

Better onions for booming Bamako

The experience of 2SCALE: the business case for providing services to female onion farmers

The vegetable sector

In Bamako, the consumption of vegetables has skyrocketed over the past decade. Mali has a rapid population growth and one of the fastest rates of urbanisation in Africa. The growing middle class in the capital Bamako eats more vegetables and is eating out more often. Bamako has become a huge food market, with many street restaurants. For vegetable producers, this cultural and gastronomic change creates a complex growing market.

The supply side

Onions are one of the main food commodities in Mali. Depending on the region, 60 to 80% of the producers are women. Per year only one crop is grown, during the dry season. It could be profitable to also grow rainy season onion varieties. However, few women have the technology and the market linkages to make use of this opportunity. Prices are the lowest immediately after harvesting, then rising slowly until they peak during the off-season. Storage facilities would allow selling the onions when the prices have risen, but few farmers can properly store their onions.



Gender-based constraints

Poor quality of the soils

One of the key factors limiting productivity is that farmers grow their crops on soils of very poor quality. They use large quantities of mineral fertilisers to improve the soil fertility. However, in this way insufficient organic matter is built up in the soil for increasing the vegetable production. Female farmers do not own cows or other ruminants that produce organic matter to increase the soil fertility. As a result, women's onion yields are lower than men's.

Limited access to land and other productive resources

In West Mali, land is traditionally owned by men. Most female producers operate less than 25 acres, lent to them by men.

Women are often the last ones able to use 'family-shared' resources, like land. This has an impact on women's productivity and overall farm productivity, as land ownership often determines decision-making and control over other productive resources like inputs, farm equipment, finance and labour.

Volatility of the market

The influx of onions from neighbouring countries in June and December decreases the onion price. This exacerbates the financial insecurity of onion producers. As 60 to 80% of the onion producers are women, they are particularly affected.



Result:

**Better quality products
for a better price**



Strategies

Access to improved seeds and fertilisers

Through the facilitation of 2SCALE, input retailer company Ginna Agricole from Niono in Mali granted female customers with a supplier credit to procure improved seeds and fertilisers. Women usually don't have assets that can serve as collateral for a loan. However, Ginna Agricole did not ask any collaterals and guarantees as a condition for a credit. The relationship was solely built on trust.

Safer spraying techniques

In addition to the production training, 2SCALE sensitised and trained female farmers in the safe use of pesticides. It was emphasised that women of reproductive age should never spray pesticides themselves to avoid health issues affecting them or their babies; instead, they should request assistance from professional sprayers, also supported by the programme.

New varieties and training in good practices

Onions in Mali are grown in the dry season, because rainy season crops suffer from fungal diseases. Partner East West Seed provided farmers with new fungus-resistant varieties that can be grown during the rainy season, when prices and profits are much higher. Training programmes focussed on good agricultural practices for these crops. They also introduced new practices such as making compost from kitchen waste.

Access to markets

To avoid dependency from the local market, flooded by imported onions, 2SCALE facilitated the collaboration between producers and Madougou S.A., a supplier to the largest Malian vegetable processing company Bara Muso. Thus producers have an alternative, remunerative market.

Results



Benefits for companies

Increased client base and sales for input providers

The Toguna SA company, that provided the seeds and fertilisers to retailer Ginna Agricole in Niono, increased its client base significantly by selling to the female onion producers. Its total turnover increased so much that it could afford to sell at lower prices.

Reliable repayments on credits from female producers

The credits to women were fully repaid to Ginna Agricole, on schedule. The company sees women as reliable, trustworthy clients.

Better quality product

The Women Marketers Association of Vegetables in Bamako indicated that onions from 2SCALE-supported farmers are of better quality: the skin is firmer, the water content is lower (which increases their shelf life), and they look more appealing. The traders (often women) can transport or store them for a longer period, and sell them at a premium price.



Benefits for women

Access to quality seeds and fertilisers leads to higher productivity and better products

The easier access of women to credit enabled them to buy quality seeds and fertilisers. Improved seeds, especially for fungus-resistant onion varieties, combined with fertilisers and training in good agricultural practices, increased the yields from 9 to 20 tons per hectare. The better-looking onions with a firmer skin sell at higher prices. They also have a longer shelf life, meaning that women can sell them when the prices are better. The women who venture to produce a second onion crop in the rainy season, benefit from the higher prices for onions during this season.

Crop protection and better health

The use of professional sprayers (young men of the locality, certified by CropLife Mali) contributes to improved crop protection, with less pesticide residue and less impact on the environment (good spraying practices, with genuine pesticides, and management of empty containers). It also improved the health of women in general.

Access to markets

Thanks to the facilitation of 2SCALE, women can now sell their better quality products for a better price to big buyers like the Madougou company.



Credits

2SCALE, 2017 Gender mainstreaming in agribusiness partnerships, a thematic paper (page 14-15).

2SCALE, 2016, Onions without tears (in Highlights 2016, page 20).

