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Small Producer Participation in Global Food Systems: Policy Opportunities and Constraints

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Access to markets is increasingly seen as an essential element in providing a route out of poverty, especially for small producers of food crops in rural areas. However, the nature of those markets is changing and bringing about shifts in both levels and forms of participation by small producers in global food systems. Small producers face new difficulties, for example in meeting high standards, but there are also new initiatives, for example by fair trade companies and co-operatives. This article focuses on nine initiatives and asks what small producers must do to achieve effective and sustainable access to markets, and how different private and public organisations can contribute to this.

The growing differentiation of products and markets offers opportunities for small food producers to grow new crops or enter new markets. For example, Deshingkar et al. (this volume), writing about Andhra Pradesh in India, describe the rapid growth of an industry of small-scale producers supplying exotic vegetables, largely to the national market. There are many other examples. However, small producers face multiple difficulties. Examples include: identifying new markets; acquiring familiarity with standards; dealing with legislation and regulation; and accessing capital (IFAT, 2002; Humphrey et al., 2000; IFAD, 2002; PROMER, 2002).[1]

What, then, might be done? And by whom? The next section unpacks the obstacles or barriers that constrain small producers' market access. The article then surveys what small producers must do to achieve effective and sustainable access to markets, and how different private and public organisations can contribute.

Unpacking the barriers – obstacles to small producer market access

Page (2003) identifies sixteen necessary conditions for market access (Box 1). These can be grouped into four categories: (i) understanding of the market; (ii) organisation of the firm; (iii) communication and transport links; and (iv) an appropriate policy environment.

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1. For a summary of obstacles identified in these sources, see Page, 2003: 45ff.

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Box 1: Conditions for market access

(a) Understanding of the market
1. Awareness
2. Knowing buyers, including the perception that others can be different
3. Knowing tastes
4. Knowing and understanding standards

(b) Organisation of the firm

5. Production equipment
6. Investment capital
7. Working capital
8. Labour
9. Appropriate technology
10. Quality and reliability of good or service
11. Appropriate organisation of firm

(c) Communication and transport links

12. Efficient local transport and communications
13. Efficient international transport and communications

(d) An appropriate policy environment

14. Appropriate legal framework, for example land tenure
15. Acceptable tariff system and non-tariff barriers
16. Appropriate additional trading environment, for example, exchange rates

Understanding the market

Producers must become aware of the possibility that there is a new product or market, and that they have at least some of the characteristics necessary to enter that market. They must also be aware of the need to change products, to improve them and adapt, because markets and therefore market access are not static. Here, the barriers to small producers are greater than for larger companies because they cannot benefit from economies of scale of knowledge (Tripp, 2001). A similar barrier for small producers is knowledge of and capacity to meet externally imposed production, health and safety standards (see Box 2 and Stevens in this volume). Income-related standards (i.e. those that are imposed as consumers' income rises) pose particular problems for developing countries exporting to developed countries and for producers turning to more affluent or informed consumers in their own country. They impose an additional 'difference' between producer and consumer in tastes (making understanding the market more difficult) and they raise costs (on all production or by requiring different types of production for different markets).

Box 2: Horticultural standards

For horticultural production, there is now a Euro-Retailer Working Group which sets standards for food safety and pesticides, and also production and labour standards. For the food market in the UK, standards have been developed by both trade associations and NGOs for the products and the processes of production and for how to monitor these. Although these are not legally binding, they are a significant force because the setters include the major retailers and because following them protects sellers from the risk of being perceived to have fallen below an acceptable standard by inadvertence (Dolan and Humphrey, 2001: 19).

Organisation of the firm

There must be capacity to produce the product. This means access to technical capacity, labour, equipment, and both investment and working capital, as well as to the necessary inputs. New types of production require at least adaptation of existing technology: the greater the change, the greater the possibility of a significant need for external technological and financial inputs. The purchase of new equipment requires funding and neither the surplus from other production nor the normal amount available for replacing capital in existing production is likely to be adequate for an initial investment. Time-lags between initial production or planting and sale also require funding, especially in agriculture. It may be necessary to move from informal systems, where the funding available or the conditions attached to it may be unpredictable and variable, to formal financial systems.

Communications and transport

A seller needs efficient links to markets. The dispersed nature of agriculture increases the need for and cost of communications and transport. A new product or market may require new services (different types of transport or refrigerated storage facilities, for example) in new locations. Poor facilities impose a continuing extra cost on production, and the need to establish new ones, a 'barrier to entry' into new production. Poor communications will make all the information needs identified here more difficult and/or more costly to meet; high transactions costs have been cited repeatedly as a particularly serious obstacle in Africa (Bonaglia and Fukasaku, 2002: 84).

Policy Environment

Finally, sellers can suffer from high policy barriers, whether deliberate (tariffs or other trade restrictions) or unintentional (inefficient administration). Other trading conditions are also important. For example, if a country's policy raises its exchange rate above a market-determined level or if macroeconomic policies (or lack of them) lead to large changes in exchange rates, these raise the costs of trading: both directly (uncompetitive prices) and indirectly (obtaining information on and reacting to changes). In countries where trade is still low or considered a risk, there may also be extensive administrative

Table 1: How different initiatives affect the necessary conditions for market access

	Integrated foreign investment (long-term)	Large direct private buyers (probably long-term)	Developing country producers (long-term)	Alternative trade companies (some long-term)	Export promotion agencies (and local govt) (usually long-term)	Import promotion agencies (temporary)	Aid programmes (temporary)	Targeted technical research (temporary)	Agencies promoting alternative trade (temporary)	No. of possible contrib-utors
(a) Understanding of the market										
Awareness	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Possibly	No, awareness is a pre-condition	No, and still no trade in PRSPs	Possibly	Yes	7
Knowing buyers	Yes	Yes	Difficult without external contact	Yes	Difficult because also in selling country	Yes, sometimes	No	No, start from product	Possible	5
Knowing tastes	Yes	Yes	Difficult	Possible, but also want to change tastes	Difficult	Yes	No	Sometimes	Possible	5-6
Knowing & understanding standards	Yes	Yes	Possible	Yes	Possible	Yes	Possible	Yes	Possible	9
(b) Organisation of the firm										
Production equipment	Has information & equipment	Has information	Must find	Sometimes	No	No	No: offer less than govt provides in home country	No	No	4
Investment capital	Yes	No	Must find, now easier	Sometimes	No	No	No (except special schemes, but these are for large companies: IFC, CDC)	No	No	3

Working capital	Yes	Not normally, but depends on credit terms	Must find, can use those already working off-farm	Specialised agencies	No	No	No	No	No	3
Labour	Possibly training	Possibly training	Must find	Yes, training	No	No	No, except general support for education, training	No	No	4
Technology	Yes	Yes	Must find	Yes	Possibly information	No	In agriculture, traditional extension work	Some research initiatives now	Yes	8
Quality & reliability	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Perhaps	Yes	No	Perhaps	No	6
Organisation of firm	Yes	No	Must do	Yes	No	Possibly advice	No	No	No	4
(c) Communications & transport links										
Local & communication	Can offer substitutes	No	No	No	Govt can	No	Yes	No	No	3
International	Yes, in part	Yes, in part	No	Sometimes	Yes, in part	No	Yes	No	No	3-4
(d) Appropriate policy environment										
Legal: eg land tenure	No	No	No	Some: finance can be used to help lease-holders	Other govt, yes	No	Advice, conditionality	No	Advice	4
Tariffs, NTBs	Advice & lobbying	Advice & lobbying	No	Starting	Political intervention	Advice	Yes	No	No	5+
Other trading conditions	Advice & some bypassing	Advice	No	Advice	Yes	Advice	Advice & conditionality	No	No	6
No. of Contributions	15	10	8	13+	9	7	7+	4+	5	

requirements combined with poor administrative capacity of customs services (cf. IFAT, 2002: 33 for a vivid description of the problems of temporary imports in West Africa).

The importance of some of the problems identified here will depend on the particular circumstances of a country (or even a region or product within it). Some (the cost of equipment, need for working capital) will depend on the nature of the product or service, and there will be a choice: to find ways of meeting the cost or to choose a different activity. Some are obstacles any particular producer will face only once; some will be faced for each new product or new market; but some are ‘permanent’, for example the higher costs of doing business as a small producer and the difficulties and needs for information created by trading with consumers who are ‘different’ from the producer. While new agricultural production, for example, has some advantages in terms of low initial costs, it has disadvantages such as high demand for working capital, high transport and communications costs, and vulnerability to trade barriers and changes in standards.

These differences mean that it is not possible to say that some conditions are always ‘more important’ or priorities. At any point, some will be binding, but it is important that ways of dealing with future barriers are known to be planned. If not, the expected later costs will reduce the expected return from new activities. And it is important to recognise that some of the costs are permanent, and therefore need permanent intervention.

Intervention options

For some of the obstacles to markets, particularly the ones to international trade, there may be a permanent role for some external agency, whether public, private, or alternative trader, to provide information and services which cannot be provided at national level. For others, more directly related to production and local infrastructure, there may be a permanent need for something at the national level.

In the longer paper on which this article is based, Page (2003) identifies nine different ways by which the barriers to market access can be overcome. These are: (i) direct foreign investment and ownership; (ii) interventions by large direct private buyers; (iii) initiatives by developing country producers; (iv) alternative trade companies; (v) export promotion agencies; (vi) import promotion agencies: (vii) aid programmes; (viii) targeted technical research; and (ix) agencies promoting small production. Table 1 indicates how each of the initiatives can support each element of market access.

Direct foreign investment

As Table 1 shows, direct foreign investment can provide all the basic marketing and production functions. Investors also have the experience to meet transport needs and to encourage governments to adapt or remove barriers to trade. In addition, the experience of such companies with other markets leads them to try to alter government policies that add to the cost of trading (unlike a local company, they know that there are alternative ways of administering standards or customs, for example), and their size gives them a significant possibility of successful lobbying, in both host and home countries.

However, foreign companies will choose investment only if the advantages of direct control of production exceed the costs of ownership. This is uncommon and decreasing, particularly in agriculture. In the case of coffee production in Kenya, for example, there has been a partial transition from foreign ownership to reliance on local producers, and remaining owners are sceptical about the future of plantations.

An alternative form, of companies from developing countries investing in developed countries (thus obtaining direct access to external markets and to market information), is emerging in some of the larger developing countries, notably India and Brazil. As the Brazilian examples include fruit juice production, this is another way of rural people gaining access to markets (Page, 1998).

Large direct private buyers

Traditionally associated with clothing and household textiles sectors, this approach, whereby large companies in developed countries provide regular orders, market information, and advice (often mandatory) on technology and means of production to companies in developing countries, without taking the responsibilities of ownership, was adopted by large buyers of horticultural products in the 1980s and 1990s (see Box 3).

Box 3: Examples of sub-contracting

Dolan and Humphrey (2001) provide a study of the 'networks of Kenya-based producer-exporters, medium-sized UK importers and large UK retailers' in the horticulture sector. In these cases, the UK companies were marketing their sub-contracted products on the basis that they were differentiated in quality from other supplies, implicitly arguing that there was a need for such a guarantee of quality because other undifferentiated products existed and were less desirable, and that the retailer had the competence and reliability to give this quality. To do this, they had to develop strong control of their suppliers, but most did not have the experience or interest to do this through direct ownership. They therefore looked for (and helped to create) companies and groups that could work with them. Some of these, in turn, purchased from smaller producers.

The emergence of external standards may be weakening one of the conditions for this model (the need for a known company to guarantee quality is premised on the absence of any agreed general standards), but this has not yet altered the model. The local companies need to be strong and reliable enough to make commitments on product quality (and increasingly also on processes of production). This is, therefore, a model that needs some initial conditions in the selling country.

Initiatives by developing country producers

These initiatives arise in the absence of external private or public sector intervention, and are often very successful. In Guatemala, production and export of snow peas was developed by local producers, led by a foreign entrepreneur (providing the market knowledge) (Wadsworth, 2002). There are other similar cases for non-standard agricultural commodities. Organisation is necessary to bridge the conflict between the need for size in trading and the concern to promote small enterprises (*Agriculture and Industry Survey*, 2000) – see Box 4.

Box 4: Farmers' organisations for market development

In India, the Kerala Horticulture Development Programme (*Agriculture and Industry Survey*, 2000), established 1993, has provided a combination of finance with technical advice and marketing opportunities. It has explicitly tried to increase co-operation among farmers, making groups a condition for obtaining finance and advice. The finance is important in this case because it is available to leaseholders, so it is offering an easing of land tenure constraints. Shared Interest, a UK-based NGO providing credit for trade, is another example. It focuses explicitly on the problem of working capital, providing finance against orders to fund the period of production and shipping. It does this for both fair trade and commercial orders (it is available to all members of IFAT (Humphrey et al., 2000: 30)), so that it is helping some producer groups to make a transition to commercial trade, where the payment terms are normally less favourable.

Obtaining information both about trading in general ('awareness') and then about specific market requirements has become much easier and cheaper with new communications. Examples include using internet resources for obtaining information about demand (weather information to determine agricultural conditions in other potential supplying countries was an example cited by a producer in Zambia), about policy changes, and for marketing and direct selling of their products – see Bonaglia and Fukasaku (2002) for an example from a leather producer in Ethiopia.

Subcontracting from a local trading company to many individual farmers as well as to co-operatives is found among agricultural producers. Some cases could be classified as either contracts by a foreign buyer or initiatives by a local seller; there were initiatives and responsiveness on both sides (cf. Box 5 on Kuapa Kokoo), so the model is more 'network' than 'chain'.

One of the traditional barriers to entry by small traders to international markets has been the difficulty and expense of making cross-border payments. The growing use of credit cards and the simplification or elimination of foreign-exchange controls have made possible obtaining these services, including enforcement of payment, in a standard form and at a lower cost.

Although lack of commercial consultancies has been considered a disadvantage for producers in developing countries (WTO/OECD, 1997: 11), local consultancies on trade are emerging in even the poorest countries, to spread the costs of information and of dealing with administrative requirements among a range of potential small producers and exporters. Private financial services are also developing. In agriculture, producer and exporter organisations that exchange information tend to be more established than in other sectors (cf. Zoomers, 1999: 81, on their role in Bolivia).

Alternative trading companies

The motivations given for establishing fair trade enterprises are discussed in detail in Page (2003), where it is argued that, at both the micro- and macro-levels, fair trade initiatives are fraught with potential inconsistencies about whether markets and ordinary trade are systematically unfair, whether they can develop relationships of concern between seller and buyer and, given these views, whether fair trade must always be 'alternative' – i.e. can ordinary traders be fair traders? The particular views and motivations for fair trade influence the nature of the alternative patterns suggested and may affect how alternative trade can be linked into the rest of the economy. For example, IFAT Africa holds the position that 'most of the trade generated [through fair trade] should be delivered within the IFAT movement'. The desire is to restrict trade as far as possible to other fair traders (IFAT, 2002: 3). This greatly reduces the potential income of any fair trade enterprise because such companies are still a very small proportion of the market.[2]

Does fair trade deliver benefits to small-scale producers? Some evidence is positive. Cafédirect, founded in 1991 by a combination of NGOs and fair trading companies (www.cafedirect.co.uk), offers a premium on the world coffee price. Because of the sharp decline in coffee prices, this stood at just under 100% for arabica and almost 200% for robusta in November 2002. For tea, added to Cafédirect in 1998, the premium is about 25% (Cafédirect, 2002). A study of an ethical trade initiative in Uganda found an increase in income, but no system for monitoring social impact (Malins and Nelson, 2003). Fair trade cocoa, in Ghana, appears to offer both financial and social benefits (see Box 5).

Box 5: Kuapa Kokoo and the Day Chocolate Company

Following the restructuring of cocoa in Ghana in 1993, which allowed private companies and co-operatives to participate, a farmers' organisation acquired a buyer's licence. It worked with a Fair Trade organisation, Twin Trading, which was looking for a suitable partner to reproduce its existing activities with fair trade coffee. In 1998, Twin Trading and Kuapa Kokoo established a company in the UK, Day Chocolate, in which they share ownership. This takes some of the cocoa produced by Kuapa Kokoo (and exported through a trading company) and, after subcontracting the processing, sells the chocolate through normal retailers. About 40,000 tonnes of cocoa per annum is now marketed through this arrangement.

Producers receive a guaranteed price (a minimum level and a guaranteed minimum differential above the market price). Ronchi (2002: 24) estimates that this added US$1.6 million to Kuapa Kokoo's revenues in the eight years 1993-2001. Of the extra funds, 25% goes directly to farmers. The rest is spent through a Trust Fund on investment in trading and production companies in Ghana and on community projects, including education, health, water, and mills for alternative income (ibid.: 25).

2. Fair trade is currently confined to agricultural or 'handicraft' production, and in services, to finance and tourism. In terms of food, the Fair Trade logo has only been defined for coffee, tea, cocoa, honey, bananas, mangoes, orange juice and sugar.

The impact of fair trade companies is therefore like that of private buyers (Table 1), with some additional input into production and organisation, and some additional social impact. Their poverty impact may be increased if there is an additional effect through lobbying on aid. Fair trade companies' reliance on their own reputation as the guarantee that standards are met may be cheaper for small producers (external standards, as discussed above, are costly for small producers), but weakens the market power of the producers; they do not have a certificate and reputations that they can use in other markets.

Export promotion agencies (and other local government policy)

Export promotion agencies exist in various forms in most developed countries, and were encouraged in developing countries in the 1960s and 1970s. Then, in spite of the excellent performance of some countries which depended heavily on them (for example, Mauritius, with MEDIA), they were criticised as ineffective (for example, Keesing and Singer, 1990).[3]

Not surprisingly, more careful study indicates that the agencies were variable in quality. It is important to define what they can be expected to do. They can act as an information point, not directly on the market conditions and standards in a potential importer, but on the sources of information and assistance that exist. They are more likely, therefore, to be useful as a first stop for a new exporter, than as a continuing resource. They also provide a point of contact for potential importers, with the better ones offering introductions to potential suppliers and at least an implicit guarantee that companies introduced are reliable (see Box 6 for a Mexican example).

While Latin American examples suggest that responsive agencies, providing services, work best, Asian examples of government intervention indicate that a more active role is possible. There, and in Mauritius, the interventions were not only through the export promotion agency, but through broad co-operation between private sector leaders and the government. This can exclude small and medium-sized producers (except in a small economy like Mauritius).

Box 6: Mexican promotion of non-traditional agricultural products

Mexico has a programme for non-traditional agricultural products which looks for 'higher-value small-farm' products. It thus tries to identify products which are particularly suitable for small farmers, rather than assisting small farmers to operate in sectors dominated by large producers and buyers. It starts from the existing farming structure. The government programme provides both market information and links to potential buyers. It meets the problem of reliability where there are no repeated or large contracts with a guarantee of quality and provenance through a seal of quality. It encourages production also for the home market (Ramírez, 2001).

3. The studies suggested that support for production, 'supply-side measures', was better than support for marketing. The argument in this article is that the stages of market access are complementary, not competing.

Import promotion agencies

During the 1960s and 1970s, at the same time as developing countries established export promotion agencies, some donors and international agencies established agencies specifically to promote trade from developing countries: GATT established the International Trade Centre in 1964 (now also related to UNCTAD), and the most important single-donor-funded agency, the CBI in the Netherlands, dates from 1971. These had similar roles to the export promotion agencies, and, like them, were not intended to provide production assistance. They therefore deal with companies which are already established. (They also, of course, do not directly assist companies trying to sell to their home markets.)

The CBI remains the standard by which other programmes are judged by exporters who have used it, and the one with which all companies and countries interested in export promotion are familiar. Its mandate is specifically to deal with what it defines as 'export ready' firms, those which are aware of the possibility, which have reasonable production systems, but which need specific market knowledge and the ability to adapt to it. It provides both basic information, on the official and marketing requirements to sell a particular product or service, and specific seasonal information on fashion or other trends. It is able to help small companies. The general information on its web site (www.cbi.nl) gives extensive background information on markets and on legal requirements such as health and labour standards.

Other individual country agencies have provided various parts of these services (all support services as well as goods). Some take a longer view of their assistance and deal with an industry, rather than an individual firm. The UK agency, DECTA, had some country programmes in Ghana and India which attempted to do this, but was generally a responsive service providing particular services or introductions for firms, not a multi-year programme. Although its information and introduction services were considered useful by exporters and importers surveyed (Page, 1994), these were less useful than the wider services provided by the other agencies. Other examples include agencies in Germany (WTO/OECD, 1997), Denmark (ibid.), and the US (Bonaglia and Fukasaku, 2002: 72).

Aid programmes

As well as the direct assistance to exports provided by the agencies described above, and by targeted aid initiatives, there has in very recent years been a revival of interest within general aid programmes in providing help for trade. In the 1960s and 1970s, both direct intervention and infrastructure to assist private companies were common among multilateral and bilateral agencies, but then there was a period when both were greatly reduced.

DFID, for example, has two new programmes for African exporters, which are intended to look at many of the stages of market access analysed here. Both look at trade as a means of attaining specified goals: poverty reduction (the Africa Trade and Poverty Programme, ATPP) and environmental benefit (a joint programme with UNCTAD, administered by FIELD). The ATPP programme, for example, is intended to build national capacity to analyse the potential poverty reduction effects from trade and then identify the policies and actions which could maximise these, both national policies and international policies where the country can have an influence through negotiation.

Targeted technical research

As access to suitable technology is a necessary condition for any marketing, and as agriculture often requires national adaptation of international techniques, the extensive international network of agricultural research can be considered an input into market access. By focusing on what is for many countries their principal source of exports, it can provide a major effect on development. It is, however, only recently that the organisations have looked specifically for export markets in developing new crops, and that they have considered the interaction between new production and policy (for example a workshop in 2002 on Poverty Reduction through Transforming Smallholder Systems from Subsistence to Market Oriented). ICRISAT (Nairobi) is trying to tie its research on new leguminous products to developing capacity in the East African countries to look at trade prospects, in the region and beyond it. It has already been working with a US NGO involved in identifying potential buyers and bringing them to producers (Jones et al., 2002: 6-7). They are also seeking co-operation on meeting standards, for example on aflotoxins. This is a supply-driven approach, but could be used by local producers as the basis of market seeking.

Agencies promoting small production

Within aid programmes, many donors consider supporting small and medium-sized enterprises an effective way of reducing poverty, and there is some assistance to companies to trade under this heading. For example, IFAD's strategic objectives cite 'strengthening the capacity of the rural poor', 'improving equitable access to productive natural resources and technology', and 'increasing access to financial assets and markets' (IFAD, 2002; PROMER, 2002). It identified a new gap in provision for small rural producers following the cutbacks in government support services through structural adjustment. Its assistance is designed to strengthen agriculture and agricultural organisations. Its advantage over export and import agencies is that it targets not only trade, but also production for the local market: 'the availability of new opportunities on world markets… should not obscure the fact that the principal strength of the rural economy continues to be supply of cash and food crops to domestic and subregional markets'. It includes non-agricultural rural activities and other areas like adult education, as tools for this (Quijandría et al., 2001: 62, 88, 104), and considers provision of financial services an essential part of support.

Conclusion

Given the wide range of needs and levels of development of suppliers in developing countries, combinations of assistance may be appropriate. The framework suggested here could provide a tool for identifying which interventions are suitable in particular cases. This could be tested and improved by commissioning detailed country studies which would indicate which types of initiative had worked in which circumstances.

There is also a need to create a network which could bring together existing studies and existing information on the ground of the effects of investment and trade on poverty and of the effects of commercial and public sector initiatives on increasing market access.

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