Summary

Objectives and purpose

AVSF wants to improve its intervention mechanisms by putting an emphasis on providing support rather than transferring techniques or disseminating “best practices”. These cross-disciplinary experiences were compiled in order to analyse different experiences involving mechanisms to support agroecological transitions with AVSF’s assistance. These experiences were gained through three different development projects:

- Capacity-building for inclusive local economic development and food security in Yamaranguila, Honduras (2013–2016): “Yamaranguila” mechanism
- Supporting sustainable and resilient family farming in Togo’s Savanes region (2014–2018): “Résilience” mechanism

This analysis aims to identify important lessons to learn from in order to improve procedures and methodological tools.

Description of the mechanisms to support agroecological transitions

Zoloke project: a relay mechanism to persuade and train smallholder farmers

The Zoloke mechanism in Madagascar makes use of “farmers relays”, who communicate practices from person to person. Project experts or coordinators identify which practices the technicians on the ground should disseminate. The technicians train and provide special assistance to the farmers relays, whom they have selected beforehand in the villages in question. The farmers relays then apply those practices on plots of land reserved for demonstrations and encourage the other farmers in the villages to adopt them.

Résilience project: developing and disseminating practices, and overcoming obstacles that limit their adoption

In the Résilience mechanism in Togo, the creation of farmers field school has made it possible to test and adapt practices to the actual conditions that smallholder farmers face by conducting experiments involving groups of producers with an approach that is both participatory and scientific/technical. Moreover, efforts to disseminate practices (training, experience-sharing, dissemination of technical references, etc.) are combined with efforts to overcome “obstacles” when it comes to adopting those practices (transport of compost, development of lowlands market gardening, etc.).

Yamaranguila project: “experimentation centres” and smallholder competitions to stimulate local innovation processes

In the Yamaranguila mechanism in Honduras, the different activities carried out (a lot of experience-sharing and group reflection, organisation of smallholder competitions, support for “experimentation
centres”, etc.) focus more on stimulating local innovation processes than on disseminating information. Emphasis is placed on how producers analyse situations and identify problems.

Results obtained and difficulties encountered

The assessment and/or sharing of the three experiences has highlighted clear, but varied, improvement in the integration of agroecological practices, especially considering the ratio of persons supported to persons mobilised. Other results were highlighted too, such as: improvement in experimentation capacities, in dynamics for exchange at local level and in capacities for individual and collective management in the Résilience mechanism; greater self-esteem for smallholder farmers and development of their ability to self-assess their problems and find solutions in the Yamaranguila mechanism. Those improvements were identified as an important factor for the viability of the processes and dynamics supported.

The difficulties expressed by the teams in charge of implementing the mechanisms differ depending on the mechanism

For the Zoloke mechanism, the teams had trouble getting the relays to play their full role (lack of resources, conviction or motivation). They also wonder whether the mechanism is viable. For the Résilience mechanism, the teams were uncertain about the change of scale for disseminating practices once those practices have been validated by the farmers field school. In the Yamaranguila mechanism, the focus is mainly on two complementary issues that also have to do with changes in scale: How to get more villages involved in efforts to change practices? And how to get more people involved in those efforts within each village?

Analysis of the mechanisms in place and the ideas on which they are based

Zoloke mechanism: emphasis on dissemination, but in interaction with local social dynamics

This mechanism focuses on helping others change their practices. It has two functions: to persuade and to train and inform. The idea is to “raise awareness” and “help smallholder farmers realise” the benefits of the project’s technical proposals. Once we have succeeded in “getting the message across”, the next step is to train the smallholder farmers so that they are able to implement those new practices in the best way possible. Analysis of its implementation, however, has revealed that there are important interactions with already-existing social dynamics. Those interactions may be positive: the activities carried out naturally led to discussions as well as exchange and debates (often informal) which consolidated over time around farmers relays. They explain the results obtained with regard to the “dissemination” of practices. Making greater use of these dynamics of experimentation and exchange would help make the intervention more efficient. Plus, if the social system and the usual forms of cooperation within social groups were taken into account more, it would help avoid the negative effects observed after the support specifically provided to the farmers relays.

Résilience mechanism: a “positivist” mechanism where farmers field school have created forums for exchange

The entire Résilience mechanism is based on a “positivist” idea of reality, under the assumption that development-related issues are “objective” parts of reality that can be identified as an integral part of a given situation. Based on that principle, the intervention proposals were formulated fundamentally through the vision and analysis of external experts. When the mechanism was set up, that idea was balanced by a better understanding and recognition of the way in which the target groups perceive and analyse their situation. The inauguration of farmers field school has created a whole new forum for sharing experiences and conducting experiments, where smallholder farmers assess their own situation and try to come up with solutions to their crop-related problems. Those comparative tests were designed and carried out as experiments of alternatives to the problems that smallholder farmers face.

Yamaranguila mechanism: an intervention mechanism with a focus on stimulating local innovation processes

The activities of the Yamaranguila mechanism were designed and implemented in a way that seeks to stimulate local innovation processes. Just like with the farmers field school, those activities are based on a constructivist approach according to which problems are not inherent but rather are social constructs. In this mechanism, emphasis is placed on understanding how smallholder farmers analyse situations and identify problems. The activities then aim to work with producers to help them improve their ability to find and develop solutions that are suitable for them. It’s all about interactive participation (or self-mobilisation) of local groups whose capacity for taking initiative has been strengthened. Nevertheless, analyses performed in several villages to determine the origin of the smallholder farmers participating in the activities of the Yamaranguila project have shown that, by using community leaders as a point of access to communities, the mechanism has concentrated the activities only in certain sectors of the villages in question.

Main conclusions and lessons

Better understanding and recognition of the social dimensions at play when changing practices

For producers, changing practices involves collective processes for producing know-how in order to solve problems that they encounter from their own point of view. It depends fundamentally on the intensity (frequency of dialogue and number of people involved) and quality (issues debated, diversity of ideas and experiences compiled, to resolve a given problem) of dialogue within local social groups. It is therefore particularly important to identify those local social groups and take them into account when considering intervention mechanisms and monitoring changes in practices.

The need to (re)-define the objectives of the intervention mechanism

In line with current ideas concerning agroecology, it is important to ask oneself what it actually means to implement mechanisms to support “agroecological transitions”. In any case, the mechanisms will become more meaningful and efficient if they are based on an adequate understanding of how change processes actually function. Moreover, transitioning from an approach that focuses on the dissemination of practices to one that seeks to assist others with local change processes opens up new possibilities for achieving the different objectives sought. The conclusion and lessons learned confirm that view.

Making sure that intervention mechanisms aim to help others solve problems

The initial steps of the diagnostic analysis must include getting to know the local social structures and taking into account the way in which the target groups perceive and analyse their situation. The situation must serve as a reference point for mobilising producers and identifying the problems that smallholder farmers face. The next step is to think about carrying out other activities, particularly training programmes [content, form, timing], depending on how useful they are in terms of finding solutions. It is also important to combine efforts to help others change their practices with activities and strategies for overcoming obstacles to adopting them.

Using tools that directly stimulate local innovation processes

In the different experiences, several tools had a very positive impact when it came to changing practices: experience-sharing between producers, participatory experiments [with farmers field school, experimentation centres, etc.] and smallholders competitions.

Revising the role and improving the skills of the development agents in charge of these mechanisms

Stimulating and providing better assistance for local innovation processes both require, first and foremost, a change in agents’ views regarding the way in which changes occur in rural areas. That change goes hand-in-hand with rethinking their own role and position, which needs to shift towards supporting changes linked to agroecological transitions. That requires first providing the project teams with the means to perform analyses in order
to better identify and understand the social dimensions at play in these processes. **Development agents must then be given methodological tools** to help them adopt an approach that aims to improve smallholder farmers’ ability to reflect and produce know-how: tools **to help express concerns and then transform those concerns into manageable problems and tools to help find solutions.**

Ensuring adequate resources and flexibility, and creating the right conditions for putting the mechanisms to good use

Most interventions are carried out through projects where priorities are dictated vertically and tend to involve strict compliance with what is stated in the project document. The establishment of working conditions, with a focus on supporting change (with everything that it entails in terms of invention, readjustments needed as the activities are carried out and results achieved, and depending on the priorities of the target groups), therefore requires **new visions and skills in project management.** An important factor is giving oneself enough flexibility to be able to adapt the activities and the use of resources, while maintaining sufficient clarity and precision, particularly with respect to sponsors, in terms of objectives, results and resources to employ.

Taking advantage of that flexibility requires encouraging independent thinking and work at “project-team” level, and placing great emphasis on group learning as a team when it comes to monitoring and learning from activities. It needs to be possible to adapt the support mechanisms, while they are in progress, to changes in context as well as to any breakthroughs or difficulties encountered.