

**EXPERIENCE OF GROUP MARKETING OF TOMATOES
BY THE NORTH WEST FARMERS ORGANISATION (NOWEFOR)
Cameroon**

By:

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1. Introduction

The North West Farmers Organization (NOWEFOR) is a Federation of Unions of Common Initiative Groups in the North West Province founded in 1995. The organization aims at improving the living conditions of farmers. This is done primarily by identifying agricultural speculations that are economically viable and facilitating the acquisition of technical and financial assistance to indulge in the production.

NOWEFOR farmers in Bambui zone identified tomatoes cultivation as an important income generating crop in 2004. The farmers in the Union were organised into a gardening sector and received technical and financial assistance to get involved in the production of tomatoes and other garden crops. The gardening sector mobilises a lot of young farmers. It was therefore an important activity to increase the adhesion of Youths to NOWEFOR. Tomato cultivation entails the use of agrochemicals to combat pests. The farmers in this production sector were trained to limit application of these chemicals to the minimum levels possible so as to reduce chemical residues in the product. Therefore, organic farming was the method being promoted in this sector. 60 young men and women were involved in the sector in 2004.

2. High supply and low prices for tomatoes

With the technical and financial assistance received, the farmers realised increased production. Each farmer moved from 7 buckets of 15l of tomatoes per week to between 20 and 40 buckets of 15l of tomatoes per week. The local market in Bambui as well as the nearby Bamenda Main Market was therefore flooded and this led to a price drop from 3,500frs per 15l bucket to between 1000frs and 1,800frs. This situation was not comfortable as the farmers were not receiving satisfactory returns for their produce. The farmers in this production sector reflected on how to make the sector more profitable. Two ideas came up namely how to reduce the supply of tomatoes in the local market and also to pool the farmers' produce and look for external market outlets.

The farmers adopted sequential production so as to reduce the supply of tomatoes in the local market. Members of the production sector were grouped into six sub-groups and a planting calendar agreed upon to separate planting dates by two weeks among the sub-groups. This means that the farmers harvested at different times and as such not all farmers took tomatoes to the local market at the same time.

In a bid to look for external markets, two members of the sector were sent to do market prospection in Yaounde, Douala and Limbe. Three bulk buyers were identified respectively in Yaounde, Douala and Limbe.

3. Pooling of tomatoes and marketing as a group

The buyer in Douala showed a lot of interest and requested the farmers to send 150kg of tomatoes by mid-December 2005 to be tested for chemical residues. The test on our tomatoes scored 92.5% while other producers who had also tendered to supply scored respectively 86% and 62%. This buyer (Leader price) agreed to buy our product. The first order was placed in December 2005 for supply of 3tons of tomatoes at 3200frs per basket of 20kg compared to 3,000frs at the local market. The contact farmer mobilised the other members of the production sector and some of them pooled their tomatoes on the agreed date. This collected and delivered to the buyer in Douala.

4. Negotiating Better Marketing Arrangements

The farmers experienced constraints in transporting the produce to Douala. These constraints were costs and handling of produce. This problem was presented to the buyer who then agreed to take over the transportation aspect. Therefore a new arrangement was arrived at which entailed farmers to mobilise their produce at the level of the village at the request of the buyer. The buyer then comes to he village and pays for the produce and takes it to Douala.

The farmers also observed that the perishable nature of tomatoes meant that they should be the ones to determine when produce is available. This was also discussed with the buyer. This was agreed upon by the buyer and a new arrangement was made that the buyer gives quantities needed for a period of six months and this will be supplied on a weekly basis. Therefore, a contractual agreement was signed between this farmers organisation and the buyer for a six months period on minimum quantities of tomatoes to be supplied monthly. The produce is supplied at a constant price over this period.

5. Quality Concerns

With the first supply of tomatoes to this buyer, 300kg of tomatoes were rejected for poor quality. This prompted the group members to organise a training on Integrated Pest Management. Techniques on limiting agro-chemical applications to the minimum were dwelt upon. The next supply of tomatoes scored 95.5% after the test.

Also, the supplies in March and April 2006 scored 100%. In April the farmers received a letter of congratulations from consumers of their tomatoes based in Equatorial Guinea and Gabon. The buyer has also called on the farmers to maintain this quality with prospects of increasing the buying price in the future given the quality.

6. Supplies and Income

- Between December 2005 and September 2006 a total of 25.2 tons of tomatoes have been supplied to this buyer.
- This brought in a total income of 4,032,000frs to the farmers.
- This massive exportation has reduced the abundance of tomatoes in the local market .
- Farmers producing other varieties of tomatoes for sell in the local market now experience better prices.

7. Impact of this groups Marketing of Tomatoes in Bambui Zone and NOWEFOR

- There is secure and regular income for farmers' tomatoes.
- The farmers are able to acquire inputs as a group from Douala at lower prices.
- Improved qualitative and quantitative production by group members (yield changed from 10tons/ha to 16tons/ha).
- The constant good quality of the tomatoes has prompted the buyer to request other produce namely Irish potatoes, water melon and sweet pepper.
- Most idle youth in the community have found employment in market gardening and increased their commitment in NOWEFOR activities.

8. Challenges and Perspectives

- Sometimes the farmers are unable to supply the quantity demanded. There is therefore need to increase production while maintaining the quality.
- This increased production will also enable the group contract other buyers to reduce the risk of relying on one buyer.
- Other farmers in the organisation have witnessed the regular income from gardening and have expressed the interest to join the gardening sector. This means that there is need for assistance to train new members who become interested in tomato cultivation.
- Resources are required to indulge in quality production of other produce being demanded by the buyer.
- The Bambui group marketing experience has been shared to other communities.
- The experience is being replicated in Babungo where the same process has been followed.
- More 75 youth are now involved.
- Production in this new zone has increased and new prices of 4,000 francs per basket have been negotiated with bulk buyers.
- Annex business of making baskets is gradually increasing and creating jobs.

9. Conclusion

This experience shows that pooling together farmers produce can enable them access special market segments. In this case, organic tomatoes are seen to have an insatiable demand. This has also engaged a disadvantaged segment of the population (youths) in agriculture. Here, the challenge being faced by the farmers now is to increase production while maintaining the quality as there is a ready market.

However, the practices involved in the process are not institutionalized. The farmers bring their tomatoes for group marketing at their free will. Also, the bulk buying of inputs at the level of Douala is done by viable farmers who put money to pre-finance the purchase. It is therefore important to reflect on possibilities of committing members to supply during group marketing as well as participation in bulk buying of inputs.