

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



KEY POINTS

- Developing a vision for a large scale irrigation scheme (and the agricultural services required to make it work) that is shared by all stakeholders is paramount to providing a sound basis for productivity, farmer empowerment, sustainability and improved livelihoods.
- The process of developing a shared vision, followed by a facilitated problem analysis and agreement on specific actions, develops the capacity of participants and builds trust between them.
- Well-developed action plans that emerge from representative and participatory negotiation processes are a sound basis to inform donor and government investments and day-to-day scheme management.
- A neutral and trusted facilitator can mobilise stakeholders and mediate between different groups, as well as ensuring that everyone has a say.

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

Why the need for action plans?

All is not well with West Africa's large irrigation schemes – yet they are an important instrument in achieving the ambitious food security plans of national governments, as expressed in the regional rice initiative¹. Producing large surpluses of rice to meet growing domestic demand and reduce dependency on imports is high on government agendas in the region, and investment in large scale irrigation is intended to achieve it.

However, the performance of irrigation schemes has not been as expected, with yields below those projected during the design of the schemes², and high operational costs – partly due to poor management, including insufficient maintenance of infrastructure. Smallholder farmers cultivating the irrigated land often struggle to make ends meet, as production costs (including labour) are high and increasing, whilst prices for paddy are stagnating. Farmers blame poor agricultural advisory services (AAS) along the value chain for low productivity and profitability, and point the finger at the government agencies (“offices” in French) managing the schemes for not fulfilling their role. The *offices* in turn blame farmers for not following the agricultural calendar and neglecting their share of canal maintenance. In some cases, the relationship between farmers and their organisations on the one

hand, and irrigation scheme managers on the other has deteriorated to the extent that effective communication is no longer possible. Yet the two groups remain inextricably entwined and interdependent within the same irrigation scheme.

At the same time, triggered by regional commitments to irrigation and rice production as well as global commitments to end hunger and poverty³, investments in irrigation schemes continue. National governments, international development banks and bilateral donors include the rehabilitation of infrastructure, expansion of areas under irrigation, value chain development, farmer organisational development, and improvements in services/support to farmers in their development plans.

High performing investments require a strong participatory analysis of the current socio-economic, physical and environmental situation that involve the future users of the services or interventions⁴. So while there is an urgent need for development actions and investments to address the current shortcomings of irrigation schemes, there is no mechanism to provide potential investors with a locally validated analysis of the actions required to achieve agreed development objectives. This requires joint analysis and a planning process that involves all stakeholders – something a standard project appraisal would not normally undertake.

Piloting new ways of working together

During an initial self-assessment of farmer organisations and management agencies in three large irrigation schemes in West Africa (Sélingué in Mali, Bagré in Burkina Faso and Anambé in Senegal), a number of challenges and opportunities for improvement were identified in the ways (1) farmers identify and articulate their demands for agricultural services, (2) government service providers respond to these demands, and (3) demand and supply for services are negotiated and coordinated⁵. Participants proposed several areas of intervention and a number of specific actions for each, but it soon became clear that these required further analysis and refinement – including prioritisation, justification and definition of roles and responsibilities.

It was therefore agreed by the two key stakeholder groups (scheme managers and farmers) to form, in each site, a working group to review challenges and opportunities, define a shared vision, and then develop actions to overcome the challenges identified making use of existing and emerging opportunities. The working groups included representatives from irrigation scheme management, farmer organisations

(both men and women), research and advisory services organisations, local government and other service providers, who were proposed by their respective constituents. During their first meeting, the working groups agreed on a vision for their respective schemes (see Box 1) and an agenda for subsequent meetings. The sessions were facilitated by a GWI staff member who was known by and had gained the trust of all participants through previous research in the sites.

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

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

In order to ensure relevance and buy-in for the actions identified by each working group, a multi-tiered validation process was initiated. This included village meetings and local FM radio programmes to inform farmers about the working group process and its outcomes, followed by facilitated discussions via radio or at village level on specific topics. National level workshops⁷ were held in all three countries to present the action plans to a wider constituency, members of which could be expected to support components of the plan technically, financially or through advocacy.

Using the action plans to bring about changes

The action plans served two main purposes: (1) the process of developing them improved the relationships between stakeholders significantly, developing trust and a better understanding of each other's roles. It also built the capacity of participants, in particular amongst farmer organisations, to articulate their needs and negotiate with other actors. (2) The plans themselves are being used as inputs in the

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

Sélingué, Mali

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

Bagré, Burkina Faso

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

Anambé, Senegal

"An agricultural advisory service that has the means and expertise in diverse fields is at the disposal of actors and works on their self-promotion and empowerment, in the spirit of respect for gender equity, good governance and environmental protection."⁶

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

Thematic area	Bagré	Sélingué	Anambé
Capacity development (of farmer organisations and AAS providers) – technical and institutional	Improve the performance of producer organisations	Farmer organisations are well structured and respond to the expectations of producers	Reinforcement of capacity (for both farmers and service providers)
		AAS responds to producers' needs	Good governance
Communication, consultation	Improve communication	A communication system links the different AAS actors	Consultation, communication and advocacy
Rice value chain	Improve the rice value chain (production, processing and marketing)		
Irrigation management	Improve management of water and irrigation infrastructure		
M&E	Help smallholders respect and take ownership of the rules agreed for their irrigation plots		Planning and M&E
Natural resource management			Natural resource management
Access to credit			Financing system / agricultural credit
Women and youth		Women and young people are effectively empowered	

design of interventions by government agencies, donors and civil society organisations working with the irrigation schemes to inform their programmes. In all three sites, scheme management agencies and farmer organisations have included elements of the action plans in their official annual work programmes.

The plans were deliberately designed in a modular way with various thematic work packages to enable participants to use different parts for fundraising or proposal development. This has already shown some success. For example, in Senegal, the farmer federation FEPROBA and the national agricultural research institute ISRA developed a joint research and development proposal addressing some of the productivity challenges identified in the action plan. The proposal was successfully submitted for financing to the National Agro-Food Research Fund⁸.

One unintended impact of the action plan process has been an increasing awareness by farmers of deficits in the governance, communication and management of their own organisations (cooperatives and unions), and the urgent need to reform these to meet both

farmers' demands for fairness and transparency and formal requirements (compliance with regional legislation such as the Organisation for the Harmonization of Business Law in Africa⁹) to access credit and other support services.

LESSONS LEARNED

Arguably, there is nothing particularly innovative about the planning process in each of these cases – it simply brought people and organisations to the table to discuss areas of mutual interest and concerns. More sophisticated assessment and planning processes, such as Participatory Rapid Diagnosis and Action Planning (PRDA¹⁰) have been piloted and used previously. However, PRDA requires substantially more resources than the process used by GWI.

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

The action plans are being used as inputs in the design of interventions by government agencies, donors and civil society organisations working with the irrigation schemes.

are not in place, and years or even decades of mistrust need to be overcome to foster cooperation. External facilitation plays an important role in catalysing such processes.

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

to speak up. Last, but not least, there were logistical challenges in identifying a mutually convenient time and venue for working group meetings and in maintaining participants' interest and concentration.

Despite these challenges, all involved agreed that the process was worthwhile, that the resulting action plans are very valuable, and that ideally it should have happened much sooner. It is recommended that participatory visioning, followed by joint planning processes, are incorporated in the programmes of all irrigation schemes, and in particular when contemplating major rehabilitations or other interventions. GWI project time and resources that supported the process¹¹ appear entirely justified in relation to the large sums of money (running into billions of CFA francs, millions of USD) that are invested in irrigation infrastructure on an annual basis in West Africa.

Barbara Adolph

Principal researcher,
Natural Resources Group – IIED
barbara.adolph@iied.org

Notes

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

1. See for example ECOWAS Commission, Department of Agriculture, Environment and Water Resources (2012) Accelerating the ECOWAP/CAADP implementation. Strategic policy paper on the regional offensive for sustainable rice production in West Africa. http://www.inter-reseaux.org/IMG/pdf/Offensive_Riz_EN.pdf.
2. GWI undertook ex-post evaluations of large dams, which compared the expected returns (including agricultural production) with those actually achieved. See <http://pubs.iied.org/G04007> (in French only) for Anambé in Senegal and <http://pubs.iied.org/G04006> (in French only) for Bagré in Burkina Faso.
3. Sustainable Development Goals 1 and 2, see <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>.
4. Feasibility studies for major investments would usually include an assessment of the economic and financial performance of an investment and its environmental and social impact. However, these assessments are undertaken by external consultants within a relatively short period of time (e.g. a month) and are not normally the outcome of participatory processes involving all stakeholders, including local people / farmers and their organisations.
5. For documentation on the self-assessment exercises in the three schemes and a review of national agricultural advisory systems in the three study countries, see <http://pubs.iied.org/G03998> (in French only) for Mali, <http://pubs.iied.org/G03997> (in French only) for Burkina Faso and <http://pubs.iied.org/G03999> (in French only) for Senegal.
6. For the full action plans see <http://tiny.cc/gwi-selingue-fr> (Mali, in French only), <http://tiny.cc/gwi-fr-bagre> (Burkina Faso, in French only) and <http://tiny.cc/gwi-anambe-fr> (Senegal, in French only).
7. For the reports of three national workshops see <http://tiny.cc/gwi-atelier-burkina> (Burkina Faso, in French only), <http://tiny.cc/gwi-atelier-mali> (Mali, in French only) and <http://tiny.cc/gwi-atelier-senegal> (Senegal, in French only).
8. FNRAA (Fonds National de Recherches Agricoles et Agro-alimentaires), <http://www.fnraa.sn>
9. The Organisation pour l'harmonisation en Afrique du droit des affaires (Organisation for the Harmonization of Business Law in Africa, OHADA) is a system of business laws and implementing institutions adopted by 17 West and Central African nations. OHADA rules are increasingly applied to civil society organisations and businesses, including farmer organisations, to ensure a minimum standard of governance, transparency and management. <http://www.ohada.com>
10. See details at Lempérière, P., van der Schans, M. L. and Gandhi Bavanirajan, V. J. (2014) Research for development using participatory rapid diagnosis and action planning for irrigated agricultural systems: a manual for development researchers and practitioners. Updated edition. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Rome; International Water Management Institute (IWMI), Colombo. <http://tiny.cc/fao-iwmi-prda>
11. In the region of USD 13,000-20,000 (approximately FCFA 7,600,000-11,400,000 at September 2016 exchange rates) which included the cost of national workshops, plus about 40-50 days of a facilitator's time.

GW WEST AFRICA

The Global Water Initiative in West Africa is an action-research and advocacy project. We work with family farmers and governments to shape policies and practices that support livelihoods and food security in the context of large multi-purpose dams. The project is funded by the Howard G. Buffett Foundation and implemented by IIED and IUCN.

www.gwiwestafrica.org

IUCN

The International Union for Conservation of Nature helps the world find pragmatic solutions to our most pressing environment and development challenges. IUCN's work focuses on valuing and conserving nature, ensuring effective and equitable governance of its use, and deploying nature-based solutions to global challenges in climate, food and development.

www.iucn.org

IIED

The International Institute for Environment and Development promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges. We support some of the world's most vulnerable people to strengthen their voice in decision making.

www.iied.org

For more information about the Global Water Initiative in West Africa, please contact: **Jamie Skinner**
jamie.skinner@iied.org