QDD.

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Rethinking agricultural and rural training systemically with a range of actors at territorial level

How can agriculture and rural training (FAR) be "massified"?

Why "massify"?

In sub-Saharan Africa, demographic projections indicate that the rural population is expected to continue growing, reaching 980 million people by 2050. Young people under the age of twenty-five living in rural areas will make up two-thirds of the population. Agriculture will remain one of the primary sources of employment.[1] The continent will need to deal with cohorts of young people of working age entering the job market with very little education and no vocational training; at country level, this figure will be in the hundreds of thousands. According to projections, this near doubling of the population and shift in the urban/rural ratio will require these countries to double agricultural labor productivity in order to maintain food availability at the same level, necessitating innovation and improvements in human capital. In the agricultural and rural sector, however, formal training systems remain fragmented and inadequate (between 2 and 10 percent of 18–25 year-olds are estimated to be enrolled in agricultural training).[2] Twenty years after the international workshop in Ouagadougou (2005), the challenges remain numerous and largely unchanged: fragile

[1] Sara Mercandalli and Bruno Losch, eds., and Michael N. Belebema, Jean-François Bélières, Robin Bourgeois, Mulugeta F. Dinbabo, et al., "Rural Migration in Sub-Saharan Africa: Patterns, Drivers and Relation to Structural Transformation," Working Paper (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2019), accessed June 11, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344620864_Rural_migration_in_sub-Saharan_Africa_patterns_drivers_and_relation_to_structural_transformation.

[2] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), *OECD FAO Agricultural Outlook 2016–2025: Special Focus: Sub-Saharan Africa* (OECD Publishing, 2016), accessed June 11, 2025, https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2016/07/oecd-fao-agricultural-outlook-2016-2025_g1g66608/agr_outlook-2016-en.pdf.

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production models and food systems, rural exodus, an aging agricultural population, changes in regulations and products, climate change, declining soil fertility and water resources, the rise of information and digital technologies, the sector's struggle to attract workers, and so on. These major trends highlight not only the need to renew the agricultural workforce through the training and professional integration of young people, but also the challenge of increasing production while conserving the environment, in a context characterized by "an increase in the frequency and severity of various shocks."[3] These challenges reinforce the need to build on the agriculture and rural training (FAR) reform efforts underway in various countries, while noting that, while the challenges are well understood, exactly how they should be dealt with has yet to be determined.

The food security level in the countries concerned has undoubtedly fallen, but not to the extent feared. This raises questions about the contribution of FAR, particularly in its formal sense, to innovations and changes in farmers' practices, since it has often not been able to adapt as needed—both in quantity and quality—in order to address these challenges. It also calls for a closer examination of practical learning in agriculture, with a particular focus on the informal processes that operate in particular local areas and are still "under the radar" today.

The FAR sector: Overview, actors, and systems

FAR (for Formation agricole et rurale; Agricultural and Rural Training),[4] which is traditionally associated with the agricultural and rural components of technical education and vocational training, is highly fragmented and not integrated into a unified system.

In **formal systems**, this fragmentation can be seen in institutional embeddedness, curricula, recognition of training programs (a range of qualifications), the status of the institutions, and so on.

Nonformal systems involve advisory services, outreach, continuing education, and functional literacy training. These initiatives may be national or more local in scope, and may be run by professional organizations, nongovernmental organizations, or by the private sector, value chain actors, and so on.

Informal processes of knowledge dissemination, between peers, using various resources (discussions, media, and so on), also play a key role in the development of agricultural practices, yet **remain poorly recognized and underutilized by politicians and supporting partners.**

Beyond this fragmentation, the sector also spans a wide range of professions: The "R" in FAR refers to agriculture-related occupations that guarantee its day-to-day operation and the vitality of territories, and are frequently part of the broader livelihood systems of farming households themselves.

Factoring in the range of actors, services, and learning methods in territories

Recognition of informal learning mechanisms among farmers requires their observation, which is the focus of the present investigation. It is based on three case studies: Cameroon, Madagascar, and Togo.

Lessons learned from farmers' life pathways

The learning pathways we observed confirm the **consistent and significant role played by informal channels**: families first and foremost, friends and peers in self-help groups, self-organized savings communities (tontines), personal experiences of paid agricultural labor and mobility, interactions with market actors, and so forth—all of which play a major role in the dissemination of knowledge and expertise. Peer learning processes can be observed throughout a person's lifetime, in various social circles, typically in close social or geographical proximity. These processes are usually not based on a formal training framework, but involve **discussion, observation**, and so on. **Mobility** (short- or long-term migration, travel) can also play a significant role in the development of practices. Farmers, who are at least partially literate and digitally connected, also access the **media** (community radio stations and newspapers), search engines and online services, and social network sites.

Creating a hybrid of formal, nonformal, and informal knowledge

The pathways taken by the interviewees in the three countries show that **nonformal and formal inputs combine** with knowledge gained informally and are a potential source of renewal: In the territories analyzed, the network and the range of FAR interventions in place reach a significant proportion of farmers. These interventions are often the **source of innovations** that take root—**provided they are seen by producers as contributing to real progress**. Farmers adapt more than they adopt; training and advisory services are useful only when grounded in a sound understanding of farmers' actual needs and future projects (as opposed to "top-down" approaches). These interventions have also contributed to the emergence of an "intermediary level": producers who are often described as "**go-betweens**,"

[3] Inter-Réseaux, "Futur rapport scientifique du HLPE: 'Identifier les innovations susceptibles d'améliorer la résilience des systèmes alimentaires'," *Grain de sel* 86 (2024): 10–11, accessed June 11, 2025, https://www.inter-reseaux.org/wp-content/uploads/GDS-No86-10-11.pdf.

[4] Réseau FAR, "La formation agricole et rurale en Afrique francophone. État des lieux" (2016), accessed June 11, 2025, https://www.reseau-far.com/fileadmin/user_upload/SYNTHESE_SUR_LA_FAR_EN_AFRIQUE_FRANCOPHONE.pdf.

with the potential to become **local points of reference, "transmitters"** of knowledge and expertise acquired through formal or nonformal systems. The role and standing of these "intermediaries" is important in a number of respects: as guarantors of the **quality** of what is passed on (also a concern for information circulating online); for their ability to maintain this network of local reference points; the **social position** they occupy, which may be more or less advantageous to the wider farming community; the **value given** to their time, and so on.

The institutional context of FAR: Perceptions, systems, and issues for public action

From a more institutional perspective, the interviews conducted with key informants in the three countries (institutional actors, technical experts, and leaders of farming organizations) show that knowledge of these informal processes is **empirical**. While they recognize the impact of these processes at local level, most actors remain convinced that positive changes chiefly come from the outside and are relayed via formal and nonformal systems—while acknowledging that these systems fall short of meeting the full range of their needs. This dominant view is reflected in the three countries' public policy approaches, which, while specific to each individual country, generally prioritize the consolidation of formal and nonformal systems.

In all three countries, the issues of "massification" and/or the inclusion of local knowledge are being addressed through formal channels via: i. training design that incorporates an analysis of **social demand**; ii. the **participation of families, communities, and professionals in the training**; iii. the involvement of "**go-betweens**." Although these mechanisms help provide greater access to FAR services and some hybridization of content, their impact is rarely measured from this perspective. In none of the three cases did we observe initiatives placing greater emphasis on supporting the intrinsic processes through which practices circulate. In addition, the very concept of massification raises **concerns**: "Training for training's sake" may resemble a top-down mandate to provide training, disconnected from real demand or local contexts, thereby creating little impact. **FAR provision can only be meaningfully designed when it is aligned with social, economic, and multisectoral demand at the territorial level, informed by demographic analysis**.

Toward the concept of "learning territories"

These reflections on FAR, along with the identification of both internal and external factors that can support learning (access to basic education; the existence of a range of sources of learning, networks of actors and services; the presence of other forms of social organization; decreasing isolation; access to the media, and so on) bring into consideration the concept of a "**learning territory**."[5] This concept is based on the idea that a territory's development is intrinsically linked to its ability to learn, adapt, and innovate to deal with the range of current challenges. It enables the role of FAR to be examined systemically on a territorial scale, and places an emphasis on **collaboration** and **links between local actors** to foster collective development: In a "learning territory," the links and shared projects generally take precedence over available resources. This concept offers a useful framework for identifying the **preconditions** and the **levers for action** to be mobilized, in ways tailored to the specific characteristics of each territory.

The concept of "learning territories"

This concept holds that the learning capacity of a territory's actors should be approached systemically and is fostered by collective approaches, since it depends on the strength of their connections and the degree of collaboration.

Levers for action to guide FAR interventions at the territorial level

The proposed courses of action concern the various categories of local actors and encompass a range of perspectives:

Developing and sharing knowledge:

- Maintaining and consolidating the creation of knowledge on farmers' learning processes, particularly informal learning
- Supporting discussion forums within and between territories and countries

Embedding systems in territories:

- Understanding and aligning with decentralization processes
- Exploring FAR governance mechanisms at local level
- Supporting the emergence of a network of local FAR skills, fostering territory-wide synergies

Thinking and acting "systemically"—Both quantitatively and qualitatively:

- Removing barriers, embedding training and advisory services in cross-sectoral, holistic dynamics that recognize diversification
- Borrowing from demographic approaches to scale systems appropriately and align them with territorial dynamics

[5] Denis Cristol, *Les territoires apprenants. Usages et imaginaires pour apprendre ensemble* (Territorial Éditions, 2021).

Working over the long term to create sustainable systems that are included in national or decentralized budgets and have dedicated funding mechanisms.

Promoting rigorous systems design that makes room for informality and hybrid knowledge and expertise (from both "farmers" and "scientists"):

- Programs that link services to each other and to informal learning networks
- Adapting the training of advisers, trainers, and system designers so that they are able to draw on local knowledge[6] and informal dissemination channels.

This Question of Development (QDD) is a summary of a study carried out by the Institut Agro-FERT-RIFAR-IRAM-TERO consortium: "From the Concept of FAR 'Massification' to the Notion of 'Learning Territories'? Factoring in the Range of Actors, Services, and Learning Methods in Territories to Scale Investments Aimed at Rural Actors," commissioned by the Agence française de développement (AFD) (French Development Agency) and available here. The field studies were carried out by three SAADS engineering students from the Institut Agro Montpellier,[7] and were supported by partner organizations (APCFAR in Togo, PCP-AFOP in Cameroon, and FIFATA in Madagascar).[8] We would like to thank all of the contributors.

[6] This improved recognition and understanding of local knowledge and practices is of considerable importance in promoting agroecology.

[7] Systèmes agricoles et agroalimentaires durables au sud (SAADS) (Sustainable Agricultural and Food Systems for the South): M. Carrère, Y. Tamague, and F. Tchatikpi.

[8] Association professionnelle des centres de FAR (APCFAR) (Professional Association of Agricultural and Rural Training Centers), Programme de consolidation et de pérennisation du dispositif de formation agricole (PCP-AFOP) (Program for Consolidation and Sustainability of the Agricultural Training System), FIkambanana FAmpivoarana ny Tantsaha (FIFATA) (Association for the Progress of Farmers)

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