

# Farmer strategies

## The history and utility of a multi-disciplinary concept in Francophone development studies

by Jean Pierre Chauveau

*The observation that farmers have good reason to do what they do is a long-established one, which, J. P. Chauveau suggests, can be traced back to 'perceptive researchers of the colonial era'. But all too often farmer decision-making has been explained simplistically, by reference to the 'logic of extensive cultivation' or the 'priority of subsistence'.*

*This article introduces an empirical and multidisciplinary approach to analysing farmer strategies which attempts to move beyond such generalisations. Its most obvious practical value is perhaps that it appears to offer the best opportunity to date for understanding conflicts between the 'technical rationality' of project interventions and 'the logic of the farmer' – in other words why farmers fail to fit in with experts' plans for them. But, the author concludes, the real merit of the strategic approach is the much greater demands that it leads experts impose on themselves.*

### Historical origins of the concept

In the 1980s, the concept of farmer strategy became widespread in the francophone literature on West African agriculture. Researchers and practitioners from various disciplines (agronomy, geography, rural economy, sociology and anthropology) were concerned to reorient both academic analysis and development practice on farmer decision making in situations of great uncertainty.

The observation that farmers have good reason to do what they do is a long-established one. Notions of consistency and rationality of indigenous agricultural practices and of farmer decision-making were advanced by perceptive researchers in the colonial era to explain the lack of fit between the plans for transfer of technology and the results which were actually achieved. The development of the participatory approach in the francophone milieu in the 1970s helped to make it more systematic. This work was undertaken mainly by networks such as AMIRA and AFIRD, research centres such as ORSTOM, INRA and CIRAD<sup>1</sup> and non-governmental organizations/consultancy groups.

The aim has been to investigate the conflicts between the technical rationality of the intervention and the logic of the farmer. On the one hand, development projects see the mastery of the environment exclusively in terms of

technical control, and development as the growth of production through increased output per unit area. On the other, African farmers favour risk minimization, returns to labour (rather than to area), flexibility in the allocation of labour and the use of extensive techniques to establish control over land. The 'logic of extensive cultivation' can be put forward to take account of farmer reactions to projects in situations both of relative land surplus (to maximize returns to labour) and of relative land shortage (to maximize control over land).

The contribution of the concept of strategy is that it forces one to focus on the fact that farmers are *actors*. This allows the hypothesis of consistency and logic of farmer behaviour to be developed by means of a more subtle scheme of interpretation of their aims and functions than hitherto, using empirical observation of their practices and analysis of their decisions. Rarely applied in the explicit sense before the 1980s, the concept of farmer strategy (and thus of decision-making) is now commonplace to describe farmer practices, the reproduction of the farm household, the nature of innovations, and the reaction of small farmers to project interventions.

### Farmer practices and technical models

The agronomists were the first to systematically compare the technical models proposed by the researchers with the actual processes of technical change. What is good for the agronomist is not necessarily good for the farmer. The analysis of the practices of African farmers (i.e. the details of their actual behaviour) requires one not to lose sight of the link between the techniques and the people who have to implement them. The practices relate to the choices and the decisions which arise out of the demands of the whole enterprise; they are thus linked to objectives and personal circumstance, as well as to the social context and local situation (and thereby, indeed, to the history of the society).

What are the underlying aims which give rise to the farm practices? The priority given by African farmers to issues of subsistence and security is the most frequently cited, but this is

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**African farmers give priority to issues of subsistence and security: but this broad generalisation does not help towards understanding the multiplicity of farmers' objectives, and the hierarchies and varying time-frames that they involve.**

too broad to permit an understanding of the full range of instances and the variety of practices which can be applied in the same circumstances. The contribution the analyst can make is not to be satisfied with this level of generality but to demonstrate, through the study of the sequence of the decisions made to direct, organize and control the production process, the multiplicity of the farmer's objectives, and the hierarchies and varying time-frames that they involve. One can thus discern the hierarchy of decisions. For example, certain choices influence subsequent decisions; thus, the strategic choice of a sequence of rotation affects the subsequent tactical choices as regards the specific cultivation practices to be implemented on the farmer's field.

hand with the need for flexibility. Some examples follow.

1. *The units of production are arenas of debate between different social and economic functions.* Within the family farm the different functions of production and reproduction do not usually overlap (Gastellu, 1978). The functions of residence, production, consumption and accumulation (particularly through inheritance) involve different groups of actors, different social roles, and different methods of economic decision-making and social control. Of necessity, negotiation implies the weighing-up of multiple objectives and strategies.

2. *The units of production are arenas of debate between actors having different, indeed contradictory, interests and aims.* The strategies of



Harvesting rice, Burkina Faso: the existence of several social categories within the farm family implies differing objectives within the farm holding

Ron Gilling / Panos Pictures

**Unit of production and strategies of social reproduction**

The decisions of small farmers and agricultural producers are never taken in a mechanistic way because they involve several different considerations. This has two implications. On the one hand, the activity of agricultural production is only one element in the process of social and economic reproduction. The analysis of farmer strategies must therefore take account of the objectives of the process of reproduction, for which the systems of production are merely one means, and not an end in themselves. On the other hand, the need for farmers to take into account multiple, and sometimes conflicting, constraints and objectives goes hand in

different categories of actor vary within each unit. The position of each person within the household unit gives rise to different interests and objectives which are reflected in the way the unit operates. The existence of several social categories within the farm family (the young, women, the elders, etc.) thus implies differences of objectives within each farm holding (Ancey, 1975).

3. *The farm units do not correspond to fixed categories but to different types, strategies and developmental paths.* The project practitioner is usually confronted by a mis-match between the social categories within the local populations, the evolving systems of social stratification, and the social differences which

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**...it is difficult to distinguish between those aspects of farmer behaviour which involve adaptation to environmental conditions and those which involve strategies of innovation in the proper sense of the term.'**

**Different types of farmer response to intervention:**

- rejection,
- avoidance and informal resistance,
- partial adoption of technical packages (resulting in the distortion of project aims),
- capture of the project by particular interest groups.

emerge within the project (Marty, 1986). It is necessary to take a dynamic view of the movements of the various actors in relation to their changes in class status.

4. *The strategies of producers and the trajectories of the production units are inseparable from their social, economic and political environment.* This point marks a divergence between the 'strategies' approach and the 'agrarianist' approach which, in line with a populist ideology, overplays the link between the peasant way of life and the activity of agricultural production. The latter approach ignores or underestimates those activities either derived from agriculture or outside of it, which figure as constraints or resources in the definition of the strategies of different categories of producers (for example, the relations between farmers and traders and markets, or migratory and urban strategies).

#### **Strategies of innovation?**

In a situation of overall uncertainty, the African farmer is required to show not only a capacity but an obligation for initiative. According to some writers this justifies talk of a permanent capacity for innovation the expression of which will depend on the situation and aims of the actors concerned.

The capacity for innovation is evident not only in periods of expansion but also in situations of retrenchment or open crisis. For example, African planters have devised strategies of response to the crisis in perennial crop production. These have involved innovations that have generally gone unnoticed by the official extension services (which are still very much influenced by technico-scientific models). In the even more demanding conditions of agriculture in the Sahel, 'recherche-développement' studies have brought to light the extent of the adaptive and innovative strategies even in conditions of extreme climatic hazards and economic vulnerability of the small farm household.

CIRAD-SAR has identified two types of producer strategies. 'Defensive strategies' aim to defend and maintain the standard of living. Though modest, such innovations do permit farmers to cope with the challenges in their environment, whether physical or economic (risk limitation, food security, etc.). 'Offensive strategies' aim to improve the standard of living. They are based on new productive mixes requiring capital growth. They are therefore both more risky and more monetized. Farmers combine these two types of strategy, only getting involved in ambitious processes of innovation in economic and institutional

contexts which offer both guaranteed markets for produce and guaranteed credit for input supply.

It is however difficult to distinguish between those aspects of farmer behaviour which involve adaptation to environmental conditions and those which involve strategies of innovation in the proper sense of the term. On the one hand, responding to a changing environment does not necessarily imply a deliberate attempt to change factor combinations, though this may be the ultimate effect. On the other hand, important technical and organizational innovations can serve to reinforce 'traditional' structures of production.

#### **Farmer responses to interventions**

Farmers adopt different responses to different forms of intervention: firstly, rejection, pure and simple; secondly, avoidance and informal resistance (absenteeism, passive resistance, tacit acts of sabotage, etc.); thirdly, partial adoption of technical packages ending up in the distortion of the project aims – for example when animal traction leads to the extension of the system of cultivation, rather than (the intended) intensification, or when inputs are diverted from cash to food crops); and finally, capture of the project by particular interest groups; etc.

Social anthropological studies have shown that the strategies of control over land, mobilisation of economic resources and status considerations are as important as the search for security or maximization of returns (to labour or unit area). As regards agricultural extension, a good understanding of power relations and social networks has proven as important as technical considerations in determining effectiveness.

Farmer strategies may lead to several opportunistic forms of behaviour. For example, capture of resources by well-placed local actors in their negotiations with aid agencies; forming networks of supporters to mobilize and redistribute aid resources; or support for the aims of a project merely in order to ensure maximization of aid revenues (witness the role of intermediaries in the peasant milieu, real 'development brokers'). Producer organizations and development projects thus figure as arenas of confrontation and negotiation in which actors and groups of actors attempt to defend their interests and their positions in village and regional affairs.

### Formalizing the strategic approach

The influence of the multiple constraints and objectives which subvert both the technical agenda and the lack of control over the small farmer thus lead to compromises, and to the abandonment of the attempt to reduce understandings of farmer strategies to a few rules or general principles of a determinist nature, such as the 'minimax' principle or the presumption of the primacy of returns to labour in farmer decision making.

One can, for example, distinguish several strategic fields of action which provide the framework for farmer decision making. Each of these fields offers a framework of possible choices which actors can emphasize, play down or combine in their particular strategies.

1. *The first is that field of action specified by the roles and positions which an actors hold in local society: s/he can act as farm manager or a family farmer, as a household head or as a person with particular political and social influence, as a man or a women, young or old, etc.*

2. *The second field is that of the diversity of modes of economic action: the logic of subsistence or of the market, the logic of risk limitation or risk taking, the logic of extensive agriculture or intensification geared to high returns, the logic of withdrawal from support structures or of the exploitation of the resources offered by these structures, etc.*

3. *A third field is that of the levels of action: technical level, economic or organizational level*

Meeting of minds: 'agronomic research has found that the farmer's field offers a laboratory for research that is at least as fertile as the experimental station.'

of productive activity, and institutional level of social and political reproduction.

The diversity of fields of action leads to the following observations:

1. actors possess room for manoeuvre, even in situations of severe structural constraint, whether these be of an agro-climatic, social or economic nature;
2. decision-making requires farmers to evaluate options and accommodate their consequences.

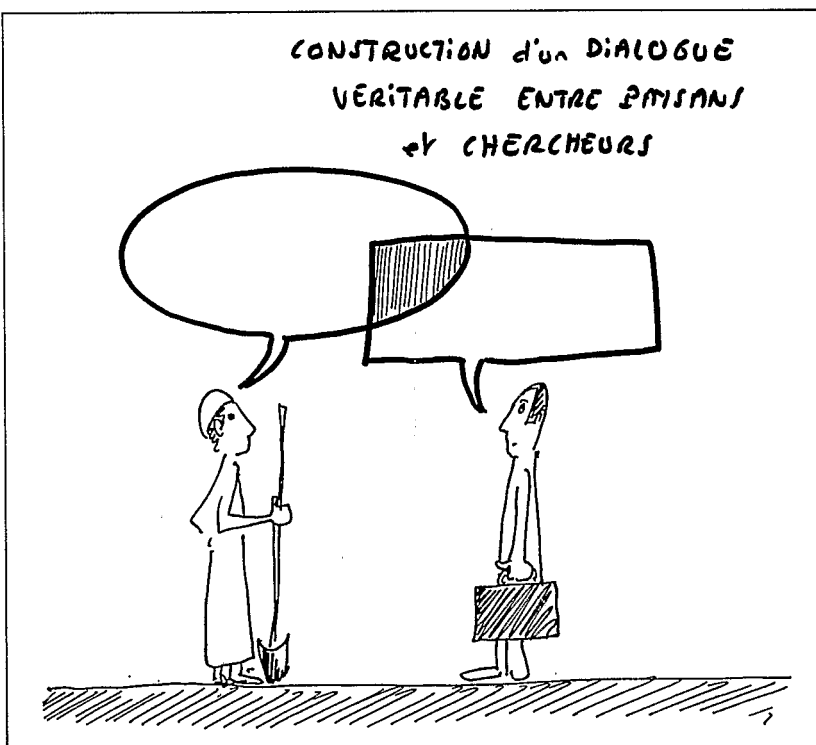
In practice, strategic action involves not only abandoning but also combining options. The combination may involve different fields of action. For example, in a particular situation the farmer may act chiefly in his capacity of head of a household unit in opting for an attempt to maximise the land area, so as to facilitate the social reproduction of the group. Alternatively, the combination might involve different options within the same field of action. It has often been demonstrated, for example, that a farmer may combine anti-risk strategies with risk-taking ones, or the logic of subsistence farming with the logic of the market or labour migration.

### Avoiding the mistakes and misunderstandings of the comprehensive approach

In matters of research as well as action, the concept of farmer strategy offers an analytic model for the understanding of farmer behaviour. The strategies are the constructs of the observer on the basis of empirical indicators derived from the behaviour and practices of the actor in question, and hypotheses concerning both the underlying consistency of that behaviour and the objectives of the actors. Actor strategies are thus neither given as 'facts' or directly observable; they are a construction of the observer on the basis of an analysis of farmer practices. Note that the observation that farmer strategy is an artifact is essential if we are to avoid the misunderstandings and ideological distortions that are frequent with the comprehensive approach.

1. *The main misunderstanding derives from a confusion of the strategies reconstituted after the event by the observer with the long term aims deliberately and patiently pursued by the farmer. One has to wonder if the decisions taken by the farmer, under constraint and in the absence of significant room for manoeuvre, always derive from a strategic analysis. This question is even more pertinent when one tries to take account of the strategies of*

Jacques Mercoiret



'Building a meaningful dialogue between farmers and researchers.'

'The golden rule is not to confuse the strategic thinking of the agronomist, economist or sociologist with the strategic intentions of the farmer.'

innovation, which assume a significant amount of flexibility on the part of the actors involved. The distinctions between long-term strategy and short-term tactics, between strategies of adaptation and strategies of innovation, may help to avoid these misunderstandings.

2. *The participative approach is not immune from populist tendencies.* These derive from the assumption that it is sufficient to be 'tuned in' to peasants to become aware of their needs and aims. However, the diversity of the fields of action which the farmer confronts mean that the latter is not usually able to articulate his/her objectives. Neither is a survey of farmer needs likely to reveal actual reality. It needs also to be remembered that the level at which a problem is manifest is rarely that at which it can be resolved. This applies whether one is dealing with technical considerations or organizations for the poor.

If the analysis in terms of farmer strategies can make an important practical contribution, its usage still requires some care. The golden rule is not to confuse the strategic thinking of the agronomist, economist or sociologist with the strategic intentions of the farmer.

### Contributions of the Strategic Approach

In conclusion, the following may be put forward as the strengths of the strategic approach and the areas in which it makes a particular contribution:

1. *An empirical methodology: the approach encourages the use not only of the usual quantitative information but also of qualitative information collected through systematic discussions with farmers and more innovative research.*

In France it has also encouraged the use of 'méthodes d'enquête légères' (not dissimilar to RRA methods) in identifying the main constraints and objectives which farmers have to take into account in their decision making. The focus on farmer strategies has likewise contributed to the reorientation of extension services towards support for farmer decision making (see Pierre Debouvy's article on page 12 of this Bulletin).

2. *The approach has also encouraged scientific disciplines to develop new research orientations.* Agronomic research has found that the farmer's field offers a laboratory for research that is quite as fertile as the experimental station. Anthropological research has also found this actor and project orientation to be a particularly enriching one.

3. *The union of agronomic and social sciences through the study of farmer strategies has shown the value of a pluridisciplinary approach.* It has also encouraged the reconciliation of different specialisms. The strategic perspective would thus strongly endorse the 'systems of production' approach. But it also shows the limitations of it, insofar as the existence of static and closed systems tends to be assumed. 'Systems effects' certainly impose important constraints on farmers; but they also offer resources which can be mobilised by rural actors, and they thus allow for rules to be negotiated and transformed.

### The strategic approach and recherche-développement

In attempting to develop detailed understandings of the decision-making processes of farmers, the strategic approach does tend to complicate research practice, even though it has also stimulated the development of rapid research techniques. It should be noted, however, that development practitioners have themselves been calling for more rigorous applied research, as a means of increasing their own effectiveness.

There is really no point in acting without a sufficient understanding of the complex forces which influence the behaviour of the 'beneficiaries' of the development intervention. The naive populist approach would not seem to have produced results that are much better than the more socially-aware top-down approaches. The real merit of the strategic approach is in the much greater demands that experts impose on themselves.

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Jean Pierre Chauveau, a social anthropologist based at Montpellier, is Director of Research in ORSTROM's *Laboratoire d'Etudes Agraires* which he formerly headed. He does research on the history of plantations and on fishery in West Africa. He is also General Secretary of the Association Euro-Africaine pour l'Anthropologie du Changement Social et du Développement.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> For an explanation of these acronyms, please refer to the article on page 8.

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