THE SASAKAWA AFRICA FUND FOR EXTENSION EDUCATION INITIATIVE IN MALI

Assa KANTE¹, Michael Craig EDWARDS² and Cindy BLACKWELL³

¹SAFE, Magnambougou Faso Kanu, Rue 6885, Porte 419, BPE 3541, Bamako, Mali
²451 Agricultural Hall, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma 74078-6032, USA
³School of Mass Communication and Journalism, 207F College Hall, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS 39406, USA

Corresponding Author: akante@field.winrock.org

ABSTRACT
The performance of extension agents and agencies in Africa has been questioned. Calls to provide more professional development are pervasive. This study assessed the views of extension agents who had completed the SAFE training program regarding their experiences with Supervised Enterprise Projects (SEPs) as a tool for serving clients. Semi-structured, focus group interviews were used to collect data. The graduates’ concerns in regard to difficulties and constraints associated with the SEPs included cost, supervisory practices, project scope, and standards for project reporting and thesis writing. The SEPs needed systematic financial support, more effective supervision, a standardized reporting format, and networking with potential funders.

Keywords: Extension, Training, Supervised enterprise projects.

INTRODUCTION
It is essential to have qualified extension agents not only for the delivery of scientific knowledge elaborated by research and made available through public and private distribution channels, but also to assist people in analyzing and solving problems and improving their livelihoods. In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), particularly, extension education is important for the improvement of food security. A challenge is that many extension personnel hold a low level of formal education vis-à-vis their job requirements (Davis, 2008; Mutimba, Mangheni, & Matsiko, 2007; Ogunlade et al., 2008). A strategy to overcome this dilemma was to invest in the professional development of extension agents, which led to creation of a training program by the Sasakawa Africa Fund for
Extension Education (SAFE). SAFE's training program aims at improving the job performance of mid-career extension professionals in parts of Africa (http://www.saa-safe.org). The program was extended to Mali in 2002; thereafter, 150 mid-career extension professionals have been trained (Traoré, 2008).

The SAFE training program was established to upgrade the skills of mid-career extension professionals by “1) involv[ing] agricultural colleges and universities in the rural development process, and 2) strengthen[ing] the competencies of Extension workers in order to serve small farmers and meet their needs” (SAFE brochure, n.d., p. 1). Other than content-driven, “seat time” instruction, another component of SAFE's professional development program is the Supervised Enterprise Project (SEP).

This facet of the SAFE training program links theory to practice and highlights learning by experience. The Extension educators develop and implement projects with farmers under the supervision of college/university faculty and the trainees' employers. The SEPs include aspects of experiential learning, internships, and coaching. The SEPs are field-based projects organized collaboratively and conducted to solve the real-life problems of farmers (Mutimba et al., 2007). The SEPs include an action research component, which begins with assessing a community's needs and selecting a need for which to develop a proposal.

The project is implemented at the community level under the guidance of faculty members and employers during the last six to eight months of the SAFE training program. Supervisors evaluate participants' SEPs on two primary criteria: a) appropriate use of problem- and project-based approaches to facilitate clients solving their problems; and b) communication of these solutions for use more widely, including the completion of research theses.

The experiential learning theory was relevant to understanding the SAFE graduates' encounters with SEPs. The SEP approach links theory to real-life situations and experiential learning opportunities. The development and implementation of SEPs require the SAFE trainees to use a participatory process to identify problems and implement their projects. This approach is similar to the stakeholder-driven, community-based learning projects.
involving the co-creation of knowledge, as described by Navarro (2008). Further, Kolb (1984) postulated that concrete or real-life experience and reflection are central components of experiential learning. This may include “real experience, concrete experience, reflective thinking, observational learning, abstract conceptualization, risk and responsibility, active experimentation, and teacher-as-facilitator” (Knobloch, 2003, p. 25) methods.

SEPs are appropriate examples of experiential learning because trainees are immersed in the practical activities of real-life situations. They apply participatory principles and approaches to develop projects leading to resolution of the local problems identified by their clients (i.e., the beneficiaries). The professional development of the SAFE trainees is intended to prepare them to solve their clients' problems. As graduates, the trainees are expected to be change agents who demonstrate self-efficacy in addressing the challenges of Mali's farmers by using the SEP approach.

METHODOLOGY
The study's two-fold purpose was to 1) describe graduates' views on the difficulties and constraints of participating in SEPs during the SAFE training and 2) suggest recommendations for improving this aspect of the training in the future.

The study's participants included male and female SAFE training graduates in Mali. Most were in their mid-forties, with an average of 17 years of professional experience in the agricultural sector or related fields. They were civil service employees who completed the Maitrise en Vulgarisation Agricole (MVA), which meant they earned a Bachelor of Science (BSc.) degree through the training program. The researchers used an up-to-date list of the program's graduates, as provided by the SAFE coordinators in Mali. To organize and schedule the study's semi-structured, focus group interviews, maximal variation (Creswell, 2005) was used to select participants and their interview locations. The criteria included density of graduates by region, agriculture and livestock activities, as well as geographical region. The graduates were drawn from the District of Bamako and two of Mali's eight regions, Koulikoro and Mopti, to increase the likelihood of the groups being representative of the trainees overall.
The lead researcher was a female, which could be construed as a limitation of the study; however, the interviews were conducted with a male assistant. Moreover, because it has been argued that some African women may be reticent to express themselves freely and candidly in the presence of men (Kiamba, 2008), a female only focus group was convened and interviewed.

Focus groups can be used for many purposes, such as needs assessment, planning, and evaluation, as well as to assist in identifying and illuminating the way participants experience a program (Krueger, 1994). To ensure validity of the study's interview guide, a draft of the interview questions was shared with a panel of experts for review and feedback. The panel included Winrock International's Senior Program Officer for Enterprise and Agriculture, SAFE's West Africa Coordinator, and four faculty members in agriculture at [. . .] University. As a result, the graduates were asked two open-ended questions regarding their experiences with clients and the SEPs: 1) What constraints have you encountered when implementing aspects of SEPs with your clients? 2) How could the SEPs portion of the SAFE training be improved to better meet your needs as an Extension educator?

Probing questions (Creswell, 2005) were also asked to gain additional information from the participants. The interviews were audio-taped and documented in a notebook during 2010, and transcribed later by the researcher. Audio tapes were used to store the data and retrieve later for analysis. The process of audio tape-based analysis involved six steps, as recommended by Krueger (1994). The focus group interviews were conducted in French and translated into English by the lead researcher who is Malian and a fluent speaker of French and English.

The study's focus group interviews included two mixed gender groups (five and seven members, respectively), one all male group of three, and an all female group of six. The researcher and her assistant asked questions, recorded answers, and took notes. The interviews lasted about two hours each. The account of the interviews was based on transcripts derived from the audio recordings and the interviewers' notes. The participants' responses are reported around two themes, inclusive of various sub-themes, and congruent with the two primary questions.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Theme One: Constraints and Difficulties Encountered with SEPs as a Training Approach
The graduates revealed that the lack of systematic financial support was a major obstacle. With the exception of the first two classes of the SAFE training program, participants either struggled to have their projects funded by financial institutions, or, in some cases, used personal funds to finance projects. The World Bank had provided funding that supported the stipends and supervision of SEPs for the earlier cohorts of trainees (D. Togola, personal communication, December 2009). One graduate reported that

[t]his assistance disappeared with time may be because the SAFE program honored its engagement and the government institutions were unable to pay for their contributions. The assistance allocated to SEP implementation was around 120,000 FCFA (~$220 USD) at its start; this was then reduced by half, and finally was stopped.

The graduates reported to perceive that, because most were civil service workers, the SAFE program's administrators assumed they could get support from their employers to implement the SEPs. As they explained, some of the SEPs were supported by employers, but this was not the case for others. A shared experience by most was articulated by one of the graduates:

If we used our own money to support projects, this means that we played another role. Instead of being helpers we became funders or donors. We mounted projects and we were forced to implement them. We were required to find funds.

The graduates recognized the value of being involved in local village life, but it was also costly, especially if the trainee had personal social responsibilities. Moving between their families and the villages meant additional expenses. One graduate explained:

“. . if there is a possibility to get, even a little scholarship for the students throughout the SAFE training period, this will help them a lot to focus on school and some motivation to continue.”

As trainees, the graduates needed to work on topics relevant to the villagers' problems. Therefore, they needed assistance to
implement these types of SEPs or risk losing the confidence of their clients. One participant stated: “[t]he villagers have always said, they come all the time to interrogate us and there is nothing after that.”

Another difficulty was the quality of supervision the graduates received during implementation of their SEPs. They explained that the supervision of SEPs was planned and conducted by SAFE's academic staff as well as their employers. The employers were informed about what their employees were doing in the SAFE training program, but they were not involved deeply in their work, nor did the employers have a clear understanding of the SEP approach. The graduates perceived that some of the faculty members, who were not involved actively in teaching the trainees but served as their projects' supervisors, lacked an understanding of SAFE's training process generally, and knowledge of the SEPs specifically. The graduates asserted that they needed specialized supervision compared to other students. Most complained about the unequal knowledge of supervisors regarding the spirit of the SAFE training program and the methods the graduates used to conduct research on their projects. One graduate said this:

Our employers and also most of the professors who were not involved in the MVA did not understand this approach. . . . during the defense of our theses, we encountered many problems with some professors because they did not understand the approach we used with the SEPs.

Moreover, other graduates indicated that a few supervisors behaved more as inspectors or “fault finders” rather than as helpers and advisors. This form of supervision was not appreciated by some of the graduates. The evaluation process of the SEPs was also considered overly rigorous and not done uniformly for all trainees. One graduate expressed this grievance:

Reduce the rigor in the evaluation of SEPs. The supervisors should come as advisors and help us find solutions to the problems we encountered on the ground, instead of coming as policemen.”

A trainee's SEP also should have served as a research study that culminated in a thesis. Some of the graduates, however, had been at
risk of repeating their final year of training because they could not get funds to support their SEPs, or the nature of their projects did not allow them to produce results in time to complete a thesis. In an extreme case, a student was unable to defend his thesis because the student's graduate committee contended it was not valid without the inclusion of findings. Even though this individual worked hard, he could not meet the deadlines of his thesis defense.

Some graduates speculated whether the SEPs should be focused solely on the clients' problems, or rather more on projects that were realistic in the time frame allocated. One graduate shared this view:

“Where the problem exists is the requirement to present the results at the thesis defense. There are projects which can be implemented and you get the results immediately. There are others which take a long time before you get the results; in this case, the student is in trouble if she cannot present findings/results”

The graduates stressed that the six to eight month period in which to show results was too short. The scope of the projects presented a different kind of difficulty faced by some of the graduates. They held an opinion that the scope of the participatory diagnostic approach was not specified clearly. Although the SEPs were selected using a participatory approach, they should have focused primarily on agricultural projects.

Farmers have an array of problems but the graduates expressed they were unable to address all of them. It was the graduates' position overall that infrastructure and health issues should not be considered when choosing a SEP. Another difficulty, which was related mostly to the quality and effectiveness of the supervisors, was the writing and reporting format of their research findings.

The graduates indicated the terminology used in writing reports was a source of controversy, e.g., some of their advisors proposed different terms for the same concept. The order of presenting information in the theses was also a topic of debate among supervisors and students. Some faculty members said the literature review should be in the appendices, but others contended it was an important part of the thesis and should appear in the body of the manuscript. In regard to scholarly writing, supervisors preferred
different reporting styles. The graduates explained that this created difficulties and caused them to speculate on which writing style to use from one course to another.

**Theme Two: Suggestions to Improve SEPs as a SAFE Training Approach in the Future**

The graduates expressed that SEPs as a training approach was a good initiative and an important component of the SAFE training program but could be improved. They said that feasible alternatives existed to improve the SEP experience for future training classes. A source of financial support could be ongoing projects (programs) at local, national, and international levels. These projects' leaders should be informed of the value of SEPs and sensitized to the trainees' initiatives. The graduates all agreed that it was compulsory to find financial support to conduct the SEPs properly. One of the study participants observed:

“[i]n my opinion, if the SAFE program has a weakness, it is the lack of financial support for the SEPs. As someone already indicated, [from] what the first class benefited, the second class did not, and so on.”

Some of the graduates indicated their employers should contribute financially to the training. The graduates also proposed soliciting government funding to support the SEPs, which would include the costs related to project implementation and supervision. They assumed such funds could be coordinated by the National Directorate of Agriculture and managed jointly with the Institut Polytechnique Rurale/Institut de Formation et de Recherche Appliquée, SAFE's institutional collaborator in Mali. A steering committee, which might include a representative of SAFE's alumni association, could assist in the selection of projects to be supported.

The graduates suggested the thesis research should be separated from trainees' SEPs, and that students could be allowed to choose topics that would not involve a lot of struggle for funding to fulfill the BSc. degree requirement. Another alternative they proposed was to stop at the project elaboration stage, i.e., the presentation of a project proposal would be sufficient. Furthermore, the graduates proposed that all supervisors should be involved in the academic portion of the SAFE training program to gain a better
understanding of the approach and its processes. The supervisors also should be trained in research methodology and scientific writing to update their knowledge and skills. Thereafter, the supervisors should agree on a uniform writing format or style to be followed when developing reports and theses. The graduates also suggested that support of the Association of Malian Agricultural Extensionists (AMVA) was needed so its members could serve as advocates supporting Extension education in Mali. They perceived the AMVA would become stronger and might provide scholarships for trainees in the future.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
The aim of SEPs was to build the capacity of extension educators to empower farmers to solve problems such that their livelihoods improved (Mutimba et al., 2007). Some graduates, however, emphasized the difficulties related to the supervision in addition to the lack of financial support to conduct the SEPs. Supervision was perceived by the graduates as controlling or “inspecting” instead of coaching and facilitating. They also described the ineffectiveness of some supervisors and their having insufficient understanding of the SEP process and the SAFE training program's spirit in general. Further, the graduates indicated that the lack of a thesis style manual to follow in reporting their results was problematic. The rather limited involvement of employers in the program also undermined the success of the graduates' SEPs.

The graduates' recommendations for improving the SEP component of future SAFE training included getting more support from funding agencies/donors, obtaining the commitment of employers to support the trainees' SEPs, soliciting government funds for the support of SEPs, separating SEPs from the research required for BSc. degree completion, developing the supervisors' capacity to evaluate SEPs, empowering the AMVA to play the role of “advocate” for the support of Extension education in Mali, and expanding financial aid for the entire program. Regarding the funding of SEPs, micro-lending opportunities should be explored and coupled with securing the commitment of beneficiaries to endorse the contracts with micro loan agencies to guarantee the repayment of loans.

For the improved involvement and commitment of all actors, SAFE
officials should organize an annual workshop to communicate expectations to employers, faculty members, trainees, and farmers as well as to address their concerns. A thesis style manual should be adopted for use by the trainees, faculty, and supervisors in reporting on the SEPs. An advisory committee should be created to make recommendations regarding future direction of the SAFE training program in Mali.

Further research is also needed to describe the views of farmers (Navarro, 2008) who participate in the trainees' SEPs. What are their views on how they benefit and why? Which aspects of the relationship could be improved, especially in regard to acquiring knowledge and practices useful for solving problems constraining their livelihoods? Future research should also seek to quantify any sustainable commune-level effects that can be attributed to the SEPs. In addition, researchers should examine the relationships between male trainees and female farmers as well as vice versa to understand the impact of cultural norms that may be influencing their work (Freeman & Richardson, 2005). Further, to gain a more understanding of issues related to supervising SEPs, assessing the supervisors' views on their experiences with SEPs and how supervision could be improved is recommended.

REFERENCES


addresses (where the actual work was done) must be written below names and surnames. All affiliations with a lower-case superscript letter immediately after the author's name and in front of the appropriate address. The full postal address of each affiliation must be indicated. The e-mail address of each author must be included.

(7) The abstract with a maximum of 150 words must describe the purpose of the research and its main findings.

(8) Maximum 5 keywords must appear on the first page, separated by a comma.

(9) The main text must be normally structured in Introduction, Materials and Methods, Findings and Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations, Acknowledgements, References.

(10) Footnotes, except for table footnotes, must be avoided whenever possible. If necessary, they must be identified with superscript Arabic numbers.

(11) Displayed formulae must be numbered consecutively throughout the manuscript as (1), (2), etc. against the left-hand margin of the page. The text must be understandable without reading the formulae. Do not embed "graphically designed" equations but prepare them by using the word processor's facility.

(12) Abbreviations. Because of the international character of JES, no rigid rules concerning notation or abbreviation need to be observed by the Authors but each paper must be self-consistent as to symbols and units which must be properly defined.

(Cont. on page 92)