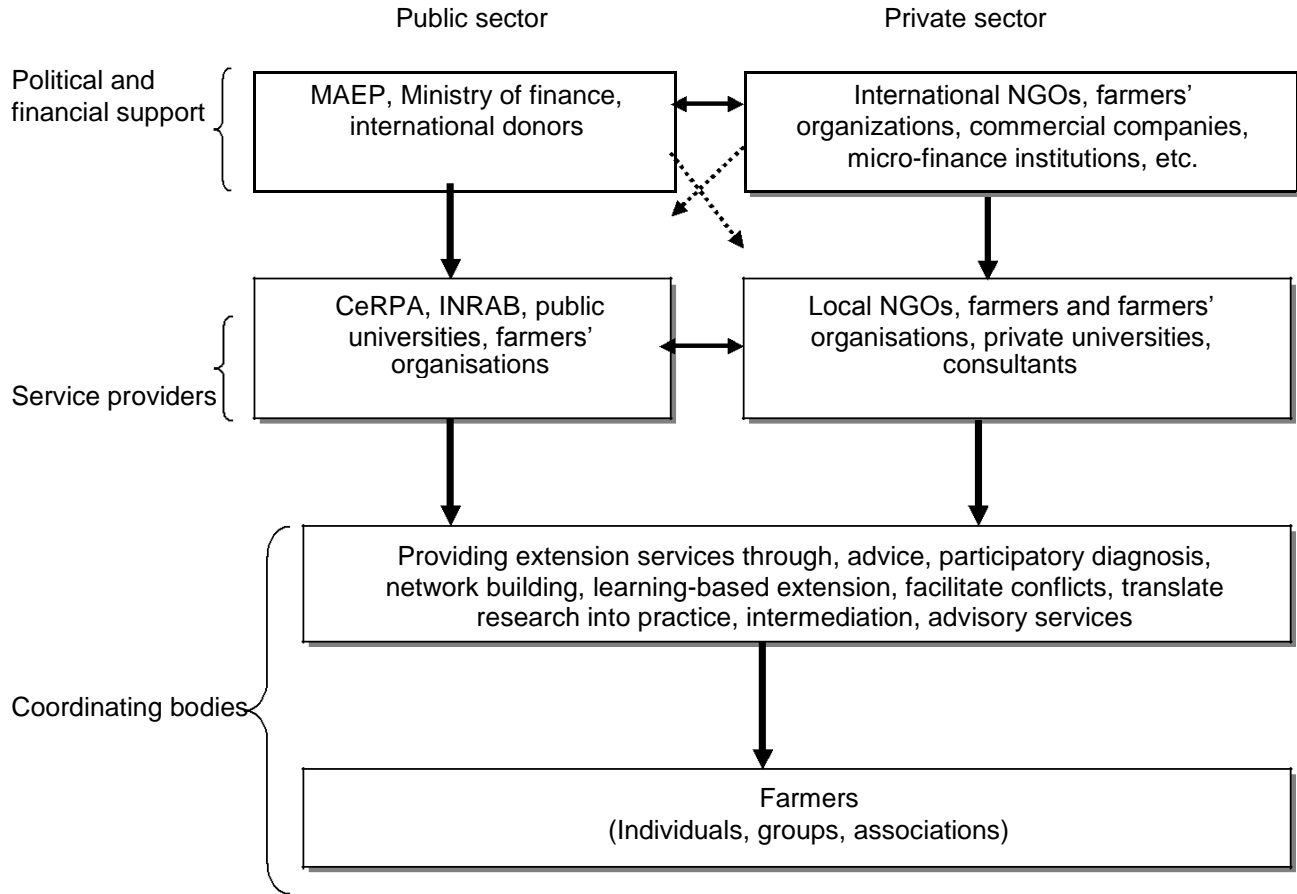


Figure 2. The new map of extension services funding and delivering in Bénin. Source: Authors.
 Figure 2: The new map of extension services funding and delivering in Bénin

knowledge-based and advisory services. The representatives of farmers' organizations expressed, however, frustration at the gradual paying service delivery fees: 25% in the first year, 50% in the second year, 75% in the third year and 100% from the fourth year onwards. They claimed that many farmers (in particular women and young) are not able to afford so.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The analysis of the findings aforementioned makes clear that the three expectations asserted by many advocates of privatization policy have been fulfilled, although in the course of time responsibility, some activities achieved seem not to receive the support of all stakeholders. Nonetheless, we have seen that the major changes that emerged out have resulted in a reduction of the role of the government organizations, and increasing private sector organizations participation in financing and delivery of knowledge-based services. Thus, changes in agricultural policy and services seem to have been reasonably advanced by stakeholders in Bénin. However, a number of overall conceptual and practical lessons with

regard this endeavour can be derived from the analysis.

Agricultural extension effectiveness requires concerted efforts and commitments between different stakeholders

One of the key conclusions from the past experience is that the Béninese government was alone in funding and delivering extension, communicating new knowledge and management practices developed in research institutions, providing the farming communities with inputs and credits and marketing agricultural products. However, services delivered accountability is upwards to the government organizations while farmers' and other private sector organizations are excluded from agricultural policy and services management. This picture is not unique to Bénin (Anderson and van Crowder, 2000; Davidson and Ahmad, 2002; Feder et al., 1999; Sulaiman and van den Ban, 2003). The desire to reverse this situation had led the government to undertake important changes in agricultural policy and services. In particular, many services previously provided by the government organizations were transferred to farmers' organizations,

commercial companies and micro-finance institutions. Likewise, these private sector organizations were performed to financing and/or delivering knowledge-based services. In this, agricultural extension involves a range and varied services that are undertaken by several stakeholders with different motivations and incentives. Each stakeholder brings some resources (financial, economic, cultural and symbolic) and expertises that are valuable for the others and for the common interest, and for the effectiveness of extension services. On the basis of the findings aforementioned, four stakeholders are of central importance.

Government organizations assuming exclusive and non-exclusive functions: Contrary to what happened in other countries⁹, the Béninese government extension organizations (e.g. the CeRPAs, INRAB, SONAPRA, etc.) were not privatised. However, their role is considerably reduced. Interviews with the extension authorities revealed that the government extension organizations now emphasized more on so-called 'exclusive tasks' (conception and coordination of agricultural policy, regulation and quality control of extension services, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of agricultural projects, promotion of agricultural research and extension reforms) and 'non-exclusive tasks' (training and advisory services). The core as suggested by many scholars is that of 'enabling State' which carried out those tasks that the private sectors (or hand-in-hand) could not, supports knowledge¹⁰, market development and balances its budget¹⁰. A focus on these tasks was seen to afford the interests of the

commercial companies, NGOs and farmers' organizations that participation in the promotion of new mechanisms of financing agricultural policy and services would benefit directly their goals and business.

Commercial companies and micro-finance institutions advising the farming communities about what inputs and credit options to use: Since the achievement of the PRSA-Bénin, it has been observed that the commercial companies are not only co-financing agricultural extension services delivery but also demonstrating the use of agricultural inputs such as high-yielding seeds, insecticides, pesticides and chemical fertilizers (Gbêhi and Verschoor, 2012; Sogbohossou et al., 2005; World Bank, 2003). Gbêhi and Verschoor (2012), for example, asserted that the commercial companies and micro-finance institutions were often invited for village participatory diagnosis, the identification and analysis of technologies likely to fit the farming communities' demands and the planning, execution, monitoring and evaluation of the experimentations of the technologies. When judged by the testimonies of the managers of the government projects, national NGOs and farmers' organizations, the funds that the commercial companies provided served to recruit and train highly

qualified and dedicated field agents, and for equipment and supplies. Interviews with the managers of the commercial companies reveal that there were good reasons to do so, because the promotion of agricultural inputs boosted their business. The managers of the commercial companies claimed that they will make profit only if farmers' needs and demands are met. By co-financing the information and advisory services provisioning, they were able to develop partnerships with the government organizations, national NGOs and farmers' organizations, thus affording agricultural extension in a context where effective services would otherwise be constrained by mistrust and conflicts.

Farmer organizations lobbying for research that fits its members' needs and demands: Farmers' organizations are also presently involved in agricultural input supply, marketing and credit, and knowledge-based services provision. Many leaders of farmers' organizations characterized this as a space to consolidate the position of farmers, arguing, for example, that farmers' organizations stood for their members in a conflict with the government over the regulation of the price of inputs and tax assessment, and participated and provides resources (such as labor, lands, seeds and fertilizers) in the design and implementation of research projects. They claimed farmers' organisations encompassed support to farmers in fields by organising the provision of knowledge and information and other services such as inputs and credits, as they allow for marketing issues and economic of scale in extension services delivery and provide mechanisms for farmers to express their demands feed-backed to research authorities.

NGOs brokering and linking farmers to input and output markets and value chains: Like farmers' organizations and commercial companies, NGOs are viewed taking on an increasing role in agricultural policy and services in Bénin, as their staff are often better trained and motivated to provide support services that farmers and their organisations need. Much literature suggests that NGOs are either service providers that delivers direct knowledge-based services to farmers, or institution builders promoting farmers' organizations, increasing farmers' ability to access inputs and credits for agricultural production, and market for their produces, and strengthening other institutions to provide services. In addition, NGOs are flexible to work with the farming communities. Alsop et al. (2000) made similar reflections, noting the NGOs themselves perceive that their strength lies more in mobilizing farmers to express their demands and needs for agricultural development and innovations.

In essence, we argue that making agricultural policy and services more effective require concerted efforts and commitments between these different stakeholders. This calls into question the relevance of the classical

understanding and practices of extension. In each case of these stakeholders, the resources and expertises to be provided are challenged by new mechanisms of financing agricultural policy and services. This is best summed up by the national coordinator of the CeRPAs. He explains:

‘Commercial companies and international NGOs financed agricultural extension through contracting out arrangements, or cost-sharing with government. Farmers’ organizations also share the costs of knowledge-based services through required financial contribution. Some service charge costs were also added to inputs, and levies on select crops and commodities commercialisation. Therefore, agricultural services hopefully means that the government, international NGOs, commercial companies and farmers’ organizations overcome the lack of financial supports that is at risk of challenging. Several managers of local NGOs and farmers’ organizations were trained to deliver services, and most of this expertise was in villages, which has certainly helped to increase the long-term benefits. Local NGOs and farmers’ organizations have the highest priority as new important service providers because they are considered to have comparative advantage in implementing extension services’.

In retrospective interviews, many representatives of farmers’ organizations comment favourably on, concluding that the experiences with the new arrangements afforded them the change to build networks and negotiate with NGOs, commercial companies and micro-finance institutions, the provision of information, knowledge and other services (seeds, chemical fertilizers, pesticides and credits) they seek. They contended that these stakeholders have become involved in the village participatory diagnosis, the identification and prioritisation of problems farmers were experiencing and the identification and analysis of the different technologies to solve these problems, the clarification of farmers’ demands, the planning, monitoring and evaluation of extension activities. Rivera and Alex (2004) and Goovaerts et al. (2005) made similar observations, concluding that these systems allowed services delivered to be tailored to the needs and constraints of the farming communities. However, several studies (Bennett, 1996; Dinar, 1996; Katz and Barandum, 2002; Kidd et al., 2000; Hanson and Just, 2001; van den Ban, 2003) and also the findings aforementioned, show that the commercial companies funded extension where there was a clear direct financial benefit for their business, but there was no evidence that this resulted in fundamental longer change in their values. When understood in the manner analysed in this article, extension is likely to produce similar results, but little

change to the underlying motivation and incentives of the commercial companies and farmers’ organizations. This is ultimately unlikely to be sufficient to promote the kind of effective change in agricultural policy and services advocated in the discourses on the PRSA-Bénin, and literature of privatization policy worldwide.

The establishment of broad-based platforms should sustain the new financing mechanisms

In light of the discussion afore reported, the analysis suggests additional impetus. The extension authorities interviewed acknowledged that the success of the changes in agricultural policy and services was contingent on farmers’ and other private sector organizations possessing a strong drive to challenge the new financing mechanisms. Several authors hold the argument that an established broad-based platform is often demonstrative of an aspiration to create an enabling environment for the farmers’ and other private sector organizations to choose their own way forward, as platform generally built with the intention of articulating practical solutions to challenges that publicly funded agricultural policy were coping with. As such, platform provides the basis for productive relationships between those engaged (Feder et al., 2001; Sulaiman and Hall, 2004; van den Ban, 2005). The success to establish such broad-based platforms resulted in satisfaction among representatives of government organizations, and constituted a major incentive to the subsequent involvement of farmers’ and other private sector organizations in financing mechanisms. This was particularly evident in the experience afore documented where the meetings dedicated represented common ground for the representatives of both government and commercial companies and farmers’ organizations, many of whom hold markedly different motivations and incentives for the establishment of such broad-based platforms. From the perspective of the government, broad-based platforms should provide both services agenda and funds in offering these services. As the national coordinator of the CeRPAs contends:

‘What we need actually are functional platforms that have the capacity to assemble fund and service providers and to provide viable options to publicly funded agricultural services. The platforms should have the drive to foster private investments in effective agricultural policy and services; possibly is the secret behind promoting effective knowledge-based services. If the established broad-based platforms do not have the drive, then nothing government, farmers’ and other private organizations do is likely to work; we get platforms of committed fund providers who want to achieve the five policy objectives assigned by the government in restructuring agricultural services’.

However, an understanding of the expectations of the managers of the commercial companies reveals aspiration different from those of the government extension authorities. In retrospective interviews, managers of the commercial companies were critical of the emphasis that the government placed on being the policy objectives, which do not result in their direct and private benefits. They thought that motivations and incentives must be oriented toward fitting to 'market development' for agricultural inputs in select crops and commodities. This has significant implication for the relations likely to lead government extension authorities and commercial companies (and certainly other private sector organizations) to set-up broad-based platforms for all to partake in funding and delivering services, share risks, costs and resources which are concerned with these services, and ultimately, for the success of those policies for which such platforms are established. Hall (2006) made similar observations noting that both parties must have an interest that overlaps. This does not mean that goals or outputs need to be the same for each sector - the commercial companies may seek increased market share while the government may want progress in achieving the policy objectives, and ultimately sustainable agricultural development and innovations.

The established broad-based platforms also proved crucial in terms of sustaining the sources of financing agricultural policy and services. However, interviews with the members of farmers' organizations revealed that few saw that sustained funds were highly important, with most contending that sustained funds were a minor problem to which their own financial contributions would be negligible. Certainly, the perspectives of the members of farmers' organizations are typical of those associated with many high transaction cost problems, which are viewed as only problematic at the marginal and high risk areas. Such costs require overcoming market failure in the marginal and high risk areas, and attempts to address underinvestment, negative externalities, asymmetry information and unequal access are unlikely to yield meaningful improvement. The major difference between the expressed motivations and incentives between farmers' and government organizations was that the latter saw the established broad-based platforms as determinant components in the success or otherwise of the promotion of effective knowledge-based services. From this perspective, the established broad-based platforms are essential in attempts to address such problems. The inexistence of platforms in this or similar situation will inevitably constrain the ability of those involved in the promotion of the knowledge-based services to design and implement effective responses to the high transaction cost for agricultural policy. To this extent, we agree with the findings of Sulaiman and van den Ban's (2003) assertion that publicly funded agricultural policy could considerably improve its effectiveness through building partnerships with many of

these new private sector organizations that have emerged in the extension scene in the last two decades.

Conclusion

As the findings presented above indicated, the Béninese government privatised state own enterprises and transferred commercial services delivery to farmers' and other private sector organisations. This has made some institutional changes built on existing structures, in particular the reduction of the government ownerships, and the emergence and performance of private sector organizations. Béninese government also moved from the conventional mechanisms of financing agricultural policy and services in which its organizations were alone. These changes in the way agricultural policy and services are financed and delivered suggest renewing the way extension is understood and practised. While traditionally publicly funded extension is expected to play an intermediary role between science and farmers, the analysis above indicated that the knowledge-based services that are currently advancing may consist of many stakeholders who provide resources and expertises of various kinds. What we see then is that publicly funded policy acquired new accoutrements, with an emphasis on the involvement of farmers' and other private sector organizations in extension management. In line with other findings (Gbêhi and Verschoor, 2012; Katz, 2006; Leeuwis, 2004; Sulaiman and Hall, 2004), we may conclude that access by farmers to a range of extension services including input and output markets should become effective. However, this conclusion reflects new challenges and the issues to promote effective funding mechanisms to make services delivered more effective and demand-oriented.

In spite of these, the findings in this article have important implications for narrowing the increasing divergence between the government and the farmers' and other private sector organizations in policy formulation and priority setting on the ground. On the one hand, sufficient efforts should be made by the government organizations to establish a dialogue with farmers' organizations and other stakeholders deemed involvement necessary and justified in the promotion of the new mechanisms of financing agricultural policy and services. On the other hand, and most important, changes may be needed at the level of the farmers. In particular, they will have to change their dependant attitudes *vis-a-vis* government organizations owing to the conventional financing mechanisms, and take opportunity of and become clients rather than beneficiaries. In so doing, they will have to positively affect the delivered extension services and improve innovation effectiveness.

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End note

¹ See Gbêhi (2004); ADE (1993); Montaldi (1992); Sogbohossou et al. (2005); World Bank (2003 and 1992).

² French companies were the Compagnie Française pour le Développement des Fibres et Textiles (CFDT) and the 'Société d'Aide Technique et de Coopération' (SATEC). Extension agencies such as SA (Service d'Agriculture), SMDR (Société Mutuelle de Développement Rural) and SONADER (Société Nationale pour le Développement Rural) were clear examples of the French advisor's commitment in extension.

³ These included the National Agricultural Credit Bank (CNCA), the Regional Credit Unions (CRCAMs) and the Local Credit Unions (CLCAMs). In 1988, these banking systems collapsed prematurely. Doligez et al. (1993) have shown that the bankruptcy can be attributed to several factors: a particularly difficult economic environment, notably the crisis in the main agricultural and agro-export subsectors and problems throughout the banking sector; interest rates that were much too narrow due to government restrictions; the time-lag between mobilizing deposits and disbursing loans, and lax management of loans, resulting in considerable loan delinquency; operating costs that were much too high relative to limited and uncertain revenue; management by staff who had little incentive to focus on profitability, but who were guaranteed high salaries in accordance with favourable banking labour convention.

⁴ In reality the experience of T & V system in Bénin was limited to the first four of the six principles. In addition, the process was top-down (Gbêhi and Leeuwis, 2012).

⁵ Other assumed disadvantages with regard to the overall functioning of privatized extension systems are well discussed by Bebbington and Sotomayor (1998), Hanson and Just (2001), Heemskerk et al. (2008), Leeuwis (2004) and Rivera (2002).

⁶ This was called Centre d'Action Regionale pour le Développement Rural (CARDER). But the name changed in 2004 to Centre Regional pour la Promotion Agricole (CeRPA) in order to take into account policies for promoting production and marketing chains of food and cash crops, and to get in line with the government's

decentralization policy. In 2003, districts in Benin became Communes with the elected local governments.

⁷ The provision of these agricultural inputs was under the control of the government through SONAPRA (Société Nationale pour la Promotion Agricole in French). SONAPRA was responsible for the import and distribution of these inputs. Thus it had a monopoly in the markets for agricultural inputs. As was the case of improved seeds, these monopoly powers were transferred to private sector and farmers' organisations.

⁸ The Groupements Villageois (GVs) were originally established in each village in the late 1960s as marketing cooperative. Until the liberalization in 1990, the GV's were tightly controlled by the government.

⁹ See e.g. Curre et al. (2002); Hoffmann et al. (2000); Marsh and Pannel (2000); Proost and Duijsings (2002)

¹⁰ See e.g. Alex et al. (2002); Bennett (1996); Carney (1995); Harris-White (1995); Hubbard (1995).

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