

Eastern Corridor Agro-Information Centre

ECAMIC: A three year learning process

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This thematic project brief describes the lessons learned from one of IICD / Cordaid's livelihoods supported projects. It is intended for practitioners in the field as well as organisations that would like to learn from the experience of this project and implement something similar.

Most of this brief's content is based on results from Evaluation exercises that have been performed with local Evaluation partners over the years. This Evaluation system consists on quantitative and qualitative assessments.

Questionnaires are filled in anonymously and yearly by the end users of the project (all users of the project or a representative sample), and the answers are analysed regarding user profiles, use and satisfaction, and impact of the project. On the other hand, periodical Focus Group meetings are attended by project staff and end users, to reflect on the data and discuss successes, challenges and solutions. This brief has been elaborated in close collaboration with the project partner, the Social Enterprise Development Foundation of West Africa (SEND Foundation). For more information on them and IICD in general, please refer to the last page.



Context

With around one third of the population living below the poverty line, Ghana is on the lower ranks of UNDP's Human Development Index. While farming is the main source of income for a large amount of the population, gains are hindered by lack of access to market information. In Northern Ghana, as revealed by assessments and a 2003 Market Access Roundtable Tamale organised by IICD and Cordaid, market information access is a challenge for several reasons:

- **No access to sources of price information**, giving farmers a weak bargaining position
- **High Transportation costs** (70% of value) due to poor road infrastructure
- **Storage problems** for post-harvest produce (losses estimated at 15%-30% in 2003)
- **Buyers' identification** at market days. Ghana has weekly markets in 110 districts. Farmers have to move around with their produce to sell it at the right district market



Notice board in one of the participating communities

- **Low income** of potential buyers
Reliable access to market information will enable small farmers to negotiate for favourable prices and therefore to increase their income.

Project description

The project "Eastern Corridor Agro-Information Centre" (ECAMIC) is an



outcome of the Roundtable mentioned. It aims to improve the livelihoods of small scale food crop producers in the Eastern Corridor of Northern Ghana through better access to market information. The project is implemented by the SEND Foundation, which operates in Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Its oldest and largest program is in Ghana, which began with a team of volunteer staff in 1998 and today has more than 50 paid staff, being acknowledged by cooperatives in Northern Ghana as part of their community. With a demand driven approach, SEND also carries out several other projects related to food security, human rights training in a former conflict zone, HIV/AIDS peer promoters, and microfinance services.

The ECAMIC project consists of two phases (see timeline below). Phase one aimed to develop a market information facility to serve as a source of market information and data to 24 community-based farmers' cooperatives. Information is delivered from the district centre by Cooperative Information Officers through group meetings and community notice boards.

Phase two, starting in 2007, introduced mobile services and provided 200 mobile phones at a reduced cost. In this period, the number of community organisations reached 48. SEND also initiated collaboration with TradeNet (www.TradeNet.biz), a web and mobile phone platform, to provide general price as well as customized information, including meeting schedules and policy information, through SMS alerts.

Objectives and target group of the project

The second phase of the project aimed to:

- **Improving access to information:**

Ghana Profile

Surface Area (sq. km): 228 thousand
 Population total: 22.1 million
 Life expectancy: 57.5 years
 School enrolment, primary (% net): 97.8%
 Human development index (UNDP): 135 (out of 177)

Source: World Development Indicators database, 2007

Access to communication technologies per 1,000 people

Mobile subscribers: 230
 Internet Users: 27
 Personal computers: 5.8

Source: UN eGovernment survey 2008

Data on the project

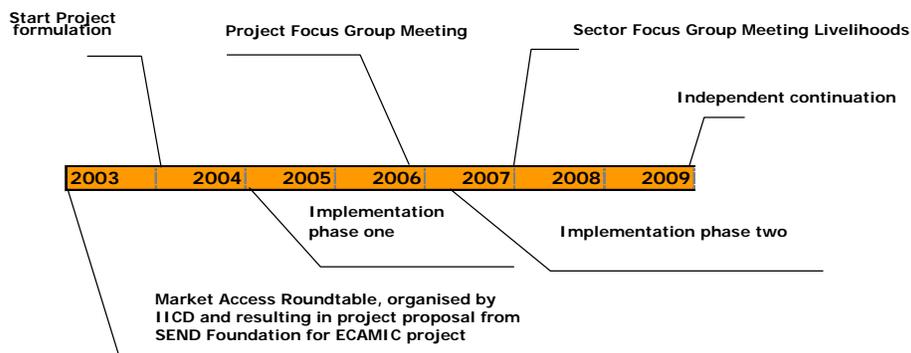
Sector: Livelihoods
 Number of users: 720 users from 48 cooperatives
 Number of beneficiaries: 4,320
 Target group(s): farmers and cooperative groups
 Population in Eastern Corridor: 1,800,000

Providing access to agricultural market and price information, essential farm inputs, health and relevant government policies for over 2,000 small-scale food crop producers so that they can make informed decisions

- **Improving information access** for urban households, giving them bargaining advantages and storage possibilities
- **Developing capacities** to use mobile phones and internet facilities to access relevant information.

The target group is the farmers and their

ECAMIC Timeline



families in the Eastern Corridor. Within this group of farmers, SEND focuses on married couples and widows. Therefore the group of young people (below 20) is under represented (only 3 %). In 2006, 75% of the users were 30 years and older, reaching 83% in 2008. Gender balance improved during the project implementation. While in 2006 41% of users involved were women, this dropped to 33% in 2007, and yet grew again in 2008 to 48% of the users. During the project's implementation, project staff was able to involve more farmers without any formal education, from 0% in 2006 to 30% in 2008.

Impact

ECAMIC project's impact has been measured for 3 years, providing a good picture of the developments over time. Impact is measured by asking users to respond to a 7-point scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) and then combining these statements into five constructs: awareness, empowerment, impact on the organisation, economic impact and negative impact. The data collected also shows the profile of the users, their satisfaction and use of the project. Since 2005, the project has collected questionnaires from 257 farmers.

Regarding motivation to participate, many indicated that their aim is to improve their income and living standards (34%), to produce more food to feed their family (34%) and to get market information about farm produce (23%). In 2008, a large majority of users (88%) indicated having achieved their goals as a result of participating in the project. One of the users mentioned: *"My standard of living has changed because I have now enough food to feed my family"*. However, not everyone was completely satisfied *"I achieved it partly because I received market information from the centres in the Northern region but not worldwide and nationwide."*

The use of electronic means to get information increased from 7% in 2006 to

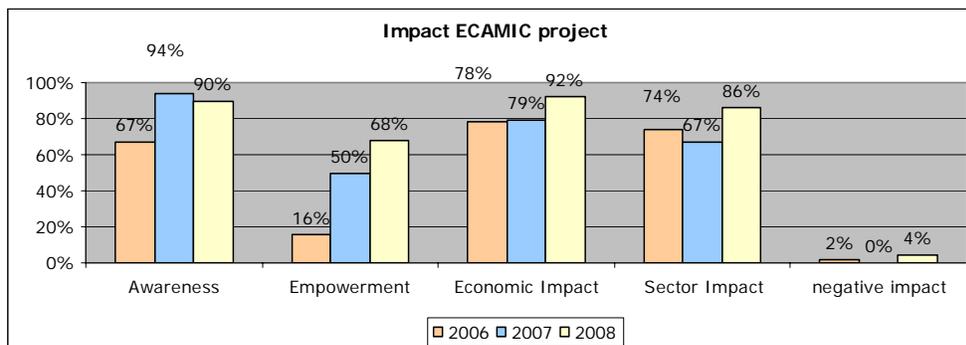
64% in 2008, mainly due to the introduction of TradeNet's services. In 2008, already half of the participants knew the website and 58% of them were strongly satisfied with it. For those farmers that used mobile phones to access information, almost 85% were strongly satisfied with the information provided. Also encouraging was that 71% of users thought that the information was also accessible and suitable for women and disadvantaged groups (this was not measured in 2006 and 2007).

Satisfaction with quality of service improved tremendously over the years, from only 17% strongly satisfied in 2006 to 80% in 2008. The main aspect affecting satisfaction is the cost of services. Farmers do not pay to ECAMIC for their services, but they do use their own resources to call the centre, send SMS to request price information or to travel to the district centres.

Another aspect is the quality and accuracy of the information offered. In 2006, 35% of the farmers were not satisfied with the information provided. During the first phase of the project, farmers had sometimes more accurate data than the one provided by the project and in some cases people doubted the market price given. After improvements in the data collection, the farmers are now highly satisfied, with only 2% not satisfied about the quality of the information in 2008. One user mentioned: *"I make sure that I am not cheated by finding out the right price where I go to sell my produce."*

Farmers are not only using the information for themselves but also sharing it with other farmers who may not have access. *"I do tell other buyers where to sell and when to sell their products,"* or *"Even though I am not a beneficiary of the mobile phone that some farmers received, I can consult the mobile phone of a beneficiary for market information"*.

Empowerment has increased tremendously from 16% in 2006 (phase 1)



to 68% in 2008 (phase 2), mainly due to the fact that farmers have more access to the information centres and mobile phones, being able to take control of their information needs at the moment they want. Farmers now value that they no longer have to wait for the Cooperative Information Officer to post the information in the notice board.

Organisational impact is an indicator that looks at participation in decision making and contributions to reduce corruption. Due to increased leadership skills and encouragement to operate more transparently and truthfully, 54% agreed that corruption has decreased, and 72% of the users thought they have now increased decision making power.

The economic impact has gone up to 92% in 2008 from 78% in 2006. Farmers see themselves now as better negotiators, knowing what prices to ask for. Motivation is high, with 86% being motivated to work harder and 74% seeing a positive cost/benefit of the project. ECAMIC calculated that farmers had an increase of 50 Ghc in 2006 based on additional soya sales. In the words of a farmer: *“At first, I did not have my own farm, but after participating in this project I now own my own farm. I produce soya beans for sale on the market so that I get money to help the whole household.”*

Overall, the project users' satisfaction levels indicate it is achieving the objectives and making concrete impact. Farmers are satisfied with the services and have taken concrete action after participating in the project.

Lessons learned

Evaluation based on questionnaires and focus group meetings provided the following information:

- **Gender representation:** women participation was very low in phase 1. Among the reasons were that “women” crops, such as dry okro and dry pepper, were not being included in the services. These were added, as well as the district markets of Dambai and Jbimdiri. To further include women in the project, it was requested that in all capacity building workshops men should be accompanied by a women.
- **High tech – Low tech:** The combination of ICT initiatives (high tech) and others (low tech like field visits and notice boards) is a good way for disseminating market information to rural communities. Computers and mobiles are not



Meeting at SEND Foundation, in Salaga

always reliable due to factors such as electricity supply.

- **Capacity building:** Initially, computer skills training was targeted at community leaders only. After evaluation of the first phase, other cooperative members were included, particularly women.
- **Low literacy:** Most farmers trained on mobile phone usage had low literacy levels and could not take full advantage of the training. This was addressed by involving literate family members, relatives or friends in the training, so they could later train and support their own relatives.

Challenges

Current challenges the project is facing include:

- **Weighing produce:** Farmers are not yet able to meet buyers' demand in terms of stating the quantity (weighing) of their produce. Also, not being able to assure buyers a guaranteed quality hinders their market negotiations on the TradeNet platform. Training has started on the use of weighing scales and how to interpret the weights into the local measuring units. In the coming period, efforts will be made to encourage farmer cooperatives to purchase weighing scales for their groups.
- **Subsidised phones:** The demand for discounted mobile phones was much higher than planned for by the ECAMIC project, so some farmers were disappointed at not being able to buy a subsidised phone.
- **Impact in daily budget:** Many farmers request price information via sms, using their own credits, instead of waiting for the weekly alerts from TradeNet (which are free of charge). Some farmers are now complaining that it takes too much of their daily budget as it requires phone credits. It needs to be reviewed how often alerts are sent.

- **Phone charging:** access to electricity to charge mobile phones is limited in some community cooperatives. Farmers travel long distances to charge their phones for a fee (50Gp per charge). In their opinion, this is also an additional cost in using the mobile phone to access market information. A possible solution could be that cooperatives contribute and buy a generator for charging their phones at a subsidized fee.

Next steps and future plans

To meet the current challenges and make use of all the possibilities of the TradeNet platform, more capacity development is necessary. Specific training will allow farmers to not only access and interpret market information, but also to sell their produce via the TradeNet platform and negotiate good prices. In collaboration with the International Centre for Soil Fertility & Agricultural Development (IFDC), SEND will also train farmers in good farming practices and how to improve their produce's quality.

At the same time, as more farmers use mobile phones as means for information access and communication, their need to meet the project staff is reduced. They are taking control of their own information needs and of when they access market information. This is an important step towards sustainability.



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Project website: www.sendfoundation.org

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Summary learning report ECAMIC:
[www.iicd.org/files/Learning Report Ghana
2006.pdf](http://www.iicd.org/files/Learning_Report_Ghana_2006.pdf)

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