

Transformation of Social Representations of the Agricultural Advisor's Role in Benin Agroecological Transition: A Professional Dilemmas Approach

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Abstract

This study analyzes the transformation of social representations of the agricultural advisor's role in the context of the agroecological transition in Benin. It draws on interviews conducted with 30 agricultural advisors and combines lexical analysis with the analysis of professional dilemmas to compare representations of advisory work in conventional agriculture and in agroecology. The results show a contrast between a representation of conventional advisory work mainly associated with technical prescription, synthetic chemical inputs, and the pursuit of productive performance, and an agroecological representation more closely associated with the contextualization of interventions, learning, and the consideration of ecological and social dimensions. The professional dilemmas confirm a shift in advisors' postures across several dimensions of the role: the frame of reference for action, knowledge transmission, the scale of intervention, and principles of action toward social norms. By contrast, the purpose of advisory work remains more contested, negotiated between securing the producer's output and income. These results thus show that the agroecological transition is accompanied by a reconfiguration of the advisor's role, without a complete break from the references of the conventional model.

Keywords

Social Representations, Professional Dilemmas, Agricultural Advisory Services, Agroecological Transition, Benin

1. Introduction

Food systems are currently under pressure that are driving severe environmental

degradation. In this context, the transition toward sustainability appears necessary to move these systems toward more resilient models (Catalogna et al., 2022). Agroecology is thus recognized as an approach that fosters the diversification of food systems and their adaptation to environmental and socio-economic contexts, with implications for the development of rural and urban territories (Gascuel-Odoux et al., 2022).

In this context, the adoption of agroecological principles is not limited to a change in agricultural practices; it entails a broader reconfiguration of production methods, forms of organization, and relationships among actors (farmers, agricultural advisors, input suppliers, researchers, public institutions, etc.). This systemic transformation, described as the agroecological transition (Duru et al., 2015), mobilizes a diversity of actors and presupposes a joint “greening” of agriculture and food systems (Magrini et al., 2019). However, the agroecological transition increases the uncertainties linked to the functioning of agricultural systems and may represent short-term risks for farmers and agri-food value chains (Titttonell, 2014). Consequently, despite the importance of natural feedback mechanisms, these alone are not sufficient to guarantee the sustainability of agroecosystems, since this sustainability also depends on the capacity of actors such as agricultural advisors to manage and steer these socio-ecological dynamics (Sundstrom et al., 2023).

In this context of agroecological transition, characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and the local specificity of ecosystems (Ingram & Mills, 2019), several authors highlight the challenge this poses to the traditional model of agricultural advisory expertise. The agricultural advisor, historically understood through the concept of the extension agent disseminating techno-economic innovations produced by research and aimed at increasing productivity (Ingram, 2008; Behera & Das, 2019), is now regarded as an intermediary or innovation facilitator within pluralistic networks of actors (Ingram & Mills, 2019; Eastwood et al., 2017).

Indeed, agroecology requires an evolution of the advisor’s role toward greater professionalization in increasingly specialized sectors, technical expertise (subject-matter knowledge), facilitation skills, and in-depth knowledge of numerous policy instruments, innovations, sector requirements, certifications, and environmental objectives (Ingram et al., 2022). This transformation, which is agricultural, cognitive, and professional in nature, relies on collective learning devices (farmer field schools, peer exchange, digital tools) that enable the shared construction of knowledge (Bakker et al., 2021; Côté et al., 2022), leading advisors to rethink their role in order to provide effective support that can help producers manage the various challenges they face (Giagnocavo et al., 2022; Kamruzzaman & Chowdhury, 2023). The farm itself becomes a learning space in which the advisor revises his or her own assumptions through contact with the field (Charatsari et al., 2022a).

Agricultural advisors are therefore called upon to simultaneously assume the roles of expert and learner, thereby contributing to a co-construction of knowledge with producers, in which knowledge and social capital, closely intertwined, constitute essential resources fostering collective learning, shared reflection, and prob-

lem-solving (Charatsari et al., 2022a). Beyond technical skills, advisors' capacity to manage the relational dimension of advisory work is becoming equally decisive (Hansen et al., 2018; Landini, 2016). Advisors are called upon to adopt a facilitator posture grounded in trust and joint learning (Gribben et al., 2025; Ingram, 2008), mobilizing transversal skills (self-awareness, empathy, critical thinking, systems thinking, etc.) that complement technical knowledge (Nikšić et al., 2023).

Advisors develop shared conceptions of their mission, of the skills expected of them, of the values that should guide their action, and of the forms of support they consider legitimate. Yet the emergence of agroecology is accompanied by new knowledge, new professional norms, and new expectations regarding agricultural advisory work. These changes are likely to transform the way advisors perceive agroecosystems, their relationships with producers, the purposes of agricultural advisory work, and their own professional role (Charatsari et al., 2022b). Under these conditions, advisors are often confronted with dilemmas, insofar as the mandate given to them by their employer may come into contradiction with both the principles promoted by agroecology and the expectations or priorities of producers (Guillot et al., 2013). Moreover, the representations advisors hold of their role influence the knowledge and support they provide to producers, the way they provide it, and the partners with whom they collaborate (Ingram, 2008; Nettle et al., 2018; Klerkx & Proctor, 2013). Documenting these representations is therefore an important issue for understanding advisory practices in the context of the agroecological transition.

This study thus offers a reading centered on the representations and on the technical, ethical, and identity-related tensions experienced by field agents. Drawing on empirical data collected in Benin, it contributes to a better contextualization of the analysis of the transformation of agricultural advisory work in a West African setting. From this perspective, the article aims to analyze the social representations of agricultural advisory work held by advisors in the context of the agroecological transition in Benin, by identifying their dominant and emerging representations, by highlighting the professional constraints that reveal their transformation, and by discussing the implications of these transformations for the agricultural advisory system.

2. Theoretical Foundations for Analyzing Social Representations of the Role of Agricultural Advisors

Theoretical Foundations of Social Representations

Social representations theory constitutes a relevant framework for analyzing how agricultural advisors apprehend the transformation of their profession in the context of the agroecological transition, insofar as it establishes a link between the individual and society, between actors and their environment, while contributing to an understanding of what is perceived as common sense. According to Jodelet (2001), social representations constitute a form of socially elaborated and shared knowledge that enables individuals to interpret their environment and to guide

their practices. They are constructed through lived experiences, social interactions, and the norms conveyed within professional groups (Moscovici, 1976). From this perspective, representations occupy a position both upstream and downstream of action, fulfilling four essential functions: knowledge function, identity function, guiding behavior, and function of justifying practices (Abric, 1989).

As reported by Jodelet (1986), social representations: 1) relate to a given object or phenomenon and are constructed from the knowledge available about it; 2) often take the form of images or concrete representations that link perceptions to abstract ideas; 3) carry meanings and symbols shared by a social group; 4) result from a process of construction through which individuals interpret the reality that surrounds them; and 5) possess a degree of autonomy, insofar as actors can transform them, adapt them, and produce new meanings from their experiences. Thus, when new contexts, forms of knowledge, or frames of reference call established benchmarks into question, representations may be led to transform in order to make sense of these changes. The formation of representations rests on a process of anchoring, through which new information is incorporated into categories already familiar to individuals and associated with their systems of values (Trindade & Ferreira, 2014). Anchoring thus makes it possible to understand representation as the product of an interaction between the social object, the individual, and the social frameworks within which the individual operates (Jodelet, 2015).

Professional Dilemmas Approach to Analyzing Social Representations

Operationally, different methodological approaches make it possible to apprehend social representations. The structural approach, as well as discursive or ethnographic approaches, mobilize various techniques (free association, hierarchical ranking, questionnaires, and so on) to grasp the structure of social representations (Jodelet, 2003; de Rosa & Arhiri, 2024), or the way in which they are constructed through interactions, experiences, and practices (Abric, 1994; Lo Monaco et al., 2017). However, these approaches have limits when it comes to observing what happens when actors must choose between several requirements that all appear legitimate to them. The professional dilemmas approach is of particular interest in this respect, in that it addresses this shortcoming.

A professional dilemma is a work situation in which a professional finds himself or herself, requiring a choice between two or more solutions that can each be justified but are difficult to reconcile. Choosing one means setting the other aside, while being aware that this choice refers to different norms, values, or responsibilities (Schön, 1983; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Work devoted to professional transformations also shows that periods of change can heighten this type of tension and lead professionals to reconsider their responsibilities, their priorities, and, at times, the way they define their own role (Charatsari et al., 2022b; Santivasi et al., 2022).

This dimension of trade-off makes the dilemma-based approach particularly

interesting for studying representations of the agricultural advisor's role. Even though dilemmas alone do not make it possible to directly identify the structure of representations, they offer the possibility of observing how actors rank the principles to which they refer when they must make a choice. The arguments put forward to justify their choices thus make it possible to identify the values, purposes, or responsibilities to which actors attach the greatest importance. The principles that actors are reluctant to give up can then reveal the most structuring elements of their representation, while the compromises they accept can testify to how this representation adjusts to the constraints of the situation.

In agricultural advisory work, this approach takes on particular importance in the context of the agroecological transition. Indeed, the shift toward this new frame of reference leads advisors to contend with professional expectations that are no longer limited to technology transfer. They are also called upon to support producers, facilitate learning, play an intermediary role, and support innovation processes. This evolution can give rise to different conceptions of what good advisory work should be and confront advisors with choices between principles that are sometimes difficult to reconcile (Klerkx, 2020; Labarthe et al., 2022). From this perspective, dilemma-based scenarios make it possible to place advisors in professional situations in which several orientations may come into tension. The interest in these situations therefore lies not solely in the choice made by the advisor, but above all in the justification given for that choice, which makes it possible to understand the principles to which the advisor refers and how he or she ranks them. The analysis of choices and their justification thus provide an entry point for understanding the principles that structure the representation of the advisor's role and for assessing how this representation is recomposed in the context of the agroecological transition.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study Framework and Population

The study was conducted in Benin among agricultural advisors. The choice of this target group is justified by the position of agricultural advisors at the interface between the technical orientations of agricultural development programs and the socio-economic, environmental, and cultural realities of farms. This position exposes them to situations in which several professional norms, objectives, or constraints may come into tension, particularly in the context of the agroecological transition.

3.2. Sampling and Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. Selection prioritized advisors working with producers within accredited service-providing structures, notably farmer professional organizations (FPOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private consulting firms. Participation was also based on advisors' consent and their availability at the time of data collection. In total, 30 agricultural

advisors took part in the study. The diversity of professional profiles was taken into account in order to gather varied positions regarding the tension situations advisors may face in the exercise of their duties. **Table 1** presents the profile of these advisors.

Table 1. Profile of the surveyed advisors.

Structures	Seniority in advisory work, mean (SD)	Min	Max	Value chains and areas covered
<i>Farmer professional organizations (FPOs)</i>				
UNPCS (n = 7)	6 ± 3	3	9	Soybean, sustainable land management, agroecology
AIC (n = 4)	11 ± 6	6	20	Cotton, sustainable land management, climate change adaptation
<i>Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)</i>				
CRADIB (n = 4)	5 ± 4	2	11	Soybean, cassava, sustainable land management, climate-smart agriculture
Sian'son (n = 7)	5 ± 2	3	9	Agricultural entrepreneurship
CAPID (n = 3)	5 ± 3	3	10	Cassava, rice growing, sustainable land management, agroforestry, soil regeneration
MAP (n = 2)	4 ± 2	3	6	Agroforestry, animal production, sustainable land management
<i>Consulting firm</i>				
Cosinus (n = 3)	4 ± 1	3	6	Soybean, maize, market gardening, cover legumes, soil-improving plants

3.3. Data Collection

Individual interviews were conducted with advisors to gather information using an interview guide. To be selected to participate in the study, advisors had to be affiliated with an accredited service provider (**Table 1**), work as agricultural advisors in the field with producers, and have at least two years of experience in this role. This selection was carried out with the authorization of the head of the advisory team at each organization, who was first contacted for a presentation of the study; thereafter, advisors meeting the eligibility criteria were invited to participate on a voluntary basis and subject to their availability. The interviews were conducted in person and in French (the common working language for both the interviewer and the participants) at a location and time chosen by the advisor based on their geographic location.

All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed in full in French shortly thereafter. They were conducted by the authors, who had no hierarchical or institutional ties to the participating advisors or their employing organizations, thereby minimizing bias in responses driven by social desirability.

The data collected related to the sociodemographic characteristics and career paths of the advisors, the methods and practices used in providing advice, perceptions of the role of the advisor in conventional agriculture and agroecology, as well as the positions and stances adopted in response to professional dilemmas. In total, five dilemmas were presented to the participants for their assessment. For each situation, they were asked to indicate the approach they would favor and to justify their choice. For each dilemma, participants had to identify the single approach they were most likely to favor. When an advisor's response combined elements of both approaches, the response was classified according to the approach corresponding to the final choice expressed.

Construction of the Professional Dilemmas

The professional dilemmas were constructed on the basis of the roles of the agricultural advisor as defined by the [FAO \(2022\)](#) in the context of the agroecological transition ([Table 2](#)). Each dilemma opposes two analytical orientations: one associated with the principles and modalities of conventional agricultural advisory work, and the other with an agroecological logic. These professional dilemmas are designed to test advisors' stated representations of their role and their choices when faced with concrete professional situations.

Table 2. Summary of the expected roles and responsibilities of the agricultural advisor in agroecology.

Dimension	Key operational elements
Frame of reference for action	Linking scientific knowledge and local knowledge; valuing locally available resources rather than standardized inputs
Purpose of advisory work	Replacing yield maximization with priority given to agroecosystem sustainability and producer autonomy (credit, inputs, markets)
Mode of knowledge transmission	Shifting from knowledge transmission to facilitation; fostering mutual learning and horizontal peer exchange
Scale of intervention	Adopting a holistic, territorial approach; acting as a mediator between producers, institutions, and decision-makers
Principles of action toward social norms	Actively involving vulnerable groups (women, youth); acting for equal access to land and resources

Source: adapted from [FAO, 2022](#).

Dilemma 1: Tension between the application of a standardized technical recommendation and its adaptation to local realities. It confronts the advisor with a situation in which a national recommendation or project protocol must be applied in a context where its implementation modalities may be difficult to reconcile with the characteristics of the environment. The advisor must therefore arbitrate between complying with the technical prescription and adapting it to the realities of the intervention environment, at producers' request.

Dilemma 2: Conflict between compliance with specifications excluding the use

of synthetic chemical products and a producer's decision to resort to synthetic chemical pesticides following a pest attack likely to severely affect production and income. This situation confronts the advisor with a trade-off between complying with the environmental requirements of the intervention program and seeking an immediate response to an economic and productive difficulty.

Dilemma 3: Opposition between an approach based on participatory learning and the co-construction of knowledge, through Farmer Field Schools (FFS), and an approach favoring the direct transmission of technical recommendations enabling rapid adoption of practices. This tension is heightened by the time constraints faced by producers and by the pressure exerted by the project to achieve its adoption targets within the allotted time. The dilemma thus makes it possible to examine how advisors arbitrate between the time required for a collective, participatory learning process and the imperative of rapidly achieving measurable changes in practice.

Dilemma 4: The advisor's scale of intervention when faced with an agricultural problem whose causes extend beyond the farm. It sets in tension an intervention centered on the producers' farms and an approach based on mediation and coordination among the various actors of the territory. The situation confronts the advisor with the need to take into account factors such as land pressure, the management of livestock grazing routes, and access to biomass, while considering the existing tensions between farmers and herders. The dilemma makes it possible to examine how the advisor arbitrates between an intervention limited to the concerns of the producers he or she supports and involvement in the concerted search for solutions at the territorial scale.

Dilemma 5: Women's participation in advisory activities and community-level decision-making processes. It confronts the advisor with a situation in which the requirements of inclusion and participation of women may come into tension with certain social norms and traditional practices of the community. The advisor must then arbitrate between taking into account local norms likely to condition the acceptability of the intervention and the need to foster the effective participation of women.

3.4. Data Processing and Analysis

The transcribed interviews were cleaned up before being analyzed. Two complementary approaches were used with the IRaMuTeQ 0.8.4 and NVivo 14 software programs. Using IRaMuTeQ, a lexical discourse analysis was conducted to identify and compare the main terms and semantic categories associated with the role of the advisor in conventional agriculture and agroecology. The corpus included all responses relating to the advisor's role in each model (287 distinct lexical forms for the conventional agriculture corpus and 544 for the agroecology corpus, prior to lemmatization), with each response treated by IRaMuTeQ as a distinct textual unit. The lexical forms were lemmatized using the lemmatization tool integrated into IRaMuTeQ, and a standard list of stop words (articles, prepositions, pro-

nouns, and auxiliary verbs) was applied before calculating frequencies and generating word clouds. The terms selected for the presentation were then translated from French into English by one of the authors. These translations were subsequently verified against the original transcripts to ensure that the contextual meaning was preserved. With NVivo, the five dilemmas were subjected to content analysis to identify, for each dimension, the preferred orientations and the arguments supporting them. The responses to the different dilemmas were then compared with the discourse of the same advisors to examine convergences and variations in their positioning.

The six semantic categories used for the quantitative comparison (posture and intervention logic; object of advisory work; knowledge transmission and construction; human support and empowerment; economic and productive outcomes; environment, sustainability, and health) were defined inductively from an initial reading of the transcripts and then refined through discussions between the two authors. The coding unit was the meaningful text segment (a proposition or sentence expressing a single idea concerning the advisor's role), rather than the interview as a whole or an isolated lexical form. The categories were considered mutually exclusive; that is, when a segment fell under several dimensions, it was assigned to the category reflecting its dominant content. The authors coded the entire corpus and compared the category assignments. Any disagreement was resolved through discussion until consensus was reached.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was based on advisors' free consent, obtained at the beginning of each interview. Participants were informed of the study's objective and of the scientific use of the data collected. The anonymity and confidentiality of the information provided were preserved during processing, analysis, and presentation of the results. The statements reported in the article do not allow individual participants or their institutional affiliation to be identified.

4. Results

4.1. Lexical Analysis of Representations of the Advisor's Role

Figure 1 and **Figure 2** present the word clouds derived from advisors' discourse concerning their respective representations of the advisor's role in conventional agriculture and in agroecology. The underlying lexical analysis was conducted on the original French-language interview transcripts using IRaMuTeQ; each term has been translated into English here, with word size preserved in proportion to its original frequency/prominence in the French-language corpus.

The lexical field of the agricultural advisor's role in conventional agriculture comprises a total of 287 distinct words. It emerges that respondents' perceived role of an agricultural advisor in conventional production is organized around three categories of variables.

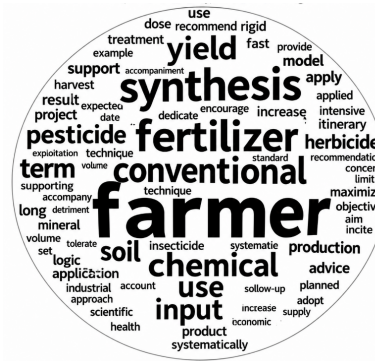


Figure 1. Lexicon reflecting the advisor's role in conventional agriculture.



Figure 2. Lexicon reflecting the advisor's role in agroecology.

The first groups words such as chemical, pesticide, synthesis, producer, fertilizer, input, conventional. The advisor thus appears as an actor responsible for directing the producer toward the use of synthetic chemical fertilizers and pesticides. The second, relating to the quantitative performance of agricultural production, is organized around yield, physical, result, maximize. The advisor is here understood as an actor whose objective is to improve production by increasing yield. The term maximize suggests that agricultural performance is regarded as a function of the quantity produced. Synthetic inputs are thus not represented as an end in themselves but rather as the technical means mobilized to achieve an increase in the producer's yield. The last category reflects the normative framework the advisor follows, and includes words such as conventional, model, systematic, standard, rigid. These terms suggest that the support provided by the advisor follows relatively stabilized norms and procedures.

Unlike the lexical field of the advisor's role in conventional agriculture, that of the advisor in agroecology comprises 544 distinct words, almost double the conventional corpus. Analysis of the word cloud shows that agricultural advisors apprehend their role in agroecology through concepts that are likewise organized around three categories of variables. The first relates to natural resources such as soil, land, crops, plant, tree. The advisor is regarded as an actor whose support is based on living components and the natural resources that can be mobilized in the production process.

The second category, relating to pedagogy, is organized around the words teaches, learns, method, technique. The advisor is here understood as an actor who continues to bring and transmit innovations and techniques to producers, as suggested notably by the presence of the term teaches. However, the advisor's representation is not limited to a prescriptive, top-down posture. The presence of the term learns also suggests that the advisor is himself or herself placed in a dynamic of learning through contact with producers. The advisor thus appears as an actor who accompanies the producer in acquiring knowledge and techniques, while also being liable to learn from the producer's experience and practices. This configuration therefore points to a function oriented more toward mutual learning and the co-construction of knowledge.

The last category, relating to local anchoring, groups words such as local, own, naturally, resource. These terms suggest that the advisor's support takes into account the specific characteristics of the production context and the resources available locally. The word chemical, which appears among the terms used, does so in a logic of reduction or avoidance (reducing the use of chemical products, or helping to avoid them), which contrasts with its place in the lexical field of the role in conventional agriculture.

In sum, in conventional agriculture, the advisor is regarded as an actor who introduces a practice or innovation by following technical norms that encourage the use of synthetic chemical inputs with a view to increasing the yield of the producer being supported. By contrast, unlike the conventional model, where synthetic inputs appear as technical means associated with yield maximization, the representation of the advisor's role in agroecology appears to be organized more around the consideration of natural resources, learning, and adaptation to the local context.

4.2. Semantic Distribution of Perceived Roles of Agricultural Advisory Services

Figure 3 presents the semantic distribution of the roles perceived by advisors in conventional agriculture and in agroecology.

The semantic categories most represented in the conventional model are posture and intervention logic (30.84%), the object of advisory work (24.27%), economic and productive outcomes (15.27%), and knowledge transmission and co-construction (14.96%) (**Figure 3**). Conversely, in the representation of advisory work in agroecology, the most important categories are environmental protection, sustainability and soil health (23.2%), knowledge transmission and construction (22.58%), the object of advisory work (21.14%), and posture and intervention logic (16.82%).

These results reinforce the previous findings and highlight a shift in the representation of the advisor's role. Whereas advisory work in conventional agriculture appears to be structured mainly around a prescriptive logic oriented toward increasing yield through the use of synthetic chemical inputs and compliance with

standardized norms, the representation of advisory work in agroecology gives greater weight to environmental protection, sustainability, soil health, and processes of knowledge construction. This shift is particularly visible in the decline of the posture and intervention logic category, which falls from 30.84% to 16.82%, and in the rise of knowledge transmission and construction, which increases from 14.96% to 22.58%. The environment, sustainability and health dimension also shows a significant increase, from 10.38% to 23.2%. The advisor thus appears to be represented as less centered on a predefined intervention logic and more oriented toward learning, knowledge construction, and consideration of the ecological dimensions of production. Nevertheless, compliance with standardized norms remains present in this representation.

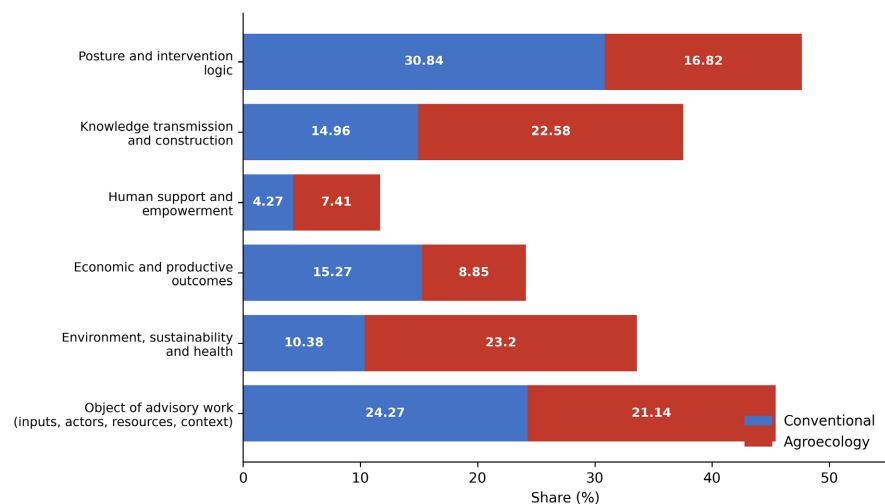


Figure 3. Semantic distribution of roles perceived by advisors in conventional agriculture and in agroecology.

The human support and empowerment category, although less represented, also shows an increase, from 4.27% in conventional agriculture to 7.41% in agroecology. This shift points toward a representation of advisory work more closely associated with producer empowerment, notably through the valorization of the producer's agricultural assets and the pursuit of their profitability, rather than through the sole transmission of technical solutions. Furthermore, economic and productive outcomes decline from 15.27% in the conventional model to 8.85% in agroecology. This decline does not mean that economic performance becomes less important in agroecology, but rather that it occupies a relatively smaller place in the discourse associated with the advisor's role.

In sum, the word clouds provide an immediate and intuitive reading of the lexical contrast, while the semantic categorization allows this contrast to be objectified and quantified. The two analyses reinforce one another in showing that conventional advisory work is characterized more by its method of intervention and its productive outcomes, whereas agroecological advisory work is characterized more by its relationship to living systems, to learning, and to the construction of

knowledge.

Fisher's exact test confirms that representations of the agricultural advisor's role differ significantly between conventional agriculture and agroecology for five of the six categories studied (**Table 3**). These differences are significant for posture and intervention logic, knowledge transmission and construction, human support and empowerment, economic and productive outcomes, and environment, sustainability and health. The differences observed in these dimensions therefore do not merely reflect descriptive variations in the corpus but correspond to statistically significant differences between the two representations. By contrast, no statistically significant difference is observed for the object of advisory work (inputs, actors, resources). Despite the general reconfiguration of the advisor's perceived role between the two models, the elements relating to the object of advisory work thus remain relatively stable.

Table 3. Significance test of the perceived differences between representations of the advisor's role in conventional agriculture and agroecology.

Category of the advisor's perceived role	N Word-occurrence AC	Frequency AC	N word-occurrence AE	Frequency AC	Fisher's exact <i>p</i> -value
Posture and intervention logic	202/453	30.84%	245/1212	16.82%	<0.001
Knowledge transmission and construction	98/557	14.96%	329/1128	22.58%	<0.001
Human support and empowerment	28/627	4.27%	108/1349	7.41%	0.007
Economic and productive outcomes	100/555	15.27%	129/1328	8.85%	<0.001
Environment, sustainability and health	68/587	10.38%	338/1119	23.20%	<0.001
Object of advisory work (inputs, actors, resources)	159/496	24.27%	308/1149	21.14%	0.113

*Significant at the 1% threshold. AC: Conventional Agriculture; AE: Agroecology.

Table 3 presents the exact Fisher's tests performed on individual word occurrences classified in the two corpora, totaling 655 occurrences for the conventional corpus and 1457 for the agroecological corpus. The unit of analysis is the lexical occurrence, not the advisor. The tests thus compare the relative frequency of each category between the two corpora. However, since all 30 advisors contributed to both corpora, the occurrences are not entirely independent in the strict statistical sense. The results are therefore interpreted at a descriptive level, as indicating differences in lexical composition between the two discourses, rather than as individual differences among advisors.

The analysis reveals significant differences ($p < 0.001$) for five categories: intervention approach and logic, knowledge transfer and construction, human support and empowerment, economic and productive outcomes, as well as the environment, sustainability, and health. These results indicate a differentiation in the lexical composition of conventional and agroecological representations across these dimensions. In contrast, no statistically significant differences were observed regarding the focus of advisory work (inputs, actors, resources; $p = 0.113$), suggesting relative stability in this dimension between the two representations.

4.3. Analysis of Professional Dilemmas: Dominant Postures by Dimension

Figure 4 presents the orientations expressed by advisors with respect to the five professional dilemmas.

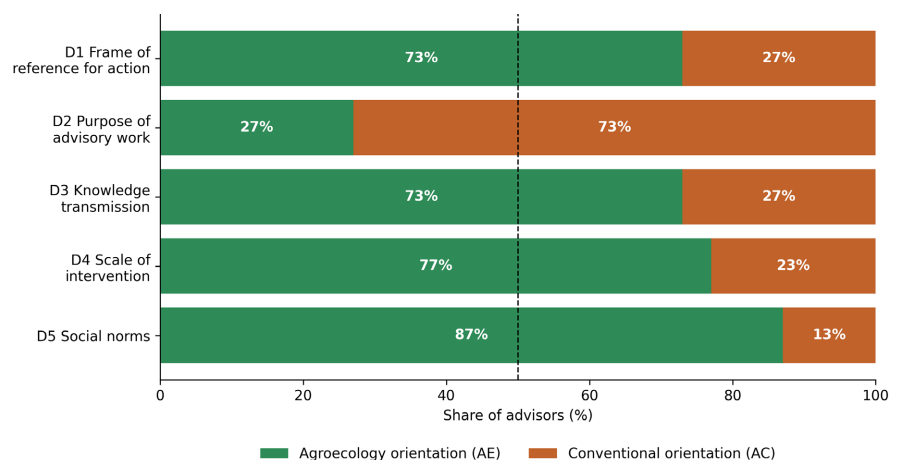


Figure 4. Orientations expressed in response to the five professional dilemmas.

The analysis of each of the five dimensions of the advisor's expected role reveals a dominant posture, which the following verbatim excerpts illustrate.

Regarding the frame of reference for action, contextualization of interventions clearly dominates compliance with standardized prescriptions (73% versus 27%). Advisors justify this posture by their proximity to producers and their knowledge of local realities, even if it means departing from institutional recommendations: *"The project I work on recommended that we use campeche wood (Haematoxylum campechianum) for the live hedge. But for two years it would not grow. A producer then suggested we use jatropha instead, since it is available locally, and barely three months later the plants had really grown"*. The opposite posture remains a minority position and stems more from contractual constraint than from technical conviction, as expressed by an advisor from UNCPS: *"I do what the project wants me to do, since it is the one paying my salary that gives the orders"*.

Regarding the purpose of advisory work, the dominant posture departs from strict compliance with the agroecological objective (23% versus 77%), condoning the producer's recourse to synthetic chemical inputs in the face of the producer's

economic urgency, as explained by an advisor from AIC: *“If the producer lost his crop, whatever you told him afterward, he would never listen to you again. It is best to accept his decision so the harvest can be saved”*. This concession is also driven by the vulnerability of the advisor, who often lives within the community he or she supports. The minority posture, in this case the one aligned with the agroecological objective, instead relies on close support intended to ensure the proper application of biological solutions. As an advisor from CRADIB puts it: *“The advisor has to follow the producer every day, at every step of the process”*.

As for the mode of knowledge transmission, participatory learning dominates direct technical transmission (73% versus 27%), driven by the demonstration effect among peers: *“It is when they have someone with a field next door who has implemented a practice, and it has worked, that is when they too will try to reproduce it”* (advisor from UNPCS). Direct technical transmission, a minority position, remains a pragmatic response to producers’ low turnout at Farmer Field Schools. As an advisor from Sian’son states: *“Out of a class of 30 learners, you can hardly find 10”*.

Regarding the scale of intervention, territorial mediation prevails over intervention limited to the farm (77% versus 23%), notably in farmer-herder conflicts: *“The producer has a critical need for organic matter to sustainably regenerate his land. The herder also has an essential need to access crop residues”* (advisor from MAP). The farm-centered posture, a minority position, mainly stems from caution in the face of physical risk. As an advisor from UNPCS puts it: *“If the local authorities themselves cannot resolve the problem, it is not up to the advisor to do so”*.

Finally, regarding principles of action toward social norms, the inclusion of women dominates, through strategies of accommodation with local norms (87% versus 13%) rather than through their outright challenge: *“In several communities in northern Benin, women are afraid to speak certain truths in front of their husbands”* (advisor from UNPCS). The posture of compliance with socio-cultural norms, a minority position, does not necessarily abandon this objective but favors a gradual approach.

Thus, these five dilemmas confirm, on the basis of advisors’ individual responses, the same orientation suggested by the reading of the word clouds: four dimensions clearly favorable to the agroecological pole, with the purpose of advisory work remaining the most contested.

4.4. Effect of Professional Seniority on Advisors’ Postures

The analyses reveal a dichotomy of postures, one oriented toward conventional agriculture and the other toward agroecology (Figure 5).

Agricultural advisors whose representation is oriented toward conventional agriculture display fairly similar postures regarding the pursuit of productive and economic performance, equality/inclusion, and territorial mediation and coordination, regardless of years of experience.

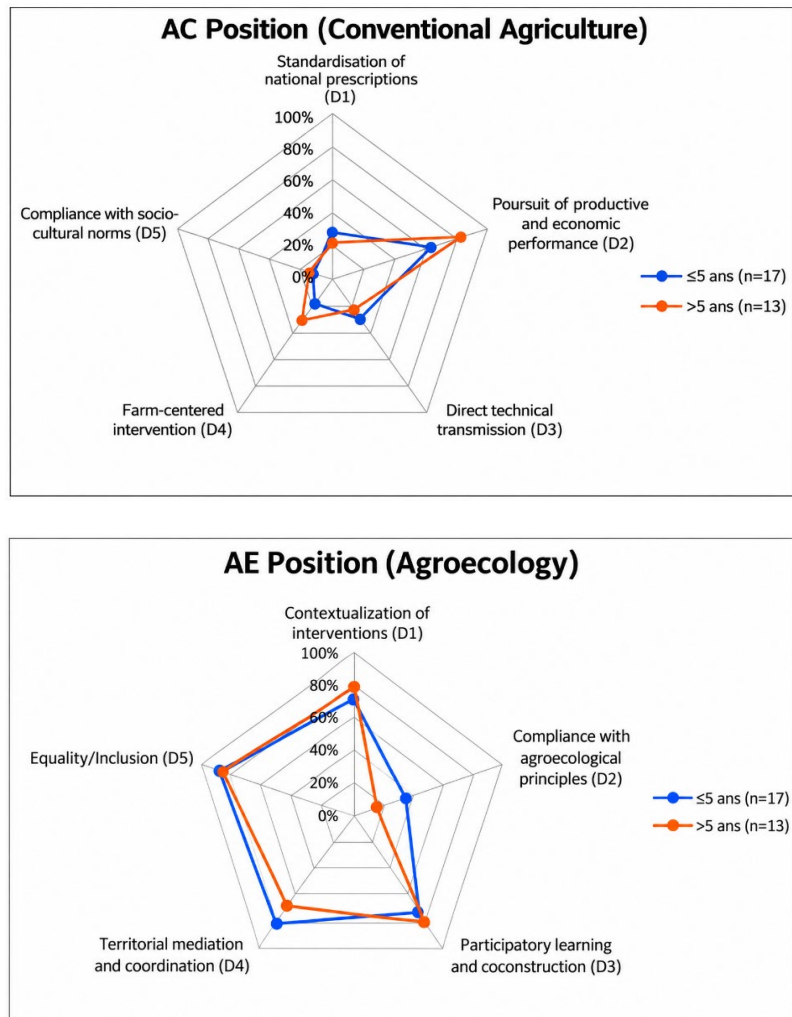


Figure 5. Distribution of advisors by intervention posture and professional seniority (conventional agriculture and agroecology posture).

By contrast, the two groups of advisors whose representation is oriented toward the agroecological model show an almost identical posture, namely contextualization of interventions, participatory learning, and co-construction. A difference does appear, however, concerning compliance with agroecological principles, which is more present among advisors with fewer than five years of experience than among those with more than five years. Advisors with more than five years of experience also appear to place greater emphasis on farm-centered intervention.

Ultimately, seniority does not emerge as a major factor of differentiation in advisors' perceived posture. Both groups share common orientations in both the conventional and the agroecological models, although the way they perceive the advisor's role shows marked differences. The differences observed relate more to the intensity given to certain dimensions: more experienced advisors appear more oriented toward productive performance in the conventional model, whereas those with less experience show greater interest in agroecological principles. The

most stable element in the agroecological representation nonetheless remains the contextualization of interventions and participatory, co-constructed learning, present in both groups.

5. Discussion

This study has shown that there is a concordance between the way advisors describe their role in agroecology and the postures they say they favor when confronted with professional dilemmas. This convergence is more marked around the dimensions of the frame of reference for action and the mode of knowledge transmission, where advisors respectively favor contextualization and participatory, co-constructive approaches. This reveals a gradual evolution in the representation of the advisory profession, which is increasingly seen not as resting on the simple transfer of technical solutions and the replication of technical frames of reference, but rather as a profession founded on adapting interventions to context and building knowledge together with producers. These results echo those of Klerkx and Leeuwis (2009), who showed that the evolution of agricultural advisory systems is accompanied by a shift from a conception centered on technology transfer toward functions more oriented toward intermediation, learning, and innovation facilitation. From this perspective, advisors in agroecology are led to build their knowledge through experiential and social learning (Charatsari et al., 2022a).

These dimensions seem to be favored in part because, from advisors' point of view, producers place more trust in results they observe themselves than in what the advisor tells them. These learning spaces are thus regarded as spaces of experimentation in which the producer observes the results achieved and draws his or her own conclusions. According to Conley and Udry (2010), producers learn in particular from results observed among other peers in their network and use this information to adjust their production decisions, thereby revealing the importance of social learning in the circulation of agricultural knowledge within value chains. Other authors likewise emphasize that agroecological knowledge is strongly situated, and that farmers themselves develop knowledge through observation, experimentation, and exchange among peers (Utter et al., 2021). The postures observed in this study therefore appear consistent with the knowledge-construction mechanisms described in the literature.

Moreover, although the dimensions of scale of intervention and socio-cultural norms are only marginally present in advisors' discourse, they proved decisive in the analysis of the dilemmas. With respect to scale of intervention, advisors recognize the need to intervene when agricultural problems extend beyond the boundaries of the farm. The advisor is then regarded as an intermediary capable of connecting different territorial actors. This orientation consists of the work of Klerkx et al. (2010), who showed that advisors can play an intermediation role in agricultural innovation systems, by connecting actors and facilitating collective innovation processes.

In the specific case of Benin, advisors have a margin of professional discretion that they use to take on a mediating role in farmer-herder conflicts, even though nothing in their official mandate explicitly provides for this, which echoes the observation made by Emeana et al. (2019) regarding the informal but decisive role played by field advisors in the local adaptation of agricultural policies. As for the dimension relating to social and local norms, the advisor's representation is reflected notably in taking into account women's participation, even when this participation must be negotiated with men (husbands, village chiefs). This orientation is consistent with a conception of agroecology that does not reduce the transition to input substitution, but also envisions it through social dimensions, equity, and participation.

However, the dimension that reveals a contradiction between the literature and advisors' discourse concerns the purpose of advisory work. Whereas agroecology requires a reduction in dependence on external inputs, the postures expressed by advisors maintain an important place for the immediate securing of production and income, which can lead to the use of synthetic chemical inputs when there is a risk of crop loss. This orientation reflects agricultural policies that continue to remain centered on intensive agricultural practices, despite the existence of a progressive institutionalization in favor of agroecology (Emeana et al., 2019).

Ultimately, the transformation revealed by this study appears selective. The professional dilemmas, mobilized as a means of accessing the analysis of the transformation of these representations, reveal a recomposition that primarily affects the peripheral system of the representation. This is explained by the fact that advisors do not entirely break with the prescriptive mode of transmission, but rather adjust it, negotiate it, and articulate it with local constraints (producer trust, community norms, time availability). Only the dimension relating to the purpose of agricultural advisory work sets agroecological objectives against immediate productive performance, revealing a more contained transformation. This suggests that the core of these representations remains organized around the producer's economic security, which appears more stable and less negotiable than the other components of the role.

Limitations of the Study

This study presents several limitations. First, the sample size, limited to 30 advisors, does not allow the results to be statistically generalized to all agricultural advisors. Second, the professional dilemmas make it possible to grasp the postures advisors say they would favor when faced with given situations, but they do not make it possible to directly measure the practices advisors would adopt in real-world situations. The results therefore provide more information about declared representations and stated positions than about actually observed behavior.

6. Conclusion

This study shows that the agroecological transition is accompanied by an evolu-

tion in social representations of the agricultural advisor's role in Benin. The comparison between discourse associated with conventional agriculture and with agroecology, together with the analysis of professional dilemmas, highlights a convergence around new ways of conceiving advisory work. The advisor is increasingly associated with the contextualization of interventions, participatory learning, and the co-construction of knowledge, but also with an intervention that goes beyond the strict boundaries of the farm to integrate the territorial and social dimensions of agriculture.

However, this evolution does not affect all dimensions of the role with the same intensity. The purpose of advisory work remains more strongly marked by the pursuit of securing the producer's output and income, which leads advisors to maintain certain references from the conventional model while seeking to promote an agroecological orientation. The observed transformation thus appears selective and gradual rather than a rupture. New orientations are progressively integrated into existing professional representations, while certain earlier references continue to be mobilized in situations where agroecological principles come up against economic constraints and field realities.

Author Contributions

AMS and ASCG conceived the idea, designed the study, and developed the methodology. AMS collected the data. AMS and ASCG analyzed the data. AMS and ASCG contributed to the critical revision of the manuscript. ASCG and AMS edited the final version of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix A. Wording of the Professional Dilemmas and Response Options

For each dilemma described in section 3.3.1, participants were presented with the situation and asked to indicate which of two response options they would favor, before justifying their choice in their own words. Response options were treated as mutually exclusive for classification purposes; where an advisor's account combined elements of both options, the response was classified according to the orientation of the advisor's final stated choice (**Table A1**).

Table A1. Dilemma Scenarios and response options.

Dimensions	Option AE	Option AC	Context	Main question	Follow-up questions
1. Frame of reference for action	adapt the recommendation to local realities on the basis of producers' input	comply with the standardized technical recommendation or protocol as prescribed	The agroecological "half-moon" practice is officially recommended at the national level as part of a pilot program. However, in your project area, soil characteristics and farming practices make it difficult to implement. Several farmers have expressed doubts and are asking for adjustments. Your superiors emphasize the importance of implementing the recommendation as is to ensure harmonization of practices and comparability of results.	Will you strictly follow the national recommendation or adapt it to local conditions? On what criteria will you base your decision?	1. What would you do if your superiors disapproved of your decision to adapt the recommendations? 2. Who is responsible if the adaptation does not yield the expected results?
			You are an agricultural advisor hired by a private service provider tasked with implementing an agroecological project that promotes the use of aqueous neem extracts. National guidelines also encourage the gradual integration of agroecological practices (reduction of chemical inputs, sustainable soil management) but also require that results be achieved in terms of increased profitability. A farmer you've been working with for several years has noticed a pest infestation in his cornfield. He explains that the agroecological technique proposed by the project is not effective as a curative measure, and he fears a significant drop in his yield. He explicitly asks for your permission to use the chemical pesticides he used previously.	Would you adhere to the agroecological guidelines, or would you seek to meet national expectations (achieving profitability targets)? What are your priorities, and why?	1. Is there a middle ground or another alternative that would allow you to resolve this dilemma? 2. In your opinion, could using agroecological practices on one's farm alongside synthetic chemical pesticides to save one's crop yield be considered agroecological production? Justify your answer.
2. Purpose of advisory work	maintain compliance with the specification excluding synthetic chemical products	support the producer's recourse to synthetic chemical pesticides to protect production and income.	You will support farmers as part of an agroecological transition project that promotes a training program on compost and bokashi production to address the issue of declining soil fertility. This training will take place through the Champs Écoles Paysans (CEP), an approach based on exchanges among farmers, experimentation, and the collaborative development of knowledge. However, due to time constraints and delays in the farming season, the farmers feel they do not have the time needed for collective learning and are seeking directly applicable recommendations so they can take swift action on their farms. At the same time, your organization expects a significant number of farmers to have adopted these practices by the end of the project.	Would you seek to meet the farmers' demand by directly teaching them the techniques, or would you maintain a participatory learning approach? Why?	1. In your opinion, what is the most important objective the advisor should aim to achieve: supporting a learning process, developing farmers' capacity for co-creation, or disseminating an agroecological practice? Justify your answer. 2. Do the project's time constraints sometimes lead you to modify your usual approach to supporting producers?
3. Mode of knowledge transmission	prioritize participatory learning and co-construction of knowledge through Farmer Field Schools;	prioritize direct transmission of technical recommendation s to achieve rapid adoption.			

Continued

4. <i>Scale of intervention</i> engage in mediation and limit the coordination intervention to among territorialthe producers' actors beyond farms. the farm;	In your area of operation, farmers are seeking assistance to resolve a recurring problem with soil fertility. The assessment shows that this situation is linked to several factors, including land-use pressure, livestock grazing management, and access to biomass issues that also involve other local stakeholders, particularly livestock farmers, with whom the farmers are in conflict. Your organization has asked you to prioritize a regional approach based on collaboration among the various stakeholders in order to identify sustainable solutions. However, local authorities have warned you that such collaboration risks reigniting tensions between farmers and livestock producers. The farmers refuse to engage in dialogue with the livestock producers and want your intervention to be limited to their own farms.	What is the role of the agricultural advisor when the problems faced by producers extend beyond their farms and involve multiple local stakeholders? 1. In your opinion, what benefits would consultation among the various stakeholders bring? 2. If you work exclusively with the producers, do you think the problem would be resolved? Why? 3. What would be your first steps to engage the relevant stakeholders?
5. <i>Principles of action toward social norms</i> actively promote women's participation, accommodate local social norms that may limit women's participation. including where this requires questioning local norms;	Your organization has tasked you with conducting a diagnostic study to identify the main problems faced by producers in your target area. Your institution's guidelines require that gender be taken into account in carrying out this process. However, in the area in question, sociocultural norms prohibit women from sitting in the same assembly as men or speaking in their presence. Local authorities are asking you to respect these customs in order to ensure that your intervention is accepted.	Would you seek to respect local norms or to ensure women's effective participation? Why? 1. Do you think the assessment would be complete if women did not participate? Why? 2. In your opinion, should the advisor treat all producers (men and women) equally, or should they tailor their support to certain categories of producers? Which ones? Why?