

Market Access Centres make the difference

The Analanjifofo region in eastern Madagascar offers a unique and extremely wide range of agricultural products. Local production of cloves, lychees, vegetables, rice and honey represents a source of wealth. Despite this potential, the area's poor farmers have to cope with many problems, most important of which are marketing their produce and finding permanent partnerships. Market Access Centres are being set up to address these problems for farmers, including bee-keepers.

Benoît Thierry and Emeline Schneider

High agricultural potential and harsh living conditions for farmers: this is the paradoxical situation of the Analanjifofo region. The cause is the rural area's lack of infrastructure and technical skills, limiting investment and hampering the professionalisation of the various value chains. Most growers have difficulty accessing commercial inputs as they are too expensive, and not available locally. In addition, productivity varies with the climate, giving farmers an uncertain income. The situation is made worse with the absence of regional-level storage facilities and post-harvest processing infrastructure. Products cannot be conserved, preventing farmers and producers from responding adequately to demand.

Since 2004, the Rural Income Promotion Programme has been running in the eastern province of Toamasina. Financed by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries' (OPEC) Fund for International Development and the Government of Madagascar, its objective is to improve the income of poor farmers in two regions. The programme's activities consist mainly of supporting farmers' groups, through the development of "partnership poles" for value chain management. These poles bring together local government authorities, producers' groups, exporters and microfinance institutions. Seven poles are at present in service in the Analanjifofo region, and three others are in preparation for the Atsinanana region. Within a pole, producers' organisations are grouped into agricultural co-operatives, which have the task of managing a "Market Access Centre" (MAC).

The aim of the MACs is to organise collection systems, improve small farmers' negotiating strength, and the quality of their

produce, and develop sustainable partnerships with traders. Each centre manages the marketing of the commodity that passes through it, and negotiates on behalf of producers in exchanges with traders. The manager in charge of the MAC is responsible for receiving the farmers' produce and selling it, and also for seeking out the best market opportunities.

An advisor made available by the programme manages marketing within each MAC. The advisor also provides training to those in charge of the centre on topics ranging from simple management to product traceability. The Market Access Centres differ from one pole to another, developing their own strategies depending on the potential and constraints of the zone. Their main challenge is to function effectively enough to gain the confidence of producers and traders.

Improving honey production

Malagasy honey used to be highly prized in Europe, but lost its market share because of the lack of a sanitary surveillance system, so that exports to the European Union stopped. Many initiatives have been launched by the support programme to improve the quality of honey and thus relaunch the honey sector on the external market. As part of this effort, bee-keepers in the Analanjifofo region have been included in the MACs since 2004.

The first improvement in the honey value chain has been to upgrade the method of bee-keeping. In the region, the traditional manner has been for households to own between one and five hives. The quantities produced (5 kg per hive per year) do not bring in enough income. Mr Nosy, a bee-keeper for more than ten years, explains the problems relating to the traditional system: "I have always worked with traditional hives set up in hollow tree trunks. You rub the inside with citronella leaves and then put in wax to attract swarms. Upkeep and gathering are difficult, and after extraction the honey has many impurities."

The programme decided to provide 500 Langstroth-type hives with movable frames to farmers, training them in the use of the modern hives. One modern hive can produce 10 kg per collection, three times a year. The main criteria for eligibility were the motivation and organisation of producers' groups. Besides improving the bee-keeping methods, the post-collection treatment received attention: the honey is extracted by centrifugation (using a machine with a rapidly rotating container to separate liquids from solids), it is then filtered and stored in plastic buckets suitable for containing food.

MACs help farmers with marketing

A Market Access Centre facilitates the marketing of the honey intended for national and international markets. The MAC collects honey (and other products) from members of the co-operative at a price slightly higher than the market price. It then finds the most profitable purchasers. If profits accrue from the sale, these are distributed among the members and help to develop the Centre. The member farmers have adopted this partnership system and new groups continue to be created. At the time of publication, nine Market Access Centres are successfully marketing different products of 4000 farmer members.

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Photo: Marcellin Léon, PPRP/IFAD

Bee-keeper Indiamalaza Gaston from the village of Rantolava shows his modern hive, producing honey to sell through a Market Access Centre in the Analanjifofo region.