

Farming dynamics

MOORIBEN: the experience of a system of integrated services for Nigerien farmers

Background

The rise of Farmers' Organisations and of Mooriben

Serving farmers in a variety of ways

The Integrated Services System (ISS)

An innovative system... with problems

Conclusion



Mooriben's aims are clearly expressed!

© Antoine Boulet.

In 2010, the serious political and particularly the severe food crisis affecting Niger once again, placed the country under the media spotlight. Beyond the emergency measures put in place to save lives, everyone agrees that responses of a more structural nature are needed in agriculture in order to free Nigeriens as a whole and rural households in particular from climate and market vagaries that threaten food security.

Of these structural responses, support to farmer organisations (FO) is certainly a priority for the simple reason that these bring together the producers who assure the nation's agricultural production. Amongst these organisations, the Federation of Unions of Farmers' Groups of Niger (FUGPN-Mooriben) stands out due to its antiquity and the innovative nature of its initiatives. Over more than 10 years, an Integrated Services System (ISS) has been introduced gradually by Mooriben on behalf of its members.

Background

In Niger, restructuring farming and improving the living conditions of farmers who have been hit hard by extreme poverty, are major challenges.

Indeed, farming is difficult in this country of 1.2 million km² given the extreme agro-ecological conditions (aridity, a regular rainfall deficit, depleted soil, lack of access to land and continuous parcelling of available arable land ...), its remoteness, public and private under-investment in agriculture and in agricultural research over several decades, the great difficulty accessing inputs and, finally, the lack of a solid support/advice structure. Under these conditions, farmers are forced to operate with the means at their immediate disposal, that is to say very little.

However, since the early '90s and the dismantling of agricultural cooperatives managed by the state, farmers have organised themselves as best they can and pooled their efforts to implement the various services they need to be able to produce.

The rise of Farmers' Organisations and of Mooriben

The Federation of Unions of Farmers' Groups of Niger (FUGPN-Mooriben) is among the very first FOs that were established freely by farmers themselves, in the early 90s. In 1988, after exchanges with FOs in Burkina Faso such as the National Federation of NAAM Groups of Burkina Faso and the inter-African association «Six S»¹, the first groups set up in the departments of Tillabéri and Tera. Their success has led to the spread of the movement to several other departments. The Mooriben Federation operated informally until 1993, when it was officially recognised by the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock. The name «Mooriben» which means «the misery is over» in the Djerma-Songhai language, was chosen by the founders of the Federation to express in one word, what they expected from this structure. Its head office is based in Niamey and

its area of intervention is limited to Tillabéri and Dosso and Niamey Urban Community.

Mooriben's areas of intervention can be divided into three main agro-ecological zones: the river zone, the agricultural zone and the agro-pastoral zone. These geographic areas are characterised by ecological and agricultural, but also cultural, social and economic differences.

Mooriben's goals are for farmers to be able to market themselves, to promote rural society, and to promote business and the implementation of economic, social, educational and cultural activities on behalf of its members. The organisation is made up of three levels:

- At the base, often at the village level, the group, which comprises 15 to a hundred individuals, is responsible for accompanying the individual activities.
- At the municipal or county level, the union brings together several groups and supports them in their various projects.
- Nationally, the Federation provides significant support to groups and associations in order to strengthen their organisational capacity, and their technical and financial resources, while providing financial intermediation functions and representation.

In 2010, the federation included 25 unions, covering 1496 groups established in 712 administrative villages, with a total of 62,609 members, of which 61.45% are women.

In terms of ideological positioning, even if Mooriben is of course an apolitical FO, the fact remains that it embodies strong values of social progressivism and the defence of the interests and rights of rural people. Mooriben actions are designed not only to improve the system for its members but to overcome all the social, political, cultural and economic constraints that restrict the welfare of rural populations. In other words, Mooriben works to defend the civil rights of a segment of the population, which while a majority, is often one that has been prejudiced. Thus, Mooriben does not hesitate to join Nigerien human rights organisations in defence of the «right to food».

This transversal positioning is found in Mooriben's five principal areas of intervention: food security (with a humanitarian component during a crisis), strengthening the organisational and management capacity of the different levels of the network structure, de-

Mooriben embodies strong values of social progressivism and the defence of the interests and rights of rural people.

1: Six S: Se Servir de la Saison Sèche en Savane et au Sahel (*Exploiting the dry season in the Savannah and Sahel*).



© Antoine Boulet.

One of the six savings and credit cooperatives that have opened since 2003.

fending the interests and rights of its members and of the farming profession, the development of self-financing capacity, and the management of natural resources.

Serving farmers in a variety of ways

Up to 2009, Mooriben managed a number of projects financed by different European and international donors in each area of intervention. This system has enabled the FO to build and strengthen a number of activities on behalf of farmers which bit by bit have come to constitute the architecture of its system of integrated services. Among these activities, of note are: support for seasonal crops, support for irrigated crops, improved access to grain, management of natural resources, facilitating access to credit, capacity building for farmer organisation and management, advocacy.

Since 2000, these activities have developed and been structured to meet the different needs expressed by members of Mooriben.

The Integrated Services System (ISS)

Around 12 unions therefore established an integrated system of services designed to meet the needs of farmers. The characteristics of this system can be summarised as follows:

- A pragmatic and appropriate response following the withdrawal of the state from agriculture (technical and financial support).
- Set up and management controlled by the beneficiaries themselves (ownership and proximity).
- Steadily building by trying out different activities in support of farmers.
- A scope that covers practically all the basic needs of members.
- Integrated services, as the name suggests, meaning complementary and interdependent services.

More specifically, the different needs of farmers are supported through the establishment of the following around the union: an inputs shop (IS), a grain bank (GB), liaison farmers, radio and communication groups, a savings and credit cooperative, warrantage.

The example of Ms. Kadi Ali, a farmer and member of Mooriben

Ms. Kadi Ali, 57, is a member of a group from the Dantchandou union. She has been a widow for thirteen years and is the mother of six children. After her husband died, she became very preoccupied with meeting the needs of her children. She claims to have lived through difficult years before joining the group seven years ago.

Kadi plants seasonal as well as counter seasonal crops. Through her group, she joined the Tabiban savings and credit cooperative. In 2006, she participated in a warrantage operation in which she gave as security five bags of peanuts, two bags of sorrel and a bag of millet for a 47,000 FCFA (€71.65) credit at a 2% per month interest rate (6 months). With part of the credit, Kadi was supplied with seed and fertiliser for her market garden.

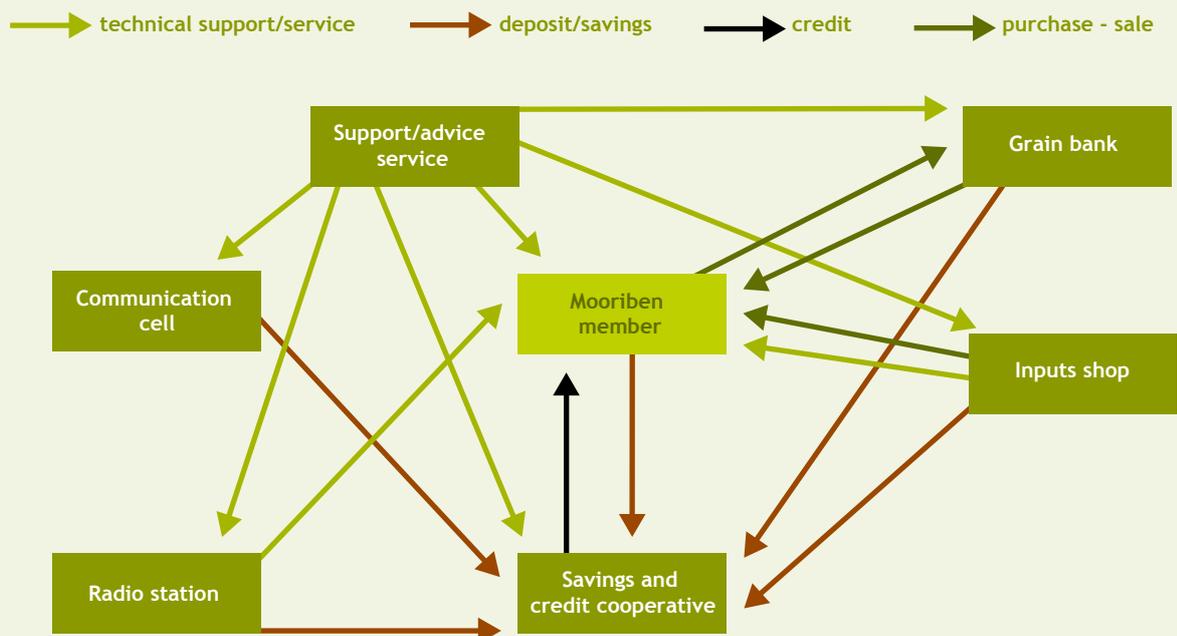
While working her family farm, Kadi received three monitoring missions from the liaison farmer: early in the season to assist with setting up the nursery, ten days later to demonstrate how to apply the fertiliser, and finally, with the approach of harvest time to offer advice on how to drain the land to better harvest the potatoes so that they would keep for longer. Meanwhile, Kadi followed the evolution of potato prices in local markets and the capital Niamey (84 km from Dantchandou) through local community radio.

Kadi and the other members of her group decided to market their production as a group. One person was commissioned by the group and the produce was sold in Niamey for 350 FCFA/kg, as against 150 FCFA on the local market. With the proceeds from the sale of the potatoes, Kadi was able to repay her loan (principal and interest) from the savings and credit cooperative and return home in possession of the bags she had acquired in the warrantage transaction. Six months after the harvest, she sold the bag of peanuts and sorrel for 15,000 FCFA (€22.8) and 28,000 FCFA (€42.7) respectively, whereas at the time she put them into warrantage prices were 5,500 FCFA (€8.4) and 11,000 FCFA (€16.8). As for the bag of millet, she decided to keep it for her own consumption.

Kadi then used 89,500 FCFA (€135.70) of the 131,000 FCFA (€200) from the sale of her agricultural produce, to buy five sheep. The rest of the money was used to meet other expenses.

Kadi says that since joining Mooriben, her living conditions have steadily improved. Better still, she has even managed to assist other households in difficulty.

The components of the integrated services system



Inputs shops

An inputs shop (I) is a service centre run by a farmers' organisation in order to provide its members with agricultural inputs and support/advice on their use. At Mooriben, the IS is run communally as a public utility by a cooperative. Unlike an inputs bank, the IS does not offer credit but instead focuses on retail sales.

The roles or services expected of inputs shops, mainly in the supply of inputs to cooperatives, include:

- ✔ Grouping predictable seasonal orders for inputs from all member and non-member union groups who wish to participate;
- ✔ The wholesale, retail and cash sale of inputs (fertilisers, seeds, pesticides, veterinary and livestock products) to members and non-members;
- ✔ The rental of small farming tools and machinery, to members and non-members;
- ✔ Free advice, at the request of the client or on posters, on how to use the inputs and farm equipment;
- ✔ Free training for members (or paid for by non-members) on the technical use of inputs and farm equipment;
- ✔ Free dissemination of results of available agricultural demonstrations.

In short, an IS is synonymous with agricultural inputs being close at hand, available and accessible, and with the offer of support/advice services on the use of inputs.

Grain banks

The use of grain banks (GB) is one of the strategic options available to group members in terms of food security. Indeed, grain banks play a key role in supplying local households and mitigating the negative effects of food crises in consecutive bad crop years.

The first Mooriben grain banks were started in 1993. Now there are 216 village GBs and 6 central GBs in Mooriben. By the end of 2011, Mooriben should have set up 75 new GBs in 17 unions.

Three specific objectives are assigned to GBs:

- ✔ Improving the coverage of food needs of the affected villages during the lean period;
- ✔ Fighting against usury and speculation in the prices of basic grains;
- ✔ Assistance in managing and storing members' surplus crops.

GBs source produce, during the harvest, initially from members, at above market prices, then at a later stage

from local markets. The grain is sold back into the market in the lean period. The produce is sold retail so that all categories of household have access. Members in financial difficulty are entitled to a credit against a limited proportion of the stock. Most GBs charge below market prices to union members, while non-members market prices.

Facilitators and liaison farmers

The support/advice activities are part of Mooriben network's mission. In order to fulfill this function Mooriben established, at the Federation level, an Executive Secretariat which is its base of support. The unions are provided with a team of facilitators drawn from the community. The IS have managers who provide advice to the users of inputs. In addition, since 2007, Mooriben has trained liaison farmers to help group members manage themselves, particularly in terms of implementing agricultural activities. 15 unions benefit from this service.

In sum, there are four major components to the self-management arrangement: the liaison farmers, the IS managers, the community-drawn facilitators and the executive secretariat.

The liaison farmers are members of the groups who are chosen by their colleagues. To accomplish their mission, farmers participate in a series of liaison training sessions run by Mooriben staff or by state technical outreach staff. A collaboration agreement was signed between Mooriben and the state Technical Services for the provision of support/advice to liaison farmers, through group briefings, field visits or the production of radio broadcasts.

These liaison farmers are an important link in the introduction of new technologies and the dissemination of sustainable agricultural practices amongst members, but also amongst non-group members. They are key assets in the transfer of new knowledge and help compensate for the failures of the system put in place by the state. Mooriben's approach has the advantage of being cheap, flexible and very close to the producers.

Radios and cell communication

Within Mooriben's unions, the creation of communication cells and partnerships with radio stations are the result of an awareness from 2004 of internal communication deficiencies and lack of access to information in



rural areas. With the help of communication specialists, Mooriben developed a plan which provided for:

- Establishing a community radio station or partnership with an existing station,
- Training locally recruited radio presenters,
- Establishing communication cells that bring together representatives of the union and people from the areas concerned,
- The cells producing news programs on various themes in partnership with the union,
- The organisation of discussions to encourage villagers to express themselves,
- The listing and dissemination of grain prices, as well as rainfall forecasts.

This set up has existed since 2005 and currently 18 unions are involved. Up to 2009, it was funded as part of a project (specific funding, with its own goals, and so on). Starting this year, it has fit transversally into Mooriben's overall strategy. The radio station and the cell each have an account at the savings and credit cooperative, which holds their resources as surety. On the other hand, the credit cooperative, the inputs shop, the grain bank and the warrantage management committee, regularly seek out the cell and radio station to publicise their services to the community. The facilitators and union officials have also used the radio station to distribute their messages more widely to the members (opinions and press releases, meeting minutes, training session feedback, information and awareness-raising on various topics and so on).

The central role of the savings and credit cooperatives

Mooriben's decision to establish a savings and loans cooperative has been motivated by the desire to solve the problem of inadequate or even, in places, the complete lack of means of financing individual economic activities by members of the FO in general and agriculture in particular. Three assumptions underlay the establishment of these cooperatives managed directly by the FOs:

- The cost of credit could be gradually reduced over time (as it was understood that the FOs would not be wedded to the same profit imperative as a traditional source of funds such as a bank)
- The products offered would be tailored to the needs of farmers, particularly in terms of duration, and thus reduce the scourge of member indebtedness (resulting from equipment purchases in particular)

- Financing agricultural activities would be the priority (supply of inputs and agricultural equipment, agricultural products processing and storage activities, warrantage, marketing and so on).

Thus, since 2003, six savings and credit cooperatives have been created by Mooriben, sometimes with the support of an external operator. Some of them have been incorporated into an existing network. In addition, cooperatives have been set up in Mooriben unions by external operators operating on their own initiative (five unions involved)².

Savings and credit facilities play a central role in the integrated services system, not only to meet the significant financing needs of FO members by extending credit lines and mobilising local saving, but also by enabling other services to operate, such as IS, GB, communication cell and so on, which deposit their funds at the cooperatives.

Warrantage

Warrantage is a service involving the savings and credit cooperatives set up by Mooriben which is quite developed in Niger, that has a twofold objective: to ensure that farmers do not dump their crop production and to allow them to use their production (sacks of grain) as leverage to obtain credit. The principle is to store bags of grain at harvest, in exchange for credit to enable farmers to finance an income-generating activity. After six months, with revenues from the economic activity undertaken, the member repays the principal and interest to the savings and credit cooperative, and the stock is released. Meanwhile, Mooriben closely monitors the evolution of market prices and stocks are sold by producers at a higher price than that available at harvest: +89% for millet in 2008-2009, +330% for groundnut in 2009-2010. A portion of the stock of grain released after repayment is purchased by the GBs. Some households designate part of their stock for consumption during the lean period.

These annual transactions are financed partly with funds from the Federation (external grants), and partly by a loan taken out by the Federation from a national funding structure. In 2009, warrantage transactions amounted to 86 million FCFA francs, or €131,106, despite the poor harvest, while in 2008 Mooriben had to raise 137 million FCFA in order to meet demand.

²: Mooriben has tried two other strategies for making financing available to its members, apart from the creation of credit cooperatives - self-managed credit and credit lines from itself or external financial institutions.

Since 2003,
six savings and
credit cooperatives
have been created
by Mooriben.

An innovative system ... with problems

The ISS performs key functions in the service of FO members' activities in a challenging national context. Within this set up, of note is the central role played by savings and credit, given the particularly underdeveloped state of the rural microfinance sector and its very poor performance in Niger.

This system was therefore developed in 12 of Mooriben's 25 unions. These are the oldest and best structured unions. In other unions, there are embryonic ISSs which offer only one or a few services.

The ISS makes sense within the strategic shift made by Mooriben in 2009-2010 with the implementation of a strategic planning process that culminated in a multi-year plan (2010-2013) built around three pillars: economic services, political services and organisational development. With this global strategic approach Mooriben intends to make improvements in members' productivity a priority. To do so involves improving, assuring and extending the various services set up under the ISS.

This goal represents a major challenge, first, given the rapid growth in Mooriben's numbers³ and therefore the future expansion of the ISS, but also given the difficulties in managing the set up, as already observed in the unions where it is in place. These difficulties can be summarised as follows:

- ☛ Institutional weakness of unions and dependence on the Federation. The constraints identified in an external institutional assessment conducted in 2009, raise questions as to the viability of SSI. Without the existence of functional units and sufficient management capacity at the union level, the services may not function properly.
- ☛ The operation of various services is based largely on the capacity of the management committees that are in place (IS, GB, radio stations, credit cooperatives etc.) Courses are held regularly but there are continuing difficulties with regards to the responsibilities of the elected representatives of these committees. In addition, there is a relatively high turnover rate amongst these elected officials, which is a sign of dynamism, but one that disrupts the operation of services.
- ☛ The management of different services requires both good governance and proven technical capacity.

³: Over three years, from late 2006 to late 2009, enrolment at Mooriben grew by 148%.

However, in most cases, the unions tend to support the recruitment of people from within their communities and these individuals may not have sufficient skill levels to manage the services that are in place. This practice also limits the effectiveness of control by the wider membership.

- ☛ The functionality of the ISS also depends on effective monitoring and supervision by the Federation. As pointed out by the 2009 institutional assessment, close monitoring is inadequate, both in terms of frequency and in terms of methodology. It appears that the Federation operates rather as a «fireman» when serious faults occur. With strong growth in staff numbers and of the unions, the Federation's ability to perform its monitoring role is being questioned.
- ☛ Such an all-encompassing system requires a proper information management system, to evaluate the effectiveness of different services and to measure progress in improving members' productivity. Currently under construction, the information system does not allow for rigorous assessment the set up in its entirety.

Conclusion

The Integrated Services System put in place by Mooriben for its members thus appears to be both a home-grown solution, tailored to the diverse needs of farmers in Niger for the smooth running of their businesses, and more broadly as a civil society response to the withdrawal of the state from agriculture over almost two decades.

The ambitious and innovative of the system does not mean that exacting questions should not be asked of it. Has under-investment in rural Niger over several decades drawn a farmers' organisation such as Mooriben into performing very broad social and economic roles, which are ultimately too demanding in terms of management and professionalism? In other words, how far can a FO respond professionally to the needs expressed by its members? With respect to the evolution of Mooriben, what methodology and at what pace should the ISS be implemented in the new unions? And, at what cost? This last question returns to the issue of Mooriben controlling its rate of growth, which is a sensitive issue in a country where farmers are starved of support and membership in an umbrella organisation is seen as the sole means of accessing technical and financial resources, and quality services.

This issue of *Farming Dynamics* was written by Nedjma BENNEGOUCH, who is responsible for SOS Faim's partnerships in Niger, and Mamoudou HASSANE, MOORIBEN's Executive Secretary.

SOS Faim and the farmers' organisations

For several years, SOS Faim supports different farmers' organisations in Africa and Latin America. SOS Faim publishes *Farming Dynamics* which deals with the challenges faced by agricultural producers' and farmers' organisations in their development.

This publication is available for download in French, English and Spanish on SOS Faim's website: www.sosfaim.org.

Apart from *Farming Dynamics*, SOS Faim publishes another newsletter, **Zoom microfinance**: as with all development tools, we have to analyse the aims, models and implementation conditions of aid to microfinance institutions. It is with this purpose in mind that SOS Faim publishes *Zoom microfinance*.

This publication is also available for download in French, English and Spanish on SOS Faim's website: www.sosfaim.org.

SOS Faim – Agir avec le Sud

Rue aux Laines, 4
B-1000 Brussels - Belgium
Phone: 32-(0)2 511 22 38 **Fax** 32-(0)2 514 47 77
E-mail info.be@sosfaim.org

SOS Faim – Action pour le développement

88, rue Victor Hugo
L-4141 Esch-sur-Alzette - Luxembourg
Phone: 352-49 09 96 **Fax** 352-49 09 96 28
E-mail info-luxembourg@sosfaim.org

Editor: Freddy Destrait, rue aux Laines 4, B-1000 Brussels (Belgium).
Coordinator: Marine Lefebvre
Graphism: www.marmelade.be
Farming Dynamics is printed on recycled paper

Web site www.sosfaim.org

Farming Dynamics is produced with the support of the Belgian General Direction of International Cooperation and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Luxembourg.

The last issues of «Farming Dynamics» have dealt with the following topics:

n° 22

Realising the value of information in agriculture, the challenge taken up by Cameroonian periodicals *La Voix Du Paysan* (LVDP) and *The Farmers' Voice* (TFV)

n° 21

The development of the potato production chain in the Sahel Belt

n° 20

Mali – Office du Niger Can the farmers' movement push back agribusiness?

n° 19

A local dynamic is created around cereal banks: the case of «Facilitaors for Change Ethiopia» (FCE) in Oromia region

n° 18

Capitalising on a Process of Institutional Evolution in a Farmer's Organization (FO)

n° 17

Agricultural Interprofessional Organisations (IPO) in West Africa