



*What should be retained from the whole process of analysing FO initiatives? What should be done with this whole store of experience for these local initiatives to be shared more widely?*

*The point here is not to draw general lessons. This will not bear fruit, and would even contradict the entire approach presented in this document, which aims to help farmers and their organisations find solutions suited to their diverse situations.*

*However, we are merely proposing some conclusions we have drawn from these experiences, whether they concern FO marketing initiatives or means and initiatives to reinforce their activities in this domain.*

*They can be summarised in a few points that may serve as reference for NGOs, or donors engaged in supporting FO collective actions in general and, more particularly, in their collective marketing actions:*

- *Successful experiences can rarely be transposed to other contexts or other areas.*
- *The interesting aspect of most cases lies in the approaches, reflections and principles that induced the actors to make their choices and to construct/build their experience.*
- *It is therefore preferable to multiply the number of initiatives that promote collective thinking involving the stakeholders, than to replicate and disseminate the results of the summary analysis derived from the case studies.*
- *Particular attention should be given to failures and aborted experiences, which are as rich and full of lessons as the success stories.*

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## 1 - MARKETING BELIEFS

### Improve marketing: key leverage

Marketing improvements can contribute to a significant improvement in farmers' income. This should be considered the priority action. For example, a simple improvement in the system of measurements can improve a farmer's income by an average of 10%. The returns from these types of activities which improve marketing conditions are often higher than those related to an increase in productivity or yields (more difficult to obtain).

### Yes, Farmers' Organisations are useful!

FOs provide essential services to farmers regardless of whether or not they are members of the FO that introduces the measure (for example, a farmer who is not involved in a FO will of course benefit from the organisation of the measurement system or the organisation of a more transparent market).

These services facilitate market access and the marketing of agricultural products through a range of more or less complex activities. Recalling the activities covered in Chapter 2, we can list: providing technical information; improving the quality of products; grouping supply; market information (information on prices and volumes); introducing market operating rules and control systems; putting in place rules to limit measurement and price variability; local supply management; import barriers; collective bargaining; looking for market outlets and creating ties – contractual or not – between farmers and other actors in the value chain; building partnerships with other regional actors.

These services provided by the FOs re-establish a balance in power relationships between farmers and other actors in the value chains and help improve market functioning in general (circulation of products, supply to cities, etc.).

### Diverse solutions: there are no "right" actions per itself

The activities of FOs tend to focus on the supply of products – the most characteristic is one in which the FO buys the products of its members and then tries to resell them. Others pay more attention to demand by targeting markets and actors and consequently adapting their farming practices and techniques (quality, volumes). Others improve on matching demand and supply.

In relation to the diversity of situations, these actions, which may or may not be undertaken simultaneously, can be carried out at different levels of actors' organisations (FOs at the grassroots level, unions, umbrella organisations, traders' organisations, multi-actors in interprofessional forums for dialogue) to access different types of markets (local, national and international).

The areas in which these actions are valid are often defined by the particular context and specific socio-political conditions. Implementing standardised actions is impossible: there is no readymade solution or one solution that is better than another. We cannot foresee the events and the situations that farmers will face. This always depends on the intrinsic characteristics of the agricultural products, on the situation of the FO and also on other actors in the value chains (in terms of organisation and structure) and potential partnerships.

It is therefore often impossible to reproduce "what works for one FO" within another FO and it is necessary to recognise the specific features of each situation. This is an important problem for the implementation of projects or activities on a large scale. One must therefore acknowledge that a priori solutions do not exist and acquire the means to examine and analyse the "actual situations", i.e. as they are viewed and experienced by the actors of these FOs.

### **Received ideas are not always the best: Beware of prejudices!**

We saw that the formula, which states: *“the cooperative must buy now and sell later”* is not always the ideal solution. *“Shorten the market channels, take over the functions in place of other actors or intermediaries in a value chain to gain added value”*; is also not always possible or beneficial to farmers and their FOs. *“Traders are thieves”* ignores the real services they can contribute (sometimes better than FOs).

Their “opportunistic” behaviour makes them less reliable in the farmers’ opinion, but this may also be due merely to a changing, less certain environment; just as farmers may have individual opportunistic strategies, “despite everything”, due to a very limiting environment.

### **FOs are successful when they innovative and do not want to “do everything”.**

In the cases studied, the FOs “score points” and their services and credibility vis-à-vis their members and their partners are strengthened, when, beyond a common vision shared by the members regarding collective measures, they succeed in (i) targeting services that respond effectively to the realistic needs of members; (ii) having the means and the comparative advantages over other actors (when they exist of course) to execute them; (iii) implementing clear rules with systems that are both binding and flexible so that they are respected.

Sometimes FOs engage in activities in which they have neither the means nor advantages compared with others who can do better than they can. Processing, marketing and transportation are professions that require techniques, know-how, finances and modes of organisation, which are neither spontaneous nor obvious. Moreover, FOs cannot easily substitute for these professionals.

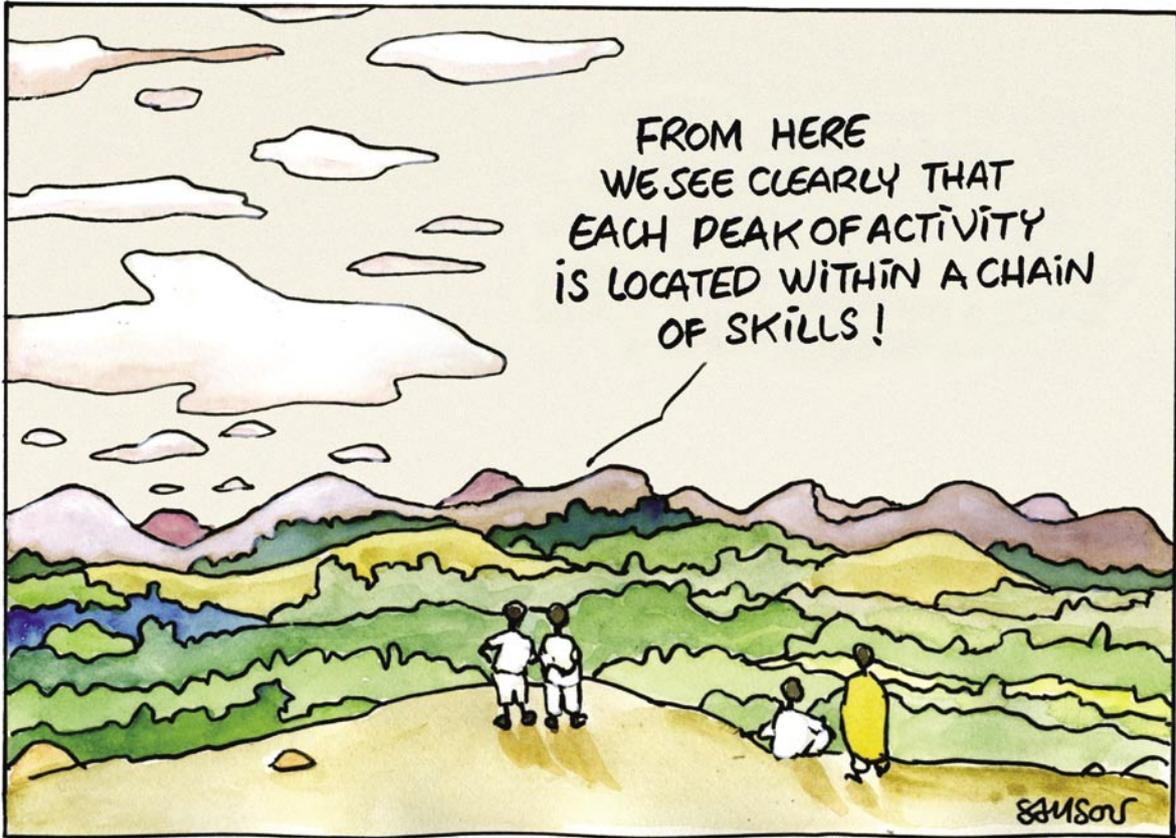
It is not always appropriate for an FO to want to replace these actors and take charge of all these types of activities. On the contrary, the FO encourages and promotes positive dynamics for farmers when it facilitates relationships between them (the farmers) and the traders, transporters, processors, or research and extension actors by obtaining funds to lead these actions.

### **Changes of scale where they are not expected**

We have seen that individual cases rarely repeat themselves nor do they abide excessive simplification. It is easy to resort to general lessons (one-size-fits-all), which are neither new nor very operational. This work shows that perhaps, by trying too hard to gain perspective and analyse the concrete cases in order to draw general lessons, even the relevance of the case studies can be lost.

The case studies therefore are neither aimed at passing on general lessons or replicating them, which is less desirable. They can, on the contrary, serve as aids to fuel and facilitate discussions within the FOs and support NGOs to build customised solutions. Within each experience, some elements can be reconsidered to nourish these discussions. For example, well-documented case studies make it possible to change the scale in terms of advice-support. By introducing some of the elements from the target actors (farmer leaders of FOs and rural development facilitators), these studies give the former the capacity to build projects adapted to their local conditions and the latter a supporting role.

In the same way, a field visit reaches out to about 20 people (which is already a great deal in terms of logistics and the system in place to be able to share effectively); but when combined with the production of a video, it renders the case more accessible to a larger number of people. The change of scale does not lie in reproducing the concrete cases but in the capacity to multiply occasions to share and discuss these complex cases. The aids, which always have to be adapted, can be used to facilitate debates at different levels (local, national or regional). This means precautions must be taken with regard to the approaches and the tools that are mobilised.



Chains of related skills (Samson)

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## 2- RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING FARMERS

There is no readymade solution that can be transferred: based on the provision of inputs to marketing, farmers and their FOs have to make decisions, negotiate, arbitrate, make choices, react to hazards, innovate daily and take up responsibilities, invent, invest, organise and get organised. Farmers who are able to analyse their constraints, identify their possibilities, express their needs, exchange knowledge and strengthen their negotiation capabilities have better access to knowledge and relevant agricultural technologies.

Furthermore, rather than merely recommending actions to carry out or experiences to copy, decisions must instead focus on principles and approaches to strengthen local dynamics. Following the work carried out, we can make a number of recommendations in this area to help local actors put together and build relevant solutions (especially, but not only, around marketing), by mobilising resources (theirs and/or those in the surroundings or externally) to carry out actions that target realistic objectives.

### **Put the actors back at the center of processes for much-needed collective apprenticeships**

To be effective, farmers and their organisations have to appropriate the methods: analysing concrete situations of FOs and searching for a range of solutions by exchanging and discussing these concrete cases as well as experimentation. Therefore, it seems important to start with what is being done, from the concrete, the actual, and from its potential and constraints, not on behalf of the actors but with them. One cannot be satisfied only with providing external analysis and technical advice; it is important to go further and above all facilitate social dialogue. To enable local actors to organise, they have to be part of the process. At a time when communication is exploding, it is amazing to witness just how difficult it is for people to establish real contact with one another. Very little effort is made to get beyond individual concerns and modes of thinking.

It is important to promote methods that reinforce social bonds, interactions between individuals and networks to allow an area to organise. The era of pyramid-like systems has evolved. Actors must be able to act on their projects locally and overcome the inevitable obstacles (elected officials, local authorities). The shift from the “benefactor” approach to one of “partnership” necessarily challenges certain existing power relationships.

### **Open up a field of possibilities**

A marketing experience implemented by a FO is made up of a series of decisions that have been taken by the leaders. For example, in the experience supplied by the Mogtédo cooperative in Burkina Faso, the cooperative members succeeded in “imposing” a unique point of sale in the market, the option to sell rice but not paddy rice (primary processing), control over weighing, etc.<sup>50</sup> The methods and systems put in place look like a building constructed with “key pieces”.

In each experience, the “chosen pieces” may be different. In one case an FO will prioritise the payment of advances for marketing; in other cases it will chose a system of “trade fairs”, a place and time for demand and supply to meet, or even the obligation to sell per kilogram instead of using traditional measurements. And, in each of the experiences presented for analysis or in feedback, we can see these differences: how the choices farmers and FOs made were driven by the conditions, contexts, degree of FO organisation and discipline as well as a wide range of factors and elements that only the actors can control.

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<sup>50</sup> After forceful discussions and multi- actor dialogue of course.

The real advantage of this feedback lies in the possibility of giving the actors involved a better understanding of “each of these pieces”, in order to review the range of tools and options, control their consequences and therefore chose the solutions that are best-suited for themselves (and collectively). The Mogtédo cooperative was undoubtedly the most visited and utilised experience with the two videos and accompanying documents that were produced to make this experience better known. This never led to a “replication” of the Mogtédo case, however, although some FOs selected certain “pieces”, which they saw and analysed.

In dealing with traders who travel and who are informed and involved in exchanges, farmers have long remained isolated with very limited access to information. The initiatives to analyse and receive feedback on marketing experiences make it possible to distribute the cards more fairly. They give farmers the possibility of thinking about the sale of their products differently.

It is better not to engage FOs in “one” type of quick, predetermined action, which is believed to correspond to what we consider good for an FO (e.g. buying members’ produce). The participatory feedback sessions should make it possible to open up a field of opportunities and discussions to construct locally adapted solutions. Once again, these feedback sessions have to “speak out”.

### **“Feedback for its own sake” or “feedback for development”?**

It appears to be necessary to multiply the feedback sessions by directly involving the local actors. Farmers must in first be able to analyse and put their own experiences and those of their neighbours into perspective and question them. Support organisations, NGOs and researchers are also necessary to support and/or strengthen these dynamics with their external and/or new viewpoints: they can participate in facilitating and keeping abreast of collective thinking by supporting the organisation of exchange visits and the production of feedback aids as well as by facilitating retrospective assessments of experiences.

The objective of the feedback sessions is not to do feedback “for its own sake”, nor to transfer a stock of “external” results that reveal which action is desirable. The goal is to create opportunities for collective reflection on the basis of concrete cases – what is done at home and what is done in other places – and comparisons to see what can be improved at home.<sup>51</sup> The issue is about collective construction of know-how and shared knowledge so that later on people can engage (or become engaged) in collective actions.

This participatory process may appear to be more expensive to carry out than external studies or “traditional” workshops, which are conducted in a short period of time. But in absolute terms this is not the case, since the results are not measured by a long display of reports on the shelves but by local dynamics that have been strengthened. The change of scale as such is not found in the multiplication of “external” case studies or workshops but rather in their effectiveness as long as they are part of a long-term process involving local actors.<sup>52</sup>

### **Communication is not spontaneous: it requires specific resources**

The knowledge of farmers – who are also marketing actors – can be useful to other farmers (and others as well). But for this know-how and knowledge to be shared or become shareable, there is no need for studies, debates, forums or workshops carried out in a preconceived manner using pre-established, standardised approaches. Indeed, communication is more than just spontaneous and immediate. It requires some detailed work, adequate tools, know-how (how to make and use the tools), human/financial resources and time.

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<sup>51</sup> Construire les compétences individuelles et collectives / G. Leboterf.

<sup>52</sup> Even if a workshop or an occasional video is apparently not expensive in relative terms, it becomes so in absolute terms if “it does not have anything to say”, if it does not facilitate exchanges, or if they are not used.

### **Strengthening the economic and organisational activities of FOs**

The economic functions of the FO (organisation of storage, transport, processing, etc.) are the first things that come to mind because they seem easy to implement. But they are professions in themselves, which are much more difficult to carry out collectively (contrary to activities which private companies can undertake activities without having to consult members, which is the case for FOs).

Thus, it is important at each stage to verify the interests and comparative advantages of the farmers and their FOs before engaging in these activities and whether or not the members believe in and support the initiative. Marketing products through an FO is first and foremost a collective action, which requires compliance and collective engagement. During visits to the Mogtédó cooperative, the first remark of FO leaders who come to learn and see the experience is always: “They are disciplined here”.

Furthermore, since the environment keeps changing and new farmers continually bring their products to the market, a new problem emerges: financing the organisational process and permanent training to build capacities (for more rigorous and transparent management at the administrative level and in applying the rules). This has a definite cost. What can be done to cover these permanent costs? A balance is often sought between the economic activities – as long as they yield surpluses – (provisioning in inputs, grouped sales) and non-economic activities (information, advice, training, etc.). External aid remains necessary to strengthen the latter.

The simplest actions are often the most effective and sometimes improving what already exists (production advice, information on prices, weighing, information from traders on volumes available, specialisation in a few roles) can be more effective than taking charge of new, complex, risky functions. Strengthening productive capacities through technical advice and control of technical pathways to limit problems in terms of product volumes and quality in advance is an indispensable pre-requisite: many collective marketing actions carried out prior to dealing with production fail due to a poor management of the volumes, dates and quantities produced.

### **Diverse types of support, not focused solely on FOs so as not to stifle them**

While FOs are a key leverage point, they are not the only actors in the value chains or the territory. It may seem easier to stake everything on the FOs, but FOs hardly have the means to charge of everything issue and manage everything over time. The investments/support focused on the FOs makes it possible to support them for a while (by pushing them to substitute other actors), but in the long run this does not solve the core or fundamental problem.

It is therefore important to help other actors progress at the same time. What is the point of strengthening the FOs if the other actors are neglected and cannot live from their services? The strength of the measures also depends on their being accepted by various types of actors who have likewise been strengthened. By dividing up support more evenly and not neglecting other surrounding actors, it is possible to redistribute roles, leverage available skills and limit exaggerated positions of power (and weakness) based on too few FOs or often too few individuals leading them.

Financing is a problem not only for FOs but also for farms: short term “dissident” individual strategies resulting from life’s hazards, emergencies and farmers’ urgent monetary needs do not always favour collective marketing action and often seriously undermine these types of actions. Furthermore, strengthening diversified systems of credit and support to those with low revenues (short term credit to overcome specific difficulties, safety nets, etc.) can help reinforce FO marketing actions.

### **Set aside time for collective learning: a gradual, incremental process**

Another observation is that changes do not occur immediately: they may take a few months or many years. The ideas and options presented in the communication aids remain available: the seeds have been planted. And it is even possible to see which ones are eventually used.

Collective apprenticeships and learning are indispensable within FOs (between members), but also among multiple actors, with the right to make mistakes: farmers learn collectively by doing. Experience is necessary, but this does not mean they should be pushed into very risky actions that carry consequences they will be unable to assume, along with the danger of destroying all the dynamics without learning anything constructive. The cases studied have shown the need for gradual progress in activities, testing marketing approaches on a small scale before engaging in larger operations (with the constraints of the critical mass: for example, grouping minimum volumes of products to cover costs).

The construction and development of local collective action over time is incompatible with political and media management of a crisis: the interventions improvised by governments according to “pre-structural adjustment programs” (planners, investors, experts, traders) that do not take into account commitments made at the sub-regional level (ECOWAS, for example); the intervention of donors with “aid” that seriously jeopardises the networks of local actors, which have taken so long to build.



There are limits to getting the big picture! (Samson, 2009)

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### 3 - FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS

#### **Continue the network exchanges to enrich everyone's work**

Today in terms of supporting FOs, priority is given to “capacity-building”. The methods for building capacities have changed, however: projects and programs no longer have their own teams with specialised trainers; the large organisations specialised in training farmers and their FOs have problems staying afloat; now is the time for activities that result from the demands of local actors and approaches geared to helping farmers “to do things by themselves”.

Concretely this often happens in a situation where an FO has to apply for assistance to “build its capacities” from projects and programs. If the application is granted, the FO has to find the appropriate service provider. Generally, the FO engages a nearby service provider who is “more or less” qualified. The service provider is certainly remunerated for the training but rarely for its preparation. The preparation, which is necessary, becomes a “weak link” that weakens the entire edifice.

This approach has become the most popular mode of intervention.

One possible, desirable fallback position for analysis and feedback on marketing experiences is to make experiences, examples and analyses available to the service providers to serve as aids and tools for training.

For this to be possible, the work has to be accessible and known, hence the importance of working in a network and multiplying the information. In our opinion, this is one of the most significant impacts of all the work that has been produced.

#### **Developing new tools for steering and evaluating initiatives?**

Continuing to invest in the dynamics of capacity-building, networking and collective learning processes appears to be indispensable. Nevertheless, these dynamics may seem complex, expensive, less visible and hard to measure, and therefore discourage donors as well as support organisations or service providers who are engaged in these types of activities.

Just because we lack tools to measure impacts does not mean we have to limit ourselves to evaluating immediately visible results, which does not actually make sense in the case of collective capacity-building, where impacts are deferred over time and influenced by many other factors. Therefore, we should continue developing methods to measure the usefulness of these tools and improve on steering and evaluating these types of frameworks in which “facilitation and process” aspects must take precedence over everything else.

It would be interesting to see, among other things, “quality initiatives” that have been developed in many other sectors (health, humanitarian action, etc). These approaches appear especially relevant in helping to put beneficiaries back at the centre of the action, especially when there is some connection between: (i) the organisation that pays for the services, (ii) the actor that develops the services and (iii) the beneficiaries of the services. At the level of NGOs, FOs or of networks of actors, member beneficiaries might well see the quality of services improve.