



Deutscher Tropentag, October 11-13, 2005, Hohenheim

“The Global Food & Product Chain—  
Dynamics, Innovations, Conflicts, Strategies”

## Analysing the Integration of the Village Level Participatory Approach into the Extension System in Benin

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### Abstract

Since 1985, the Training and Visits System (TVS) has been the cornerstone of agricultural extension approach in Benin. The use of TVS helped particularly to improve cotton crop production, and made it the most important cash crop in the country. However farmers displayed an evident disaffection for extension activities because their real needs were not taken into account. To better address the needs of farmers, the Village Level Participatory Approach (VLPA) was developed and experimented with the support of the World Bank. This experimentation involved 600 villages from 1999 to 2002. A plan is made to generalise it to the whole country. This paper analysed the strengths and weaknesses of the integrated approach, basing on its implementation in 17 villages in Bembereke district in the North Benin. Analysis showed that the VLPA tended to reinforce the resources management and auto-promoting capacities within the rural communities. In contrary, TVS focused on individual farms and targeted the increasing of the productivity and income through the transfer and diffusion of innovations. Both systems required different methodology and professional capability from extension agents. While the TVS agents need great technical skills and knowledge on adult training, the VLPA call for better capability in group animation and survey. On the one hand, extension was not a high priority according to the participatory planning. On the other hand, except soil fertility problems, the others agricultural issues for which extension services are requested concerned only less than 36 % of the villages. Regardless this order and difference in priorities, the same extension topics were systematically developed in all the villages. To increase the efficacy of the integration of VLPA and TVS in Benin, the analysis and training capacity of existing extension agents should be reinforced and training topics should be decided on a case by case basis. This may require changes in the way the TVS was carried out. Lots of care should be also taken where dealing with sensitive issues related to health, water and infrastructures. The VLPA is a valuable tool in Benin context, where a decentralisation process is going on.

**Keywords:** Benin, extension, integration, training and visit system, village level participatory approach