

Taking it One Day at the Time: Cultivating and Processing Alternative Staple Foods in Central Senegal

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Since the mid 1990s, the “linking farmers to markets” theme has become very popular among international, governmental and non-governmental development agencies focusing on poverty alleviation among African male and female farmers. Analysis of recent experiences has shown that small scale farmers organizations play a central role in strengthening individual farmers’ position in traditional and in innovative markets as well as in building their capacities. The principles underlying the market chain approach to increase small farmers’ income are basically the same as those on which the innovation systems theory relies, namely the interaction between economic actors for the exchanging of existing and the creating of new knowledge, believed to lead to innovative actions. Farmers organizations are key actors not only in defending farmers’ interests and in negotiating with the authorities to foster the development of policies that are more favorable to smallholder farmers, but also in providing platforms and facilitating contact with other stakeholder groups for an improved knowledge exchange and learning environment.

In Senegal as well, the agricultural chain approach made its entrance from the early 2000s onwards and quickly caught the attention of a number of NGOs as well as governmental departments. With the collapse of the national peanut industry, the attention slowly shifted to alternative agricultural supply chains, such as rice, tomato, onions, beans, sorghum etc., within the framework of a widespread discourse of poverty alleviation among the rural populations. At the same time, the collapsing of the peanut industry, which for decades was the major agricultural income earner of the country and of individual farmers, brought to light the inherent instability of the country’s agricultural economy due to the incompatibility of local versus global values. The emphasis of many development agencies and actors on the importance of working with farmers organizations in the linking of farmers to markets tends to overshadow the field of tensions between the functioning of liberal market based economies and the day-to-day economic realities of smallholder farmers and their livelihoods.

This paper illustrates the above arguments through the author’s six years’ experience working for an international NGO supporting farmers organizations in Senegal applying the new agricultural chain approach. It discusses the political economy surrounding the implementation of technical and other innovations within the organic banana chain at production, processing and marketing level in central Senegal, as well as the interactions between economic actors and other stakeholders involved.