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THE ECONOMIC ROLE OF WOMEN
IN FOOD MARKETING
The Case of Muea Market

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The Case of the Muea Market

Honeh Faustina Suh

February 1996

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Abstract

Women are the main link between producers and consumers. They are the main agents in the distribution of agricultural foodstuffs. Despite this vital economic role, they are not given enough attention by agricultural policy-makers. There are many barriers which prevent the women from fully contributing to and benefiting from economic development. The purpose of this study therefore, is to find out the mode of operation of women in agricultural food marketing and to identify the barriers limiting their efficiency. To do this the women food marketers of Muea market, in the South West Province, were taken as a case study. From the findings of the study, suggestions are made that could enhance the participation of women in development.

Keywords : Cameroon, Women, Food Marketing, Development.

Résumé

Par leurs activités les femmes établissent un lien entre les producteurs et les consommateurs. Ce sont en effet les principaux acteurs de la distribution des produits agricoles. Pourtant, en dépit de leur rôle économique essentiel, les décideurs ne leur portent guère d'attention. Il y a beaucoup d'obstacles qui les empêchent de contribuer totalement au développement économique et d'en retirer les bénéfices correspondants. Le but de cette étude est donc de décrire la façon de procéder des femmes qui vendent les produits alimentaires sur les marchés, grossistes et détaillantes, et d'identifier les obstacles à leur efficacité. Pour ce faire nous avons pris comme sujet d'étude les vendeuses du marché de Muea, dans le Sud-Ouest. A partir des résultats de cette étude un certain nombre de recommandations sont formulées afin d'améliorer leur participation au développement.

Mots-clés : Cameroun, Femmes, Vendeuses sur les marchés, Développement.

Préface

The Cahiers of Ocisca is a regular series of working papers which presents the results of the surveys and studies undertaken by the Ocisca Program (Observatory of Change and Innovation in the Societies of Cameroon). All topics are related to the reaction and behavior of the various economic actors in the current context of economic crisis and structural adjustment. The research work on various issues of development such as the household standards of living, poverty and vulnerability, social innovation, the social impact of adjustment measures, the devaluation, the design of socioeconomic policies will be discussed in this series.

The Cahiers are designed to provide a medium for those who want to disseminate the information collected in the various observatories and analyzed in the laboratories. They include the results of rapid surveys, the scientific analysis of survey data and also individual research work. The objective is to inform the policy-makers, and the main economic actors, of the on-going research work and, when feasible, to propose appropriate solutions for some of the issues that they have to solve.

It is within this framework that this issue of the Cahiers is focussing on the economic role of a specific group of women, those who devote their time to the marketing of food and are currently called the "Buyam-Sellam" women. They earn their life by buying foodstuffs from the farmers who produce them, and reselling them to other food marketers or to the consumers. Their role is essential in the economic system since they are the main actors of the food distribution process and create with efficiency the link which is required between the producers and the consumers.

This study is based on a random survey of nearly 100 women food marketers that work in the Muea market, near Buea, in the South West Province. Its objective is to understand how the food marketing model operates and to answer to a series of questions concerning the behavior of the actors of this system : the women food marketers.

The author makes a distinction between two groups of women: the mobile "buyam-sellam" and the urban "buyam-sellam". The first ones who have usually more capital visit the farms and the village markets to buy the foodstuffs that they will carry to Muea. The second ones get their supply from the mobile women in the morning and resell during the day.

The majority of these women (54%) enter in the buyam-sellam trade to earn an income that will support their family. Since most of them have little or no education (39.8% have primary education and 14.3% have never been to school) they could not find other opportunity for a job. But this lack of education also limits their efficiency in the food marketing. The range of their activity is related to the amount of capital at their disposal. The majority (54%) of them obtained their start-up capital from the "Njangi" or "tontines" groups they belong to. On average this amount of capital is between 20,000 and 50,000 CFA Francs for 45.9% of them, but 28.6% begins with a very low capital between 1,000 and 5,000 CFA francs.

The author suggests several measures that would easily improve the quality of life and the efficiency of these women in the food marketing. They are related to the access to basic education, to credit and sources of capital, to working in cooperatives, and to the improvement of the market

environment. If these measures could be applied they will form part of the improvement on the participation of women in the development of the society.

This paper complement the Cahiers already published on women issues which include the survival strategies of Yaounde women (Chantal Guimapi, Cahiers d'Ocisca n°16), the participation of women in community development (Rebecca Amin, Cahiers d'Ocisca n°19), and the women smoking the fish in Limbe (Oumarou Njifonjou, Cahiers d'Ocisca n° 20). They all represent part of our contribution to the improvement of the women situation as it was discussed in the Beijing World Summit on women issues.

Jean-Luc Dubois
Ocisca Manager

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Introduction

Women in Cameroon as a whole have made enormous contributions to the economic development. The women are prominent in the informal sector of economy where they carry out activities like hairdressing, handicraft, baby-sitting, restaurant operators and food marketing among others.

The informal sector is the part of economic activity that is not included in government employment statistics. The participants in this sector always consider their activities as a transition to a more permanent activity. The informal sector of Cameroon is dominated by women, most of whom are illiterate. This high level of illiteracy within the women's folk is due to the fact that their education had been neglected for a long time. As a result of this, they cannot compete in the modern labour market where skills and training are required. They have to struggle for survival. They look therefore for means of self-employment and usually end in the informal sector, particularly in the buying and selling of agricultural foodstuffs. The women food marketers are generally known in Cameroon as "buyam-sellam" women. In this paper, "buyam-sellam" women and "women food marketers" will be inter-changeable.

1. Background for the Study

For a long time women were confined to domestic activities and farm work. Most women did not go to school. The education of the woman was regarded as a waste of resources. However it is often said that educating a man is educating an individual, while educating a woman is educating a whole nation (Peyeu, 1988). Women's participation and wage earning employment are crucial means of income distribution. Cameroon, being a developing country, needs to make maximum use of its resources be they natural or human. The women food marketers in Muea, and in the rest of Cameroon in general, constitute an enormous fraction of the country's human resource. The women have a contribution to make towards national development be it political, economic or cultural. Besides their role as housewives and mothers, they are still capable of participating in all aspects of the social life: market, office, farm, etc..

To achieve any meaningful economic growth and development, maximum use should be made of all available resources. Women constitute 51% of the population (National Census, 1987) which is an enormous resource that should not be neglected. Placing more emphasis on the full utilization of all resources, the 1988 A.I.D administrator stated that "to pursue a development planning strategy without a woman-in-development focus would be wasteful and self-defeating". Involving women in the process of development is a crucial factor in achieving broad-based sustainable economic growth.

Since the break of the economic crisis in Cameroon, the informal sector has been the principal employer. By 1992, three quarters of employment in Yaounde were from the informal sector (DIAL/DSCN, 1993). The dominance of women in foodstuff marketing dates back to the colonial era with the gender division of labour. Men were employed in plantations while women were engaged in various activities, mainly trading and farming (Ardener, 1960). In Cameroon as a whole, the proportion of the population involved in "buyam-sellam" varies according to regions as follows: Yaounde 80%; Douala 60.3%; the forest zone of South 83.5% and the Western Plateau 74.1% (Peyeu, 1988).

Previously, the "buyam-sellam" activity was carried out by elderly illiterate women. Recently, it has been noticed that this trade is being done by young school leavers as well. One reason for this is the increasing rate of unemployment caused by the worsening economic situation of Cameroon since 1987.

a) Location of the Muea Market

Muea is one of the main food markets in the Fako Division of the South West Province. It is situated on the way to Muyuka, about seven kilometers from Mutengene and four kilometers from Buea. People come from various towns like Douala, Limbe and even Yaounde to buy foodstuffs. The market is becoming expensive now because of the influx of people from all over the country to buy from there.

b) Scope and Limitation of Study

This study focuses on the activities of the "buyam-sellam" women in Muea market. Muea is chosen so as to make a comparative study with other towns like Yaounde and Douala in which some studies have already been done on market women. This will help give a general view of Cameroon.

Muea is one of the main foodstuff markets in the Fako Division. The market operates twice a week, Thursdays and Sundays. There are always pre-markets, on Wednesday and Saturday evenings, before the real market days. Some of the women buy to resell early in the morning in the same market while others carry the foodstuffs to other towns like Douala, Limbe, Mutengene, Yaounde, etc.. The study is limited to Muea for easy analysis. The lack of statistics on the activities of women also limited the scope of the work. The work that women do is often unrecorded, undervalued or even not valued at all. It is always very difficult to quantify the productivity of illiterate self-employed persons. These women lack written business records and it is difficult for them to recall detailed information from memory. Some of the women categorically refused to answer any questions, saying that it is an intrusion into their private lives. All these factors make accurate analysis of the progress of the buyam-sellam extremely difficult.

c) Research Objective

The main objective of this study is to examine how the "buyam-sellam" activity is carried out in Muea market as well as what motivates the women into this trade. We will also examine how the productivity of the women food marketers could be increased. The following points will be specifically examined :

- the problems encountered in acquiring the foodstuffs they sell;
- their source of finance;
- their source of labour;
- the motivation of women into the "buyam-sellam" activity.

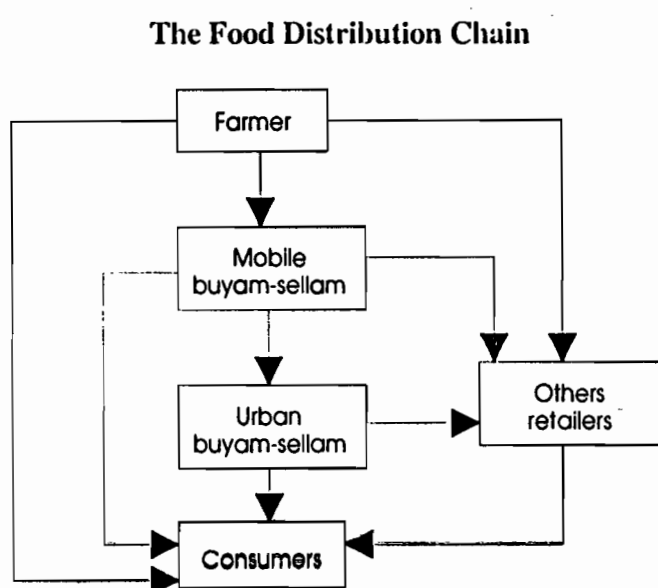
To achieve these objectives the following hypotheses were verified:

- a) The "buyam-sellam" women lack basic education and professional training ;
- b) The start-up capital is relatively small ;
- c) Labour force is provided mostly by family members especially children ;
- d) Most of the women are heads of household.

d) Methodology

Primary and secondary data will be used, though the primary data will dominate. They will be got through questionnaires administered on a random sample of one hundred women food marketers in Muea market. Due to the low literacy level of the women the researcher asked the questions in Pidgin English and filled the questionnaires personally. This was then supplemented by the researcher's observations. A few questions were given to those who could read and write. Two of these were wrongly filled. As such we worked on ninety-eight questionnaires. This was complemented by secondary data and the analysis done using descriptive statistics, presenting the results on tables using frequencies and percentages.

A simplified food distribution model was also developed to show the intervention of the "buyam-sellam" women in the food marketing. The model can be sketched as follows :



Source : Developed by the author

The absence of the various agents will imply that each consumer has to buy directly from the farmers. This will be very cumbersome and will increase the cost to both the farmers and the consumers. With the farmers engaged solely in producing and the market women responsible for distributing the foodstuffs, they both enjoy the fruits of specialization and division of labour. Despite the role the "buyam-sellam" women play in the food distribution most consumers look on them as being unnecessarily expensive and exploitative of them. The findings of Kohls (1985) affirm this assertion. He noted that food middlemen face public distrust despite their economic value. The middlemen are often scorn and sometimes merely tolerated. He however concluded that those who take time to understand food marketing better, usually agree that they perform an important role in the process of food distribution.

2. The Women Food Marketers

Despite the negative attitude that the consumers, sometimes, have towards the women food marketers, they continue to excel in the trade. We will now look at what motivate them into this trade, how they carry out the trade and the constraints they face. Finally we will come up with suggestions to ameliorate their activities.

a) Motivation into the "Buyam-Sellam" Trade

Generally women do buying and selling of foodstuffs to reduce their level of poverty in the economic sense of the word, i.e. low level of income. Women food marketers interviewed in Muea market advanced various reasons for doing food marketing. They had social as well as economic reasons. Socially they will be able to interact with other women in the market place and economically they will be able to earn an income for the upkeep of their families.

Some of the women found "buyam-sellam" trade as a means of occupying themselves and not feeling bored at home. Others especially those below the age of 20 years could not continue their education due to the difficult financial situation of their parents. Some others wanted a degree of financial independence instead of depending entirely on their husbands for financial support. Those with a post-secondary education could not find white-collar jobs in the modern sector of the economy due to the economic hardship Cameroon is going through. They saw the "buyam-sellam" trade as a means of self employment.

Increasing rates of lay-off from the civil service and the para-statal have left many families in a precarious financial situation. The women have to look for means of sustaining their families. Some of the women are married to jobless husbands or husbands who earn very little. The women are therefore the main providers for their families. Others are single mothers and as such are heads of their household.

Most of the families live in the urban centers where there is limited land for farming activities. High population growth is also one of the reasons for women involvement in off-farm self-employment. Urban population has been on a rapid increase with growth rates moving from 2.2% in 1960 to 5.7% at the beginning of the 90s. Rural exodus has also increased the level of urbanization with rates ranging from 14% in 1960 to 28.1% in 1976, 37.9% in 1977, 42.4% in 1992 and will finally reach 50% in the year 2000 (UNDP, 1993). Some other women were encouraged by the success of their friends and relatives in this trade. They saw how these people, friends or relatives, made their livelihood out of this trade and decided to try their hands on it. The above reasons explain why families can no longer depend solely on agriculture to support themselves. They must turn to other sources of earnings to improve on their living standards. The following table summarizes the various reasons advanced by the "buyam-sellam" women in Muea market for getting involved in food marketing.

Table I - Reasons for Entering into the "Buyam-Sellam" Trade

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
Just to be occupied	5	5.1
Financial independence	19	19.4
Main family supporter	54	55.1
Encouraged by family members and friends	7	7.1
Lack of farmland	13	13.3
Total	98	100.0

Source : Field Study 1995

b) Level of Education of the "Buyam-Sellam" Women

It can be seen from the table that the majority of the women food marketers are the main family supporters while those who just want to occupy themselves are the least. These findings are similar to those of Simmons (1976) who concluded that women are motivated to work to earn money, to provide for their children, to attain a social status and some do not want to depend too strongly on their husbands. The earnings of the "buyam-sellam" woman therefore constitute a crucial component of the family income. Despite the economic importance of the "buyam-sellam" women, their efficiency is limited by their low literacy level. A majority of the women have never been to school and very few had a post-secondary education.

Table II - Level of Education of the "Buyam-Sellam" Women

Level of Education	Frequency	Percentage
Primary	39	39.8
Secondary	33	33.7
Post-Secondary	12	12.2
None	14	14.3
Total	98	100.0

Source : Field Study 1995

More than half of the "buyam-sellam" women have little or no education. From the interviewed population, 39.8% have primary education and 14.3% have never been to school. This leaves them lacking in skills and professional training, thus limiting their efficiency in food marketing.

c) The Activities of the "Buyam-Sellam" Women

The range of activity of the women food marketers is determined by the amount of capital at their disposal. Some have very little capital while others can afford a reasonable amount of capital. On the basis of amount of capital available, the "buyam-sellam" women are placed into two groups: mobile and urban "buyam-sellams". Mobile "buyam-sellams" are those who can raise enough capital to allow them visit village markets where they buy the foodstuffs and carry to the urban center. Some of the village markets they visit around Muea include Tole and Modeka. The urban "buyam-sellams" do not have enough capital to go to the village markets. As such they get their supplies from the mobile women food markets. Some of the urban women food markets can only afford capital enough to buy in the morning and resell in the evening. Generally, the women operate on a small scale due to the lack of capital or credit facilities for the expansion of their activities. They generally obtain credit from family members and friends. A good number of the women also obtain credit from njangi groups. Njangi is defined as a group of persons who come together to make regular contributions to a fund that is given on part or whole to each contributor in rotation. Membership of such groups is based on tribal, professional or family ties. Contributions could be uniform for all members or otherwise depending on the group (Amin and Amin, 1992). Some of the women have daily contributions in the market which also constitute a source of credit to them. However, they obtain very little amount from these sources. The various sources are summarized in the table that follows.

Table III - Source of Credit

Source	Frequency	Percentage
Njangi	53	54.1
Daily Contribution	34	34.7
Relatives and Friends	11	11.2
Total	98	100.0

Source : Field Study

The table shows that 54.1% of women food marketers obtain their credits from njangi groups and 34.7% from daily contributions. Relatives and friends provide 11.2% of the credits. Njangi and daily contributions are therefore the main sources of credit to the women.

Some of the women started with very little capital, sometimes as low as one thousand francs CFA. A few of them could raise up to one hundred thousand francs CFA as start-up capital.

Table IV - Amount of Start-up Capital

Range (in FCFA)	Frequency	Percentage
[1,000-5,000[	28	28.6
[5,000-10,000[	7	7.1
[10,000-20,000[	4	4.1
[20,000-50,000[	45	45.9
[50,000-100,000[	12	12.2
100,000 and above	2	2.1
Total	98	100.0

Source : Field Study.

The majority of women started the buying and selling of foodstuffs with a capital of between 20,000-50,000 F.CFA. 45.9% of our working population fell in this range. A non negligible number (twenty-eight) fell within the range of less than 5,000 F.CFA which represents 28.6% of the population. Only 2.1% of the population could afford above 100,000 F.CFA as start-up capital.

The small amount of start-up capital implies that many women can easily enter the food marketing activity of the informal sector for the upkeep of their families. The limited capital also makes the "buyam-sellam" labour-intensive, using mainly child labour. They also make use of traditional resources like baskets from raffia palms. Studies by WID (1979) came to the conclusion that women in non-agricultural production typically engage in small-scale home based manufactures or foodstuffs which are typically labour intensive, sometimes poorly remunerated, based on traditional skills or primitive technology. It is also often individualized.

The women food marketers have three main ways of acquiring their foodstuffs. There are :

- directly from the farms;
- daily or weekly village markets;
- other "buyam-sellams".

The first two sources are used by the mobile women food marketers while the third is used by the urban women food marketers. The distinction as earlier mentioned is at the level of available capital.

The cost and profit margins are different in the different groups of food marketers. The mobile food marketers have lower purchase cost with higher profit margin than the urban women food marketers. The bargaining power is different following the source of acquisition of foodstuffs. Those buying directly from the farms have a higher bargaining advantage. This is because they are few. The farmer, not knowing when the next group of buyers will be around is forced to accept the buyers price. This is caused by the high perishability of agricultural products. In case of less perishable goods like yams, the farmer might be able to determine his price and the "buyam-sellam", afraid of returning without goods and bearing the transportation cost is forced to pay higher. The women buying from rural markets have lower bargaining power because there are many of them in the market. There are many buyers and sellers and the sellers know that the next buyer will be around almost immediately. The market here is highly competitive.

3. The Model of Food Distribution Chain

The foodstuff markets handle a variety of agricultural products. These include green vegetables, tomatoes, fruits, irish and sweet potatoes, plantains, onion, corn yams, etc.. Some of the women deal in single items like yams or plantains or cocoyams, while others deal in variety of foodstuffs: vegetables, fruits, tomatoes, etc.. The women start their activities as early as 5.00 a.m and sometimes go as late as 8.00 p.m each day. Some buy and sell in the same market while others buy from the Muea market, in Buea, and sell in Limbe, Mutengene and Douala, or they may buy from Tole, Modeka and sell in Muea. Due to the high competitive nature of the food market, the marketers often improvise selling spots. They always try to attract the attention of passers by. The word they normally use to call attention is "cus" meaning customer.

The mobile "buyam-sellams" are always in groups. This is for security reasons because they often have to spend a couple of nights out of their homes, sometimes in the open market place. Consumers usually prefer buying directly from the mobile "buyam-sellams" than from the other middlemen and retailers. This is because the further the goods move away from the producer, the higher the price due to increased costs.

a) Costs Incurred by the Women Food Marketers

In order to carry out their marketing activities, the women incur a number of costs. These costs vary according to the group of women. The mobile "buyam-sellam" incur higher costs than the other food marketers. The costs could either be fixed or variable. Fixed costs are expenditures that do not change with the level of activity, at least in the short run, while variable costs depend on the level of activity. This implies that variable costs will increase with increased activity. The sum of the fixed and the variable costs will give the total cost incurred by women. A greater proportion of the total cost is made of variable costs.

The fixed costs include: plastic bags, jute bags, baskets, basins, trays, stalls for those who have them. On the other hand the variable costs include: daily ticket dues, transportation costs, and rents. Rents here are the payments made to the owners of houses around the neighbourhood of the market where they keep their foodstuffs for collection on the market day. Transportation costs form a greater part of the variable costs. This is particularly significant to the mobile groups who must move from one village market to the other to gather their foodstuffs. To lower the transportation cost, the women sometimes hire a bus as a group that will do the transportation. The other groups of "buyam-sellam" women, i.e. urban "buyam-sellams" and other retailers, have the same cost components but their amounts are smaller.

b) Obstacles Limiting the Efficiency of the Women Food Marketers

Marketing efficiency is defined as the ratio of output to input (Kohls, 1985). Inputs include labour while output are the returns in terms of monetary income. Most of the women, as seen earlier, are of very low literacy level. This contributes to the reduction of their marketing efficiency. The productivity of the "buyam-sellam" women could be increased through education. Herz and al. (1992) confirmed this by saying that education raises the productivity of men and women at home and in the work place. Whether engaged in the formal wage sector or in the informal sector as self employed farmers or entrepreneurs, educated men and women earn more and have a greater labour mobility.

Apart from education, there are other problems that limit their productivity. They lack enough time to carry out their marketing activities. This is caused by the numerous household chores they have to perform like preparing food for the family as well as caring for younger children. Some of the women complained of the strenuous nature of the trade. They need to exert a lot of energy to transport the foodstuffs which makes them tired and worn out. The market environment is not conducive. They have not got shaded stalls, no toilets, tap water and no medical facilities. They lack storage facilities. Due to the high perishability of agricultural products, what they cannot sell during the day might get rotten. Transportation costs are also very high. The road infrastructure is not very good especially in the villages where some of the roads are almost impracticable, especially during the rains, and the women are sometimes forced to trek. Numerous blocks and checks increase the time spent on the road. With this delay on the roads, some of the foods like tomatoes, pepper vegetables might go bad before they get to their destination. The scale of activity remains limited because of lack of credit facilities for expansion.

c) Utilization of Earnings from Sales

The income from sales of agricultural products help the women to solve a number of problems of social as well as of economic nature. Socially, they are able to belong to social groups and make monetary contributions, and economically, they are able to provide for the basic needs of the family. They can provide necessities like food, clothing, medication and even assure the education of their children.

Belonging to a social group is of great importance because they can be assisted by the members of the group if need be. They also share ideas in this group to ameliorate their living standards.

Conclusion

Women play a vital role in the economy. They perform a big role in the informal sector of the economy. The "buyam-sellam" women are the main agents in the food distribution chain. These women bear and nurture the inhabitants of the nation. In this light, their health, education and economic situation determine the well-being and productivity of future generation. The marketing activities of the women offer hope for the promotion of local commerce and entrepreneurship.

The marketing activities of the women provide them with a monetary income for the upkeep of their families. It also helps them come together in groups where they share ideas and thus improve on their social status. Enhancing their productivity is therefore an important strategy in improving their welfare.

Despite the importance of the women in food distribution, their potentials are not fully exploited due to the problems they face. Their contribution to economic growth cannot be fully evaluated because most of the work women do is not recorded. The food distribution chain is a complex one involving numerous agents. Marketing of foodstuffs complements the production process started by the farmer. Food is produced to be consumed and the production process is not complete until the foodstuff reaches the final consumer. This is made possible through the activities of the "buyam-sellam". The urban centers are supplied with foodstuffs due to the dynamism of these women. To fully participate in the economic growth and the development, the women should be assisted to eliminate the obstacles that limit their efficiency.

Suggestions to Improve on the Activities of the "Buyam-Sellam" Women

To achieve sustainable growth in foodstuff commercialization in Cameroon, the agricultural policy agenda should put more emphasis on the role of women in food marketing. Emphasis should be placed on strategies to improve women's access to and retaining of income including measures to improve their access to credit. The women should be sensitized on the advantages of working in cooperatives. Cooperatives will facilitate the marketing of the agricultural products and increase their bargaining power in acquiring the foodstuffs. As a cooperative, it will be easier for them to purchase in bulk and will reduce the number of days spent out of homes. They could also acquire grants from non governmental organizations (NGOs) which will be difficult at individual level.

The local councils should improve on the market environment by building shaded stalls, providing social infrastructures like toilets, water as well as some medical facilities. The government should provide public goods like better road network especially in the rural areas to link the farms to the markets. If these measures could be applied, they will go a long way to improve on the participation of women in the development of the society.

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Liste des Cahiers parus ou programmés

Cahier N°1, "Le programme OCISCA: cadre théorique et orientations de recherche" par l'équipe d'animation d'Ocisca (en préparation).

Cahier N°2, "Du passé re-composé au futur improbable: les observatoires ruraux d'Ocisca comme mode opératoire d'une recherche impliquée" par Georges Courade, Mars 94, Ocisca, Yaounde, 31 p.

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