N°2 | Coordination SUD | June 2017

THE NOTES OF SUD

AGRICULTURE • FOOD

© Ernanio Mandlate - ActionAid

Rethinking the Profession of Agronomist: Towards an Accompaniment Approach

The accompaniment[1] approach between agronomist[2] and peasant farmer puts into question the hierarchical principles that generally govern their relationships. This approach contrasts with traditional advisory services, which are close to management. It is rarely taught in training programs or in professional circles, even though it is an empowering approach that enables greater adaptability to climatic or economic uncertainties, thereby improving the sustainability of agricultural systems.

The accompaniment approach for peasant farmers: a new method?

Acceptance of the concept of "agricultural advisory services" varies according to the relationship between the advisor and the producer.[3] For example, in the case of "agricultural extension," advice has often been associated with knowledge and technology transfer from the world of research and technicians towards that of producers. In the agricultural extension approach, advice is disseminated to promote predefined technical models of production. It has shown its limits, having led peasant farmers to technical and social dead ends.

On the other hand, the notion of agricultural advisory services can also apply to an approach whereby dialogue is established between the producer (or group of producers) and the advisor, with the aim of helping to resolve a given problem. It can also fall within the framework of an apprenticeship approach to help empower producers or to facilitate interactions among stakeholders concerned by a problem, in order to produce new knowledge to be used in the action. Here we should note that today the term "extension" (French: vulgarisation) is often used in the countries of the South to describe the equivalent of "advisory services" (French: conseil) in France. In these cases, a "knower" is identified: the advisor or extension agent.

1. Translation of the French term accompagnement, which has its roots in the word compagnon, meaning "companion."
2. Agronomists are people who put into practice their knowledge about rural development, agriculture, and food. Agronomy, as a science applied to food security and sovereignty, includes the social sciences that are an integral part of the so-called natural sciences.
3. UMR Innovation Montpellier, *Synthèse bibliographique sur le conseil agricole*, 2009.

"Accompaniment," on the other hand is an "*approach that seeks to help people make their way, develop, and reach their goals.*"[4] The accompaniment approach is, strictly speaking, intended for the individual most of all, to help attain the future he or she desires and which will be managed just by him or her. The individual stakeholder is thus put back at the center of the thought system, instead of a technical and normative way of thinking. While the accompaniment approach thus contrasts with the traditional advisory approaches commonly applied in agricultural development, traditional advisory services can be identified as one of the many practices of the accompaniment approach.[5] In short, the accompaniment approach works on coherency between project and individual, and between the individual's trajectory and resources.[6]

The accompaniment approach provides for a relationship that:

- supports peasant farmers in identifying their problems and successes, and in gaining hindsight about their technical choices;
- facilitates access to a variety of knowledge, for example by encouraging stakeholders interested in the same issues to meet together;
- encourages dialogue between the beneficiary of the accompaniment approach (the person "accompanied") and its advisor, hereinafter referred to as "accompanier" (French: accompagnateur), without hierarchy;
- proposes access to research-action, to work on responses to complex agricultural questioning;
- raises awareness about issues the peasant farmer is not aware of;
- insists on the fact that there is not necessarily a predetermined solution, and that those benefiting from the accompaniment approach have the last word in managing their activity.

Clarifying vocabulary

The question of the accompaniment approach applied to the professional relationship with peasant farmers is appearing in the sciences dealing with rural development. The vocabulary pertaining to accompaniment is not always very stable. Here we speak of accompaniment as an approach, i.e. as a "way of thinking or acting." The accompaniment relationship applies to different practices, in the sense of "exercises of a particular activity" (advising, tutoring, mediation, sponsorship, etc.). The accompaniment approach thereby describes all the accompanier's practices implemented specifically with a person or group that is accompanied. By extension, we speak of an accompaniment approach to describe the "moral attitude" adopted through this "way of thinking or acting."[7]

Today, the accompaniment approach has a diverse and varied offer whose role is becoming increasingly important within the positions taken by agricultural professional organizations and agricultural advisory systems. This can be seen in the case of AITA, the new French ministerial program to provide accompaniment for peasant farmers in setting up a farming activity or in handing down a farm. However, because lack of specific funding and time, the ability of this new labelling to effectively promote these changes of practices has not been proven.[8]

© ActionAid

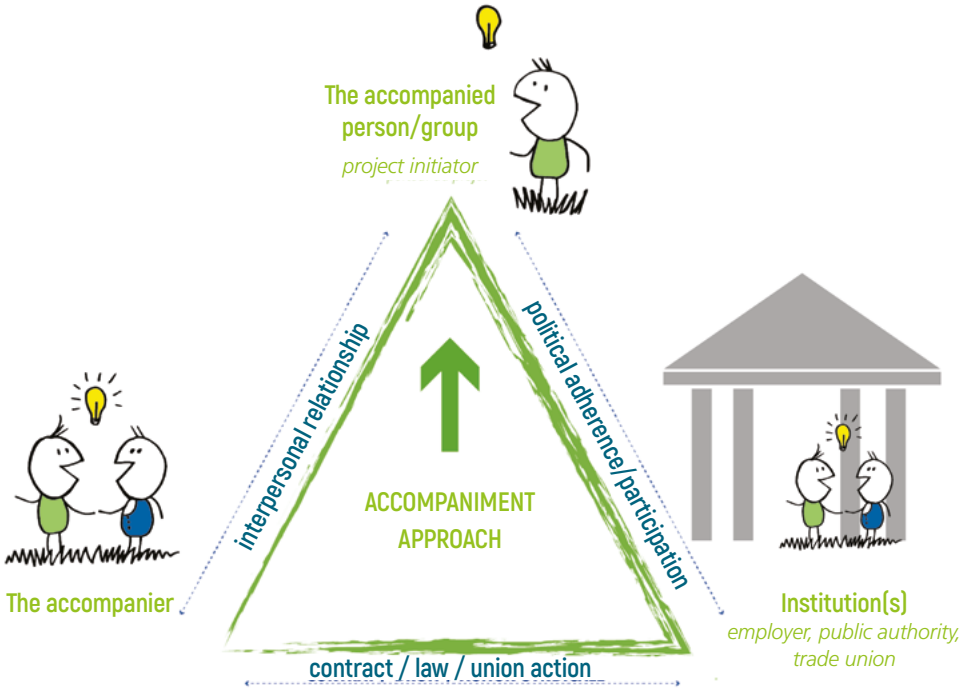
4. Martine Beauvais, « Des principes éthiques pour une philosophie de l'accompagnement », *Savoirs,* 2004.
5. Hélène Tallon, *Pluriactivité et accompagnement : un territoire à l'épreuve. Une expérimentation par la formation menée dans le Haut-Languedoc (Hérault)*, Université Paul Valéry Montpellier III, 2011 & Maela Paul, *L'accompagnement : une posture professionnelle spécifique,* L'Harmattan, 2004.
6. Mathieu Dalmais, *La place de l'outil dans l'accompagnement individuel à l'installation en agriculture,* Montpellier SupAgro, 2011.
7. Martine Beauvais, « Des principes éthiques pour une philosophie de l'accompagnement », *Savoirs,* 2004.
8. Claude Compagnone and Frédéric Goulet, *Conseil privé en agriculture : acteurs, pratiques et marché,* Educagri, Quae, 2015.

AGRICULTURAL ACCOMPANIMENT APPROACH IN FRANCE: ORIGINS IN PEOPLE'S EDUCATION

We can find the first traces of the use, in the French language, of the term *accompagnement* in the 15th century, and of the idea to accompany (*accompagner*) a person in the 18th. But the meaning employed here stems from the people's education movements that developed in France in the 20th century. Its application in the field of professional activities emerged in particular after people's education organizations developed a vocational focus. In the case of rural development, the first instances of people's education applied to the agricultural world were those of the Agriculture Promotion Initiative Centers (*Centres d'initiatives pour la valorisation de l'agriculture* - CIVAM) and then the Christian Agricultural Youth Association (*Jeunesses agricoles chrétiennes* - JAC). In the 1990s, the accompaniment approach developed more specifically in the CIVAM and the Agricultural and Rural Job Development Associations (*Associations pour le développement de l'emploi agricole et rural* - ADEAR), in response to the evolution of the social and environmental issues attached to agriculture, as well as to broader societal evolutions.

The accompaniment approach established itself as a counter model to the agricultural advisory services that were designed for the high productivity promoted by chambers of agriculture since the 1960s. Today, even though attitudes regarding the environment and the taking into account of territorial and individual specificities have transformed the role of agents at chambers of agricultures,[9] the production of benchmark information is still given priority there, furthering specialized advice. But the lack of resources, the increase in norms, and deference to non-normative accompaniment approaches at chambers of agriculture do not always further changes in practices. Indeed, while some agronomists do effectively practice an accompaniment approach towards peasant farmers in these organizations (often on volunteer time not recognized in general by the institution that employs them[10]), others view the accompaniment approach as institutional discourse and do nothing to modify the relational practices between agronomists and peasant farmers.

The accompaniment approach was first studied in the learning sciences by theoreticians and critics of business management, as well as by theoreticians and actors in the medical and social field. Use of the term accompaniment (*accompagnement*) is currently devoted to the social sciences studying rural issues. Agricultural advisory service practitioners, and even a certain number of actors working for or with the chambers of agriculture in France, have reappropriated the term, with varied applications.
Moreover, calls for tender, upon which agricultural professional organizations and agricultural development associations are increasingly dependent (because of the drop in grants for public service), have seized upon the term, but rather frequently with the meaning of "providing economic support" for a project. The French word *accompagnement* has thus become synonymous with "funding," epistemologically modifying the meaning of the term. Furthermore, it can be noted that some organizations do the opposite: they adopt the moral attitude of accompaniment but call their work "advisory services."



Accompanied person/group–Accompanier–Institution relationship triangle in the accompaniment approach (ISF Agrista, 2015, according to Gasselin et al., 2013).

9. Hélène Brives, « L'évolution du conseil agricole et du rôle des chambres d'agriculture », *Pour* n° 196-197, 2008.
10. Claude Compagnone and Sandrine Petit, « Séparer et intégrer. Les temps du conseil des agents des Chambres d'agriculture », *Revue d'anthropologie des connaissances*, volume 8, n° 1, 2014.

Going beyond the normativity of the traditional agricultural advisory service practice

The accompaniment approach is a non-normative relationship because it is specific to each case and situation, and it enables peasant farmers to progress in their thinking out the agricultural system and its associated activities. Concretely, it involves the person accompanied (as well as all of his/her work environment: family, associates, community), the person who provides him/her with the accompaniment approach (advisor, agronomist, technician, engineer, etc.), as well as the institution that connects them (cf. Fig 1).[11]

Accompaniment falls within the framework of a people's education approach, insofar as the roles of knower and learner can occasionally become inverted in the iterative process that binds the accompanied person/group and the accompanier. The latter facilitates the reflexive action of the person/group accompanied and constantly takes part in the apprenticeship and in the understanding of the trajectories and choices of those accompanied. These trajectories and choices may be very varied within the same context. This process thus leads to reducing the domination of the powers that be over knowledge, and it fosters more egalitarian relationships.

While adopting several accompaniment approach practices is a condition for quality or for success in empowerment, it alone will not suffice. This is because some of the practices adopted can come dangerously close to manipulation techniques (in the sense that part of the problem—part that can help in understanding it—is purposely concealed) or to conditioning that takes away the meaning of the accompanied person's project, to the benefit of the accompanier or institution.
The paradigm supported by the proponents of the accompaniment approach includes the definition of the individuals taking part in it (accompanied persons and accompaniers) as empowered subjects who are responsible and who can project themselves into the future. A subject's "empowerment" corresponds to individualized ownership of the temporalities constructed by the organization, whereas "control" refers to normalized ownership. Here, the subject becomes empowered and responsible for his/her agricultural project that he/she is developing, along with support from the accompanier, up to the time when he/she no longer needs it. In return, the accompanier will have to demonstrate ethics that include honesty and transparency in his/her motivations and interests; this develops the relationship of trust between the actors. The accompanier must respect the ethic of otherness so as not to take on ownership of the peasant farmers' projects: this way, the accompanier leaves the technical and thus political choices that seem best to the peasant farmers up to the latter.[12] Often, the framework of project management is not flexible enough for the accompaniment relationship to develop within it; in such cases, the project format does not make enough allowance for participative methods. The fixed and normative aspects of logical frameworks used in development projects are obstacles to progressive and innovative processes, with a timeframe too short to truly take into account the social dimension.

Accompaniment as an approach to further food sovereignty

Food sovereignty, especially as described by Via Campesina, implies peoples' capacity to meet their needs; it therefore includes empowerment and the capacity to do by oneself, for oneself. In order to ensure the sustainability of this sovereignty, the entire productive agriculture system must consider how to be resilient faced with all types of uncertainties. Accompaniment is an approach that makes resilience possible for human relations, farms, and territories, through various aspects.
Firstly, by reappropriating the management of their farms, the producers who are beneficiaries of the accompaniment approach can experiment with more complex management strategies because of room for maneuver that has been created. They allow themselves greater experimentation and thus develop their critical thinking all the more. The accompaniment approach (like other relationships or tools derived from people's education), especially when carried out well thanks to specific instruments,[13] guarantees that the beneficiaries' individual and collective choices will be their own and will be implemented with full knowledge of possible consequences. Peasant farmers' decision-making capacity becomes sustainable, because they have command over it.

Conversely, top-down apprenticeship is not very effective in terms of ownership of techniques, especially when they are not adapted to the environment. The dominant form of agronomy, which is reductionist and pro-Western, has had alarming consequences in other regions of the world. For example, motorization experiences, such as the introduction of tractors in sub-Saharan Africa, have had mixed results—in the past and still today. In particular, growth in work productivity for some important activities (for example plowing, despite not always being suitable for tropical soils) do not increase overall productivity because other activities remain manual (e.g. sowing).

Next, through its complex and non-normative dimension, the accompaniment approach in agriculture is an appropriate instrument for the evolution of agricultural practices, especially agroecological ones. This is because the huge number of components of the agroecological system makes each farm unique, especially according to the territory on which it is established. This is an advantage when having to act in situations of uncertainty, as decisions can be based on these numerous proposals of existing agricultural systems

11. ISF AgriSTA, *L'évolution des métiers de l'agronome, du conseil vers l'accompagnement ?*, 2016.
12. Mathieu Dalmais, Cécile Fiorelli, Pierre Gasselin, and Hélène Tallon, *Trois outils pour l'accompagnement à la création et au développement d'activité,* 2013.
13. Guide méthodologique d'accompagnement Intersama: http://www.intersama.fr

© Clément Tardif / ActionAid

encouraged thanks to the accompaniment approach. Resilience, especially to climate change or faced with economic uncertainties, is better ensured.

Furthermore, the resilience and sustainability of agricultural systems also depend on the meaning that peasant farmers can find in their profession. The approach adapted to this dimension is positioned not at the agricultural system level, but rather that of the activity system, expanding comprehension of agricultural management through the filter of the other members present on the farm. This, for example, makes it possible to consider agricultural dynamics more collectively. Because accompaniment is non-normative and focused on the individual, it is the suitable approach for taking into consideration multi-activity agricultural systems or cases of collective farming, which are ways of basing the analysis on complex production systems.

Finally, the accompaniment approach contributes to a governance of food systems in which the peasant farmers have a more important role, for example by building local value chains with the peasant farmers organizing themselves into groupings of producers. The agronomist or advisor is then an accompanier of the network by facilitating the meeting together or collective dynamics of the peasant farmers. This is the case, for example, of the "cafés-installation" of the members of the InPACT[14] or Bio networks in France, or of the exchanges workshops among peasant farmers organized within the framework of the Advice for Family Farms (Conseil à l'exploitation familiale - CEF) approach, which is at first led by advisors and then by peasant farmers who take over themselves. The accompanier is then a go-between or mediator between producer dynamics and societal demands.[15] This relationship makes it possible to better integrate each person's political commitment for the setting up of real food sovereignty.

© ActionAid

14. Platform of associations bringing together AFIP, InterAFOCG, FADEAR, FNCIVAM, Accueil Paysan, MRJC, Terre de Liens, MIRAMAP, and Solidarités Paysans.
15. Marianne Cerf et al, « Le métier d'agent de développement agricole en débat », *Innovations Agronomiques n° 20*, 2012.

EMPOWERING PEASANT FARMERS THROUGH FAMILY FARMING ADVICE (CEF)

In West Africa, innovative advisory methods were developed in the 1990s. These broke off with the traditional governmental top-down approaches focused on production and instead made it possible to meet the varied needs of peasant farmers, by using participative methods. Family Farming Advice (Conseil à l'exploitation familiale - CEF) is one of these approaches. CEF has been adapted to varied situations and is currently implemented by a broad range of actors, in particular non-governmental organizations, producers organizations, cotton companies, and governmental agencies. In Africa, for example, CEF reaches approximately 100,000 producers.

CEF was recently adapted to new situations including Burma (Southeast Asia) and Malawi (East Africa) especially by GRET. In these cases, the services provided by the advisors comprise three tasks:
- training peasant farmers in using management tools adapted to their needs and capacities;
- applying the accompaniment approach to help peasant farmers analyze their situation, through dialogue;
- putting the peasant farmers in relation with one another and into a network.

CEF advisors must have a foundation of knowledge in agriculture, especially references on the main agricultural activities, which will enable them to understand the situation of the peasant farmers they advise using the accompaniment approach. But CEF advisors must be careful not to give orders to the peasant farmers. The founding principle of CEF is "peasant farmers have good reasons for doing what they do." The role of the advisors is thus to understand how the family farm works and then to work along with the peasant farmers in developing their reasoning, in order to help them make better-informed decisions (on their environment and on their own situation).

Feedback from the peasant farmers about the service has been very positive. They feel they have finally been put at the center of an advisory system, because the objective is no longer to disseminate a predefined technical package or to direct them towards a certain kind of production, but rather to work along with them in developing their own projects, all the while helping to empower them.

This enthusiasm manifests itself in strong ownership of the approach: peasant farmer groups organize themselves to share these advisory methods and to develop services (collective sales, access to inputs, etc.) following the collective analysis of their situation and environment.

© ISF - AgriSTA

© ISF - AgriSTA

An experiment by ISF France and ISF Cameroon, and outcome of the accompaniment approach applied to agricultural collectives

During the annual theme-based seminars of Engineers Without Borders (Ingénieurs Sans Frontières - ISF) France in 2015 and 2016, ISF AgriSTA (Agricultures and Food Sovereignty) and ISF Cameroon chose to have exchanges on eight French and Cameroonian accompaniment approach experiences. For example, making connections regarding accompaniment approaches applied to land access for a peasant farmer on an organic farm in Mayenne (France) or to creating family agricultural enterprises in Edéa (Cameroon) helps facilitate reflexive analysis by agronomists on their professional practices. The varieties of practices of accompaniers over time are very important from one system to another. The accompaniment approach evolves broadly and changes according to collective cases. No single or unique format emerges regarding the directions the accompaniment approach should take in terms of reflection/action or meaning/technique. Each case thus requires a unique accompaniment approach. Furthermore, it was found that the practices involving questioning the role of the individual within the collective body were not used; this perhaps indicates academic research questions that could be gone into more in-depth.

Recommendations: an approach to teach in agronomic training and to take into account in local development projects

Currently, promotion of agriculture in France aims for effectiveness in three domains (ecologically, socially, and economically). It is thus essential for the decision-makers on agronomic training and agricultural development in France and around the world to seize upon this notion of accompaniment and provide it with a suitable allocation of resources (funding and time to implement the approach). More concretely, **Coordination SUD proposes taking into account the social dimension of agronomy:**

1.
in agronomic training programs[16] (initial and continuing education)[17], through the ministries in charge of agriculture and the training governance bodies, and in the calls for tender by Agence française de développement (AFD). This will be done by:

→ promoting the teaching of tools from people's education, know-how, and methods adapted to the accompaniment approach (facilitation, systemic and complex analysis, negotiation, capitalization, research position, etc.);

→ teaching the ethics, critical thinking, and inter-personal skills required for accompaniment (doubt, knowledge of one's own limits, justice, empathy, etc.);

→ granting more importance to fundamental and cross-cutting knowledge: sociology, rural law, political science, generalist and pluralistic agronomy techniques, general culture, etc.

16. Agronomic training programs include all the engineering programs that cover rural development, food and agriculture; the BTS (post-secondary school vocational training) programs; and the technical universities. In France, it is chiefly engineers, via the engineering accreditation by the CTI, that orient the content of engineering training programs. The other training programs are the responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture. These training programs vary according to the country, with course content being established by a variety of decision-makers.
17. ISF, *Manifeste pour une formation citoyenne des ingénieur-e-s,* 2014.

2.
in professional activities, professional organizations, unions, and civil society, in brief by all the actors working on the current systems of the accompaniment approach and agricultural advice services, by:

→ preserving land for professional experimentation and by encouraging the initiatives of the agents who manage these multifaceted agricultural systems on a daily basis;

→ enabling continued professional insertion within the framework of research-action funded by the public authorities, in order to facilitate reflexivity and to improve their practices;

→ shaping and building reflection and calls for acknowledgment of this special relationship (towards union action by agronomists);

→ including this social dimension in the terms of reference for the profession and advocacy on this aspect targeting the government ministry and employers (skills sheets, information and orientation centers, etc.);

→ involving peasant farmers in the governance of institutional accompaniment approach mechanisms.

Some experiences have shown the conditions and tools that would make it possible to better structure accompaniment:

- the Peasant farmer's Field School - FFS (champs écoles paysans - CEP);
- peasant farmers contests (the Association AVSF offers some);[18]
- the campesino a campesino method;
- the many participative methods or Family Farming Advice (CEF);
- initiatives in agronomy schools, such as the engineer's ethics module offered in the second year of studies at Montpellier SupAgro and the training course in agricultural accompaniment at ISARA-Lyon;
- collaborative experiences among peasant farmers, such as the example of exchanges between peasant farmers from Brazil and Périgord (France) on corn populations and the creation of peasant farmer varieties. These exchanges on know-how took place with AgroBio Périgord and Inra's SAD-Paysage unit, among others.

18. AVSF, *Sécurité alimentaire à Yamaranguila au Honduras*.

Coordination SUD
Solidarité Urgence Développement

This publication is produced by the Agriculture and food Commission (C2A) of Coordination SUD

As part of its mission to support the collective advocacy of its members, Coordination SUD has set up working committees. The Agriculture and food Commission (C2A) brings together international solidarity NGOs working to realize the right to food and increase support for smallholder farming in policies that impact world food security: ActionAid France, Action contre la Faim, AEFJN, aGter, Artisans du Monde, AVSF, CARI, CCFD-Terre Solidaire, CFSI, CRID, Gret, IECD, Inter Aide, Iram, ISF AgriSTA, MADERA, Oxfam France, Plate-Forme pour le Commerce Equitable, Secours Catholique-Caritas France, SOL and UNMFREO, and one guest, Inter-Réseaux.

The C2A is in charge of the representation of Coordination SUD to institutions dealing with agriculture and food, such as the Interministerial Group on Food Security (GISA) and the Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) for the Committee on World Food Security (CFS).

Contact Agriculture and food Commission:
Sébastien Chailleux, ActionAid France
Email: s.chailleux@peuples-solidaires.org
Website: www.coordinationsud.org

This paper was written by
Bérénice Bois (ISF AgriSTA), Mathieu Dalmais (ISF AgriSTA), Auréline Doreau (ISF AgriSTA), Tanguy Martin (ISF AgriSTA) et Louis Pautrizel (Gret)

Translated from French by Eric Alsruhe

C2A publications are produced with the support of the AFD. The viewpoints expressed in this document in no way represent the official point of view of the AFD.