

Summary Learning Report Ghana 2006 : Evaluation ECAMIC project

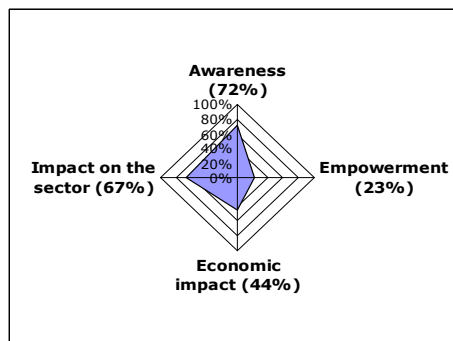
The ECAMIC project uses ICT innovatively to promote market access and equity for farming communities in the Eastern Corridor of the Northern Region of Ghana. The project works with individuals and organisations of men and women in organised community-based groups and cooperatives to create access to market information that allows project participants to have a more predictable market environment. The project also provides various capacity building trainings that enable project participants to develop relevant capacities for taking advantage of both domestic and international markets. The ultimate goal of the project is to improve the lives of its target beneficiaries or clients through enhanced profitability of their economic activities. SEND Foundation West Africa is the local implementing partner of the project.

At the end of 2006, an evaluation exercise was conducted as part of an annual exercise designed to gauge the progress, outcome and impact of the project to date. The exercise involved the analysis of 131 questionnaires filled out by end users of the project and a Focus Group meeting with all project partners involved in the livelihoods projects in Ghana. This way, ECAMIC could benefit from the view of 'outsiders', while the other project partners could benefit from the lessons learned from this first ECAMIC evaluation.

End users

Findings from the analysis indicated that the project is currently heavily patronized by men within the middle age group who have some degree of formal education beyond the primary school levels. Women and young men in the 15-20 age brackets are under represented. The majority of users are farmers working in cooperatives, with incomes falling between average and below average, when compared to their counterparts in the same geographical area.

Most of the respondents said they joined the project because they wanted to find new ways of improving their



economic livelihoods, which included the search for means to improve household food security through increased food production. The vast majority (88%) of users have reported achieving their aims through participation in the project, with many citing improved household food security as the main reason or, as one respondent to the questionnaire put it, "*since I joined this project I have been able to reduce hunger in my family*".

The majority of users also consistently reported high rates of satisfaction with the content and delivery of the various training packages that formed part of the project. Similarly the delivery of market information to farmers received high satisfaction ratings.

User impact

High user impact of the project was reported in various domains.



Increased access to timely and accurate market information has enabled beneficiaries to have greater control over the marketing of their produces. The majority of respondents reported that they are now able to decide when, where, and at what price to sell their farm produce. Others have reported an enhanced self-image that now allows them to interface effectively with formal sector financial institutions for the access of services such as savings and loan facilities. Several respondents are sharing their knowledge and skills with others outside the project in order to spread the benefits of the project beyond the immediate target population. Increased access to mutual business networks has also been increased in many cases. As one of the Focus Group participants remarked: *"I know where and when to sell my farm produce. I have also bought a motor bike from the sale of my produces and have been the best soya beans farmer for two consecutive times (2005 and 2006) in the district."* Three other participants added that they had also been voted the best farmers in their districts for specific crops over the last three years, mainly because of the improved knowledge, skills and high sense of motivation they derived from the project.

In general, respondents now see the need for ICT in their economic activities, and many agree that access to accurate and timely information is important for their businesses. The majority of respondents affirmed their belief that technology can be used to improve the

standards of living of the poor. A major "critique" of the project, and the reason for the low percentage for empowerment, is that most respondents have not been able to improve their computer skills through participation in the project. This, according to explanations offered in the Focus Group discussion, is largely due to the project implementer's decision to limit computer skills training to group leaders only. Although the quality and impact of the information was not hampered by the farmers' inability to manage the computer themselves, some of them indicated that they would like to learn computer skills in order to be able to take more responsibility for the information and have access to it when the information officers are not at their office. Based on these results and comments, the project will now look into possibilities to make the computer more directly accessible to the users.

Women and crops

The findings further reveal that women in particular have observed that agricultural produce that are exclusively produced by them (a common practice in Ghana) are not featured on the list of commodities for which the project collects and disseminates market information. As such, women are unable to take advantage of the availability of market information to increase their earnings from their produce. Consequently women, more than men, believe that the project has created a false sense of competition for agricultural produce in their operational environments. Project management has taken note of the finding on the unintended exclusion of women's products from the list of products for market information collection and dissemination, and will make every effort to identify and select "women's only" agricultural produce for inclusion in the list of commodities for which market information will be collected and made available to the participating communities.

Standardization

The Focus Group discussion also observed that the absence of standardised ways of measuring quantities of goods sold in the markets distorts the price information that the project provides to clients. The use of non-standardised measures such as the "bowl" instead of weights makes the comparison of prices difficult, as price quotations for commodities actually represent non-standardised pricing of the same commodity. For instance, since the sizes of "bowls" differ, a price quotation for a bowl of maize does not represent the true value of the maize, as the quantities would differ from one seller to the other. Closely related to this was a discussion of the lack of standardized quality of produce that is offered for sale, as different varieties of the same crop may attract different prices. Hence, when price information is not disaggregated by the variety of crop, the prices quoted can be misleading. Participants noted that the situations in which project clients doubted the accuracy of the prices quoted by the project centre to them could be traced to this lack of standardization of qualities and quantities of agricultural products in the price quotation process. To address this, participants called for standardization quantities and measures for farm produce in particular. There is also the need to classify various sub varieties of grains and other food stuff to facilitate quality control and standard measures of produce to ensure fair and standard prices within and across markets.

Costs of the service

Triggered by the request of one user that the project provides them with mobile phones to enable them to call the project centre for commodity prices, the cost of services provided by the project and its implications for the sustainability of the project was extensively discussed in the Focus Group. Participants observed that project clients may be unaware of the full cost of services provided to them largely because SEND Foundation has not made the full cost of providing project services known to the clients. It was agreed that SEND will expose the full cost of services to the clients so that they can better be prepared to take up the cost in the event of the project being round up. Project clients were also encouraged to examine the possibility of taking advantage of the demand for mobile phone services to set up a private telecommunication service business that would support the project clients who cannot afford the service.

SEND Foundation has many interesting points to work on in the time to come. The other participating livelihoods projects (project partners?) also agreed that there was a lot that they could take back to their respective project teams, or, as one of the project owners put it: *"It was an eye opener what you can get back from services that you offer, and from really involving the communities in the design of your project"*.

The International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD) assists developing countries to realise locally owned sustainable development by harnessing the potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs). IICD realises its mission through two strategic approaches. First, Country Programmes bring local organisations together and help them to formulate and execute ICT-supported development policies and projects. The approach aims to strengthen local institutional capacities to develop and manage Country Programmes, which are currently being implemented in Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Ecuador, Jamaica, Mali, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. Second, Thematic Networking links local and international partners working in similar areas, connecting local knowledge with global knowledge and promoting South-South and South-North exchanges. Thematic Networking focuses on sectors and themes like education, health, governance, the environment, livelihood opportunities (especially agriculture), and training. These efforts are supported by various information and communication activities provided by IICD or its partners. IICD is an independent non-profit foundation, established by the Netherlands Ministry for Development Cooperation in 1997. Its core funders include the Directorate-General for Development Cooperation (DGIS), the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).