

Chapter 7

Mass Product Consumer Regulatory Authority, Cameroon

7.1 Context

Women in Cameroon¹ make up 75 per cent of the agricultural workforce and produce 80 per cent of the country's food (MINPROFF 2010). The agricultural sector is largely non-wage or subsistence, with women concentrated in informal agricultural activities and men accessing the majority of agro-business and cash crop activities. Due to restrictions within customary law, women face difficulties in terms of rights to land ownership, which results in increased difficulty accessing credit. For example, in 2007 women's access to production credit was 0.5 per cent (Doffonsou and Simrique Singh 2014). Barriers to economic participation are seen in non-agricultural settings as well. As of 2010 only 26.5 per cent of non-agricultural workers were women (Doffonsou and Simrique Singh 2014). For women who work in the non-agricultural wage employment sector, the majority of these positions continue to be held informally, with 84.1 per cent of women in non-agricultural work being self-employed or family workers (Doffonsou and Simrique Singh 2014).

The Government of Cameroon is implementing the Growth and Employment Strategy Paper of 2010–20 (GESP), which guides the development goals of the country. GESP acknowledges the need to foster conducive conditions for women's empowerment and socioeconomic development, setting out goals such as facilitating women's access to credit, supporting the development of women's entrepreneurship, and promoting girls' inclusion in science and technology education. Additionally, the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family² launched Cameroon's National Gender Policy in January 2015.

Despite these institutional mechanisms, the Government of Cameroon has acknowledged on-going challenges, associated with food insecurity and market opportunities for its citizens, including women. In the wake of the 2008 global fuel, food and financial crises, Cameroon saw widespread riots due to spiking commodity prices (Oneke 2012). High food prices have continued in Cameroon.³ The government is aware that these challenges particularly affect women, who are both agricultural workers and primary care agents for their families. This case study focuses on the Mass Product Consumer Regulatory Authority (MIRAP), a public entity in charge of the purchase, storage and dissemination of high-consumption domestic products that provides economic empowerment opportunities for women and responds to their need for food security.

7.2 Key institutional actors

The Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family is responsible for developing, implementing and evaluating measures related to women's rights, and has the broader goal of eliminating discrimination against women across Cameroon. Working alongside several development partners, the ministry has established a number of programmes to reduce poverty and increase women's economic standing including MIRAP, which it is implementing in collaboration with the Ministry of Commerce. Other MIRAP related initiatives include the Program for the Improvement of Rural Family Income (PARFAR), which has enabled the construction of several women empowerment centres across the country, and the Poverty Reduction Project and Actions in Favour of Women in the Far North Region (PREPAFEN), which grants small, direct income loans to rural women (MINPROFF 2010). As of 2014–15, the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family also became responsible for implementing the recently developed National Gender Plan.

7.3 Theory of change

Due to the uneven distribution of food production, post-harvest losses and limited transactions between rural and urban settings, accessing food supplies poses difficulty for many Cameroonians. Women are particularly affected by lack of transportation, harassment by middlemen and the remoteness of production zones, which increases the challenges women face when trying to access markets. To address these problems, MIRAP acts as a facilitator to increase the availability of cheaper consumer goods. The aim of the programme is to reach consumers with basic commodities at affordable prices, in order to reduce the cost of food at the household level. The theory of change for MIRAP centres on the idea that if market opportunities were provided and facilitated between local consumers and producers, domestic markets would be improved and households would have access to affordable and accessible products. MIRAP allows women, who are both the primary caregivers for their families and active in small-scale agricultural trade, increased access to market opportunities, as well as the ability to purchase more food for their families.

7.4 Social institutions and discriminatory norms

Women's economic empowerment is constrained by a wide range of social and discriminatory norms. Gender bias in agricultural markets impacts women's access to technical resources and tools for value-addition to agricultural production, as well as access to information on financial opportunities and to wider markets. Weak organisational capacity in women's agricultural networks also limits their ability to increase productivity and gain a fair price at markets. Programmes such as MIRAP and other initiatives implemented by the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family address the issue of women's economic empowerment using multiple strategies, as follows:

Formal laws, policies and accountability: Cameroon has a number of different formal policies in place to address women's economic participation. For example, the need

to increase women's economic standing has been recognised in the 2010–20 national development plan. The most recent institutional mechanisms put in place can be seen in the development and official launch of the National Gender Policy, which outlines a multi-sectoral strategy for the realisation of women's social, economic and political rights.

Access to resources and opportunities: Even though they make up the majority of small-scale vendors and food producers, women face constraints accessing market opportunities and expanding their production value. Limited access to economic resources, such as land, credit, and business training, acts as a barrier for Cameroonian women looking to move past the subsistence, micro and informal levels of these economic activities. Rising food prices also hinders the ability of women to purchase commodities, increasing their income poverty and taking away the ability to afford social goods such as healthcare or education for themselves and their children.

To address these concerns, the government has implemented a number of projects to increase women's access to resources and opportunities. MIRAP gives women preferential access to markets for their products, creating new opportunities to sustain their livelihoods through the sale of agricultural and consumer goods. Additionally, programmes such as PREPAFEN (for women in the Far North Region), or PARFAR (for improving the income of rural families) create opportunities for women to access financial resources through income grants and loan programmes (MINPROFF 2010). The Ministry has also worked closely with its development partners, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), to implement initiatives such as the Global Program for the Advancement of Women and Gender Equality, which provides micro-loans and equipment to support women's income projects in the North and West regions (MINPROFF 2010).

Informal norms and exclusionary practices: Although women represent 75 per cent of the agricultural workforce, they do not benefit to the same extent as men in terms of income from agricultural production. Men run the majority of agro-businesses and cash crop enterprises, while women are concentrated primarily in the informal sector. Programmes such as MIRAP challenge this, allowing women to grow beyond subsistence agriculture and to increase their wages by selling products in specialised markets. Sociocultural barriers, including the role of women as primary caregivers in the home, further obstruct women's participation in economic activity, hindering access to markets and other forms of trade. By providing opportunities for women to access preferential trading zones, the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family aims to increase their participation throughout Cameroon's domestic markets.

Women's and men's consciousness: Attitudes to women's position in the home mean that often men retain control over economic decision-making. Through access to markets and subsidised products, the MIRAP programme allows women to build up their economic resources. Although there is no concrete evidence yet to show widespread change in consciousness, anecdotal evidence demonstrates that MIRAP might have influenced ideas around women's ability to participate in the economic sphere. Also, by lowering prices for high-consumption goods and thereby easing pressures on household income, MIRAP may increase women's own economic

decision-making, as they are able to shift spending to other areas such as education or health.

7.5 Strategies

Implemented with the Ministry of Commerce, the MIRAP initiative began in February 2011 with the main objective to supply high-consumption commodities for cheaper prices across Cameroon. As an initial step MIRAP staff set up consultations with producers, distributors, transporters, bankers, commercial experts and other key actors in Cameroon's economic sphere. Using this expert testimony, test trials were undertaken throughout May of 2011, with MIRAP caravans and 'roving markets' setting up throughout the capital to facilitate domestic goods markets at cheaper prices. By November 2011, MIRAP was holding these periodic and roving markets in several different locales across Cameroon. As a regulatory authority, it is responsible for securing products, regulating the supply and price of basic food items, and organising markets for consumers. Once a date is fixed for a market to take place, it sets up vendors who are able to sell their commodities at cheaper prices. Commodities range from fruit and vegetables, to meat products, to consumer goods such as soap or cement.

There are several strategies MIRAP uses to help ensure success.

- First, it emphasises partnership across a wide range of community actors, including municipal governments, wholesalers and retailers.
- Second, it focuses on improving community infrastructure in order to strengthen facilities for the storage, packing and selling of consumer goods.
- Third, MIRAP uses communication methods such as radio and public sensitisation campaigns to increase its reach across Cameroon.

MIRAP itself is not a gender-specific project, as it aims to address volatile food prices that affect Cameroonian citizens broadly, both male and female. However, as women make up the majority of agricultural producers, there are several MIRAP strategies that have gendered effects. For example, the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family has facilitated women's associations and networks of associations at all levels of MIRAP, ensuring that women's voices have been captured in design and implementation. Additionally, MIRAP enables stronger regional integration between rural and urban women, playing on each other's strengths. For example, rural women often have more access to their own agricultural products. Urban women may not have access to their own food resources, but have greater disposable income and access to consumer goods such as construction materials. By facilitating markets, MIRAP allows these populations to trade with and benefit from each other, bringing together rural and urban women to increase the flow of their economic resources.

7.6 Outcomes to date

During the first 13 months of the programme, over 220 periodic markets were organised, culminating in the sale of 10,823 tons of high-consumption products across

eight of the ten regions of Cameroon (Consultation of Commonwealth NWMs 2014). Staff from the Ministry of Trade observed an average 17 per cent drop in prices for MIRAP markets compared to traditional markets (Consultation of Commonwealth NWMs 2014). MIRAP has in this way been successful in reducing the cost of food and other high-consumption products for Cameroonians. Since women bear the primary responsibility for feeding and taking care of their families, they can use any income saved for other priority areas.

At a community level, MIRAP has strengthened the ability to deliver food products to markets in good condition, increasing national production as well as guaranteeing revenue for food producers. As women make up the majority of agricultural workers, their ability to make a living within the agricultural sector has become less volatile. Access to these markets and savings from cheaper products has led to higher revenues, allowing women to purchase greater amounts of protein rich food (Consultation of Commonwealth NWMs 2014). This has enabled women to increase the nutritional health of their families.

Box 7.1 MIRAP in action

An example of this programme in action can be seen in the city of Buea in the South West region of Cameroon. This monthly market sees a continued inflow of buyers, most of whom are women. Products such as plantains, eggs, yams, pears, beef, pork and fish are put on sale, along with other household items such as soap. Due to low prices, most women buy products in bulk. Beneficiaries of the programme explained that they usually saved between 20 and 50 per cent shopping at the MIRAP markets. Even though products were sold directly to consumers, they were sold at wholesale prices, enabling women to buy more for less.

Source: Cameroon Tribune (2012).

The MIRAP programme has also challenged some of the larger societal and institutional constraints faced by women, particularly in relation to accessing markets, engaging in wage-earning and fully contributing to economic development programmes. Not only are more women able to access resources such as markets and places of trade through MIRAP, but it has also strengthened their participation in public spaces and decision-making. For example, women and women's associations have increased their participation in MIRAP partner organisations. The Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family has also confirmed a shift in attitudes and behaviour, as women demonstrate increased confidence and fulfilment due to their participation in these economic activities. The Ministry reports that due to extra income, women are no longer economically dependent on their husbands and are beginning to actively take part in household decision-making.

7.7 Lessons learned and the way forward

MIRAP has seen considerable success in providing cheap consumer goods to the population of Cameroon, as well as facilitating access to specialised domestic markets. Not only have women been able to access markets in order to sell their agricultural products, they have also been able to access cheaper food for their families, increasing their household income as spikes on commodity prices have decreased. Because the programme has been well received throughout the country, parliamentarians have requested an extension of MIRAP to other towns and regions, including expanding the initiative by engaging in partnership with new local councils.

Although it is a positive step that MIRAP will be expanding, several challenges remain. While MIRAP markets have demonstrated successes, this is a small initiative, with traditional markets still having high prices and feeding into the cycle of poverty and food insecurity. Since the programme is not run by the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family but spearheaded by the Ministry of Commerce, there are opportunities to further ensure that gender is being streamlined throughout MIRAP, and to deepen understanding of how the programme is having differential impacts on men and women. This requires investment to improve data collection and monitoring mechanisms for the programme, in order to build up an evidence base on the impacts of MIRAP specifically for women and girls. More broadly, there is a need to strengthen monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for all of the Ministry's economic empowerment programmes to attain an adequate picture of improvements that occur over time.

Entrenched structural barriers to women's participation in economic activities continue to pose difficulties for the realisation of women's economic rights. Increased income in the hands of women is important. MIRAP needs to be considered in the context of wider strategies to address other factors, such as limited access to capital, weak land rights and a lack of education opportunities in business and entrepreneurship training, which limit the ability of women to move out of the informal or micro-enterprise stage. It will be important to ensure integration of gender planning and programming into national budgets and that this is backed up by resource allocations for gender mainstreaming to be fully implemented across all government sectors and development initiatives.

Notes

- 1 Cameroon is a least developed country (LCD) and ranks 0.495 on the human development index, with a poverty rate of 39.9 per cent. UNDP Cameroon (2015), 'Sustainable Development', available at: www.cm.undp.org/content/cameroon/fr/home/ourwork/povertyreduction/overview.html (accessed on 14 May 2015).
- 2 In French, Ministère de la Promotion de la Femme et de la Famille.
- 3 In the 2011 Comprehensive Food Security Analysis survey, the Food and Agricultural Organization classified Cameroon as a country with insufficient food supply, with approximately 30 per cent of Cameroonian households experiencing food vulnerability. [Sneyd, A (2014), 'Cameroon: Perspectives on Food Security and the Emerging Power Footprint,' *Sustainability* Vol. 6 No. 4: 1868–95.]

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