

These young professionals can gain experience, develop their professional network and learn from farmers. Part of their job is to cope with unforeseen problems and to document the process in order to provide feedback to research. The producers get a chance to test new technologies in otherwise risk-averse environments. The young professionals team up with local young farmers, who are members of the collaborating farmers' groups and left school early but are literate. This collaboration is crucial as the young farmers have local knowledge, are trusted by their group and can help in day-to-day monitoring. Throughout the eight-month period, the young professionals are coached by the experienced field agents in the district.

As poverty is one of the main factors hindering technology adoption,

we invest in the innovation process and development of financial capital. At the end of the season, farmers' groups will sell the produce that they grew on their experimental field or that they transformed in the improved processing unit. This money will be used to establish an autonomous micro-credit system, which field agents at the district office will help to manage. The young professionals are encouraged to save part of their income earned as service providers during the eight-month period. Savings will help them to develop their own business. Farmers' groups and district teams assess the potential of technologies for growth and identify business opportunities, in farming or processing but also in the trade and service sectors. Towards the end of the farming season, young professionals and farmers' groups develop business plans around

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their ideas. Alongside farming and processing, areas of particular interests include seed production, agricultural inputs, provision of mechanical services and marketing.

The team at AfricaRice are presently designing a package of business development services with experts. In 2018, the project will support promising business proposals during their start-up phase, e.g. with e-learning modules on business development, face-to-face coaching on entrepreneurship and other services that help create a better business environment and investment climate.

“The real problem is the lack of models of success”

Samadi Rutherford runs a small agropastoral and fish farm in northern Benin. The AgriSam company he has founded specialises in the production and sale of animal feed, but is also a start-up centre for young agricultural entrepreneurs.



Mr Rutherford, why is your start-up centre for young farm managers so important?

Our vision is to solve the problems of underemployed youth – students from the agricultural sector who have either dropped out of their studies or have graduated but are nevertheless uncertain about their future. Our centre seeks to offer these people new prospects. In Benin, the population is and will remain young. And there is a high rate of poverty that results at least partly from a poorly focused education system.

What are the biggest problems young farmers face in your region?

The real problem is the lack of models of success in agricultural entrepreneurship and insufficient training. Furthermore, there is no framework for social reconversions. Access to financial resources and land is lacking, as are investment structures for water control and access to seeds and other inputs.

How do you help young people going into business?

As soon as the young people are in our centre, we encourage them to come up with their own ideas, and then we offer them suitable training. As members of our partnership system, they can sell their products on a formal basis. The initiative is voluntary and private, and we currently receive no government support.

Samadi Rutherford started his family farm in 2010. Since 2016, young people seeking farming occupations have been trained on the farm. It takes on trainees from agricultural colleges and students of agriculture as well as locals. The AgriSam Centre employs four full-time and eight temporary staff.

What did you miss in your own (professional) training?

It did not provide me with a background in agricultural production techniques and agricultural management.

What do young people in Benin need to have a future in agriculture? Where could the government help?

To cope with unemployment among young people, the government should support private agricultural centres like mine by offering training on innovations and production. Security of land tenure and the establishment of a bank adapted to the requirements in agriculture are further important aspects. In addition, the government ought to finance or subsidise investments. Access to high-quality inputs like seed and fertilisers is absolutely crucial. And these inputs ought to be tax-free. What I would also like to see is structuring for hydro-agricultural development and water control. And our young farmers lack agricultural machinery for production and processing. Furthermore, young agricultural entrepreneurs must have the opportunity to organise in associations.