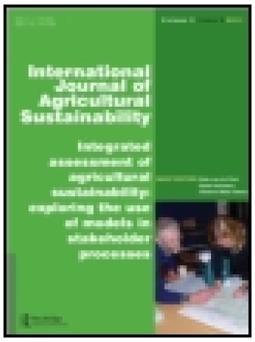

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Navigating dynamic contexts: African cooperatives as institutional bricoleurs

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ABSTRACT
In agricultural policy and programmes, cooperatives have been framed as organizational fix for addressing institutional voids and market imperfections in rural Africa. By way of guaranteeing scale, quality of produce, and professionalism, cooperatives are assumed to be capable to subvert current trading patterns and contribute to sustainable market access for small-scale farmers. However, such change logic does not hold up well with the circumstances of African farmers and traders. We argue that for understanding how a cooperative organizes sustainable market linkages, attention should be paid to its capacity to navigate within its specific context. This article traces the emergence and development of two cooperatives in distinct contexts, Uganda and Mali. We use a critical institutionalist approach, called bricolage, to show how in both cases farmers organize sustainable market access by blending novel arrangements with existing institutions embedded in social and economic relations. We suggest agricultural policy and programmes to shift attention to the ability of a cooperative to embed new institutions in socio-historical shaped local realities rather than requiring them to comply to an ideal-type organization.

KEYWORDS
Institutionalism; farmer organizations; market imperfections; Mali; Uganda; contextualized solutions

Introduction

Agricultural sustainability depends on more than farming; it is as important for farmers to have a sustainable market outlet. In many rural areas in Sub-Saharan Africa this is not self-evident. African markets are portrayed as being pervasively imperfect (Markelova, Meinzen-Dick, Hellin, & Dohrn, 2009; Shiferaw, Hellin, & Muricho, 2011). Poor infrastructure, weak institutions, policy failures and high transaction costs among other things, are thought to limit the poor from grasping the opportunities offered by a growing domestic demand for food crops and a rapidly globalizing agricultural economy (Barrett, 2008; Dorward et al., 2005; Dorward, Kydd, Morrison, & Poulton, 2005; Kydd & Dorward, 2004; Shiferaw et al., 2011).

In the last two decades, cooperatives have become the centrepiece of pro-poor market development interventions in Africa. Cooperatives are presented as a solution to assumed institutional voids and market imperfections that constrain farmers from grasping economic opportunities (Devaux et al., 2009; Fischer & Qaim, 2012; Lemeilleur & Codron, 2011; Markelova et al., 2009; IFPRI, 2014; Poole & de Frece, 2010; Shiferaw et al., 2011; Trebbin, 2014). They are regarded as being capable of changing prevailing trade patterns by fixing what is supposed to be lacking in rural markets: scale, quality of produce and professionalism (Devaux et al., 2009; Kaganzi et al., 2009; Markelova et al., 2009).

However, how cooperatives foster market relations remains unclear. Research concerning the contribution of cooperatives in 'fixing' market failures for farmers focuses mostly on the impact of cooperative membership at the level of the individual farmer. A wide range of topics is covered such as the effect on farmers income, bargaining power, costs of marketing,

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access to market information, credit, inputs and extension services (Abate, Borzaga, & Getnet, 2014; Ahmed & Mesfin, 2017; Bernard & Spielman, 2009; Fischer and Qaim, 2012; Francesconi & Ruben, 2012).

Much of the empirical research on cooperatives focus on the 'design principles' that should guarantee beneficial outcomes for all members (Donovan, Blare, & Poole, 2017; Hagedorn, 2014). To exemplify, the following factors have been found conducive to cooperation: group size and homogeneity of membership; accountable leadership; trust among group members; economic feasibility; 'facilitators'; and the type of crop and market.[1]

According to us these factors are not fully indicative of how a cooperative successfully organizes market access for its members. A focus on either the design or the impact of a cooperative at farmer level does not give us enough insight in how a cooperative achieves collective outcomes and how it remains a viable organization within a given context.

In Mali and Uganda, we observed a discrepancy between the organizational models promoted in development interventions and the diversity in practice of two well-functioning organizations. This to us highlights that many assumptions on how a cooperative should function do not correspond to what works in practice.

In view of the strong role given to farmer organizations in development programmes aimed at improving market access we believe that it is important to understand how cooperatives become organizations viable to cater to sustainable market relations. It is this research gap that we aim to address in this paper. Our study questions the idea underlying many policy initiatives that encourage the set-up of cooperatives; namely that to realize market access for smallholders, new formal institutions need to be designed. Instead, we seek to understand how a cooperative is built on already present market institutions, and how the specific socio-historically context shapes collaboration within the cooperative.

Accordingly, contrary to most of the research on cooperatives, we shift perspective from the effects of cooperative membership, to understanding how cooperatives organize sustainable market linkages, and as such contribute to agricultural sustainability. With this focus, we add to a small, diverse, and growing body within development literature that lays emphasis on the processes that reinforce organizations, rather than outcomes (for instance Wertheim-Heck & Spaargaren, 2016; Sidibé et al., 2014; Mangnus & Vellema, 2019). We do so by studying the development and functioning of two African cooperatives in distinct contexts, Uganda and Mali.

To scrutinize an organization 'in development' we deem the approach of institutional bricolage as suitable. Institutional bricolage pays specific attention to how organizations adapt to, and develop within, a specific context (Cleaver, 2001). To our knowledge, institutional bricolage has not been used for studying the development and functioning of cooperatives in a rural African setting. In our study, we scrutinize the emergence, development and functioning of two cooperatives in Uganda and Mali.

The two case studies show that for cooperatives to achieve their objective, they need to be able to strategically navigate in their specific context. With this paper, we therefore recommend development policy and practice to shift attention from fostering ideal-type organizations to identifying and strengthening capacities needed to perform within a specific context. The following section – Theoretical Framework - positions the theoretical perspective underlying our study. This is followed by the Methodology section, where we operationalize the bricolage approach and describe our case study material. The case studies are detailed in the section Findings. In the Analysis and Discussion section, we answer the research question and describe the implications of our findings for development policy and practice. We conclude the paper with a reflection on the usefulness of the bricolage approach to study sustainable market linkages.

Theoretical framework

Depart from new institutional economics

Development interventions that encourage cooperation to organize market linkages for smallholders are, knowingly or unknowingly, often inspired by theories in New Institutional Economics (NIE). NIE can be regarded as a movement within the social sciences that unites theoretical and empirical research examining the role of institutions in shaping economic activity (Coase, 2005; North, 1987; Williamson, 2000). According to NIE institutions incentivize individuals to maximize their economic behaviour in socially preferred directions and enact sanctions to punish those who cheat or freeride on the collective action (Williamson, 2000). Following NIE, the organizations that manifest in practice are the ones that are economically most efficient given their specific context.

Building on this line of thinking development interventions specifically encourage cooperatives as efficient arrangements for farmers to access markets (Shepherd, 2007; Holloway & Ehui, 2002). Cooperatives are democratically controlled enterprises owned by a group of people who voluntarily participate. Members contribute financially, and exercise control through supervising the management. From a development perspective the cooperative is attractive as it responds to an ideology of bottom-up empowerment. The cooperative is owned, controlled and financed by its users, the farmers. Moreover, its design is inclusive; anyone should be allowed to become a member, and the governance and management structure encourages participatory decision-making (Bijman, Muradian, & Cechin, 2011).

The preference for the cooperative as an ideal collective action arrangement stems from NIE's idea that rules and regulation, a clear authority and accountability structure, and the use of penalties against free riders are necessary for successful collective action (Gardner, Ostrom, & Walker, 1990; Ostrom, 2000). Moreover, NIE emphasizes the importance of transparency, clear conflict resolution, and resource allocation mechanisms. The 'cooperative' principles fit within this logic. Cooperatives are regarded as arrangements that can efficiently, and formally, coordinate transactions for many smallholders in the 'imperfect markets' of Sub-Saharan Africa (Shiferaw et al., 2011).

However, several critiques can be raised towards NIE and the idea that sustainable market linkages are best crafted by archetypical organizations. First, NIE holds a de-contextualized notion of organization. Organizations induced by NIE inspired interventions are built on generic principles concerned with internal group factors. These interventions simply assume the cooperative to be a suitable market arrangement in the context of smallholders and imperfect markets, no matter the specific characteristics of this market (Mehta, Leach, & Scoones, 2001; Rodrik, 2014). In this paper, we aim to unravel how even an archetype organization such as a cooperative is co-shaped by its environment.

Second, NIE seems to equate institutional viability with fixed and formal structures that are rather static, if farmers follow the procedures and statutes, the cooperative will provide them with sustainable access to the market (Rocheleau, 2001). In our case studies, we observed that rural markets and the arrangements to access markets are typically dynamic and membership of marketing arrangements evolved over time (Benjaminsen & Lund, 2002; Granovetter, 1985). Decisions are often made by the use of implicit norms and habits which may not conform to 'modern' managerial concepts of transparent decision-making, but are nevertheless effective. Our aim is to study the processes that lead to the viability of the case study cooperatives.

Third, the links between rules and decision-making structures within institutions and the outcomes produced in terms of more efficiency are not as simplistic as presented by NIE. Most local level organizations have multiple purposes and an evolving organizational structure. Authority and the social norms for resolving competition and conflict are rarely clear and consistent but diverse and subject to negotiation and compromise (Lund, 2001). In this paper we therefore pay close attention to the multiple purposes cooperatives might have and to the internal negotiation and decision processes.

Fourth, NIE maintains a very narrow conceptualization of social capital; namely as an asset that fosters cooperation. The fact that social capital is historical, place-specific, can be exclusive, and can actually constrain successful collective action is neglected. NIE thinkers emphasize the importance of trust and social connections, but are not able to explain satisfactorily how these lead to performing collective action. In this paper, we hope to come to an understanding of how social relations in both case studies foster or limit the performance of the cooperatives (Martin, 1993).

Fifth, NIE only has a partial understanding of peoples' motivations for collective action (Rocheleau, 2001). In real life, people have multiple roles and affinities, and their motivations for participating in an organization might change over time. Moreover, they make decisions based on both conscious and unconscious rationalities (Douglas & Wind, 1987; Giddens, 1984). In this paper, we aim to study how cooperative membership touches upon different livelihood ambitions of smallholders.

Our aim in this paper is to gain an understanding of how cooperatives organize sustainable market access. In a search for an approach that enables us to study farmer organizations as evolving organizations in dynamic and unique environments we propose to use Lévi-Strauss's (1967) concept of 'institutional bricolage', – shortly characterized as 'making do with whatever is at hand' – as described by Cleaver (2001). According to this approach, institutions are shaped by historical processes, the power relations which prevail in social life and worldviews. They are constructed both deliberately as well as in the practical iterations of daily life. In the next section, we elaborate upon the approach and how we aim to use it. Institutional bricolage departs from NIE in that it regards institutional formation as a socially embedded process rather than a deliberate and transparent managerial activity.

Institutional bricolage

An institutional bricolage perspective is a critical institutionalist approach that refutes the idea that prevailing institutions are an outcome of rational efficiency-seeking behaviour. Instead, it regards existing institutions as a bricolage of borrowed, adapted and combined institutions at hand in the processes of solving resource management problems by collective action (Cleaver, 2001, 2002; Cleaver & de Koning, 2015). These modified and new arrangements always fit into what is locally perceived as an acceptable manner of doing things (Cleaver, 2001; Galvan, 1997; Lanzara, 1999; Sehring, 2009).

In this line of thinking institutions are not fixed entities, but the results of what people do; institutions must be continually reproduced or re-enacted by people to exist (Lund, 2001). An institutional bricolage perspective also challenges the notion of collective benefits: it assumes that power and inequality always result in some people benefitting more from outcomes than others (Cleaver, 2005; Matose & Watts, 2010; Ribot, Lund, & Treue, 2010). The bricolage approach offers an understanding of organizations as embedded and evolving phenomena and aligns well with our aim to grasp the development and functioning of two cooperatives in two distinct contexts. It allows us to view cooperatives, even when a-priori designed for a specific purpose, as organizations that borrow and adapt from other arrangements, such as church associations, women's' groups or savings clubs.

We follow Baker and Nelson (2005) in operationalizing the approach of bricolage. Baker and Nelson (2005) conducted a review of research in which the concept of bricolage was used to clarify a phenomenon observed. They identified a triplet of dimensions coming back in all studies, helpful for our study:

Making do. making do implies a bias towards action and active engagement with problems or opportunities rather than reflecting over questions of how to create an outcome given the situation at hand. In their study to firms and bricolage, Baker and Nelson (2005) observed an unwillingness to stick to the conventional usage of practices, ideas and standards. The entrepreneurs insisted on trying out new ways of doing this and left room for risk and failure.

Resources at hand. Using resources at hand is a central theme in the different studies reviewed by Baker and Nelson (2005). It refers to both physical assets, as well as skills or ideas that are easily available, very cheaply or for free, rather than specifically acquired to construct a pre-designed project (Lanzara, 1999). One can think of the development of new ideologies based on elements of existing myths and world views (Chao, 1999); or the construction of new laws from fragments of existing ones (Hull, 1991). This also captures the role of external resource constraints.

Combination of resources for new purposes. Another central theme running through the studies Baker and Nelson (2005) reviewed is the reuse and recombination of above-mentioned resources for *different* applications than those for which they were originally intended or used (see Cleaver 2002, 2005 for similar findings). In his case study on a community association in Tukal, Senegal, Galvan (2007) shows how seven young adults founded an association. Their strong bond originates from the ritual of male circumcision they underwent together in their youth. However, the technocratic type of leadership they applied derived from their working experiences in Dakar. The only reason the local community legitimized this type of leadership was because the seven had also shown respect to the traditional norms and values. Combining resources for new purposes defies assumptions of linear rationality; it is about recombining existing elements rather than fabricating them from scratch (Baker & Nelson, 2005).

Using this framework, we trace the emergence and functioning of two cooperatives which were successful in establishing market linkages for their members in Mali and Uganda. We do so using the following questions: First: How did the case study cooperatives 'make do' with emerging problems or opportunities? Second: what were the 'resources at hand' used by the cooperatives? And third: how did cooperatives 'combine these resources for new purposes' to perform in a continuously altering environment?

Methods and research area

Methods

Our interest in cooperatives as arrangements to facilitate market access was triggered by our working experience in development aid. We closely witnessed the increasing attention in development policy and practice to farmer organizations as means of achieving development objectives. In the field we observed the discrepancies between the theoretical assumptions underlying the development interventions and the practice and the diversity of well-functioning organizations at local level. We aimed to achieve an enhanced understanding of the functioning of collective action organizations engaged in agricultural marketing by doing case study research.

Our paper follows a comparative case study design based on qualitative research methods (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2017). A case study is an intensive, in-depth study of a bounded phenomenon (Gerring, 2004). Case studies lend themselves to making cautious causal inferences about the mechanisms of influence on organizational development and performance. We selected two cases of cooperatives that were successful in trading: (1) cooperative Nyetaa Waale trading in sesame in Mali, and (2) Alito farmer group working in sunflower seeds in Uganda. The cases differ in terms of sector, location and the actors involved. However, they lend themselves for comparison as they both concern a group of people that aimed to collectively succeed in trading food crops produced for the regional market. Both organizations realized the tasks of procuring produce, organizing finance, transport, bulking and selling and aimed to continue doing this, even when circumstances changed. The first step in both case studies involved the construction of a time path of key events and critical moments in the development of the cooperative. By means of literature research and interviews with key-resource persons we traced how historical processes in the local context had contributed to the emergence of the cooperatives. Interviews helped us to understand how the organizations had adapted to changing circumstances over time.

Next, we participated in cooperative meetings and took part in activities related to the cooperatives' tasks to comprehend how the cooperatives functioned in daily practice. We then used the concept of bricolage to grasp how these organized sustainable market linkages. For organizing and analysing the data we followed the dimensions identified by Baker and Nelson (2005): making do, resources at hand and a combination of resources for new purposes.

Case studies

In northern Uganda, Kole, the Alito Joint Christian Farmers Society[2] (hereafter referred to as Alito) engaged in the marketing of oilseeds (sunflower and soy), as well as the production of crops for local food security (maize and beans). Alito was established in 1998 and grew from 5 to 5500 members in 2015, clustered into 161 farmer groups. The structure of the organization was bottom-up; they were organized in 161 farmer groups led by a lead farmer who represented the group at the annual meetings. Alito farmer group had several sub-committees: a production committee responsible for finance and administration; a marketing and processing committee for market information and bargaining with buyers on behalf of the group; a disciplinary committee to settle grievances; and a maintenance committee responsible for transport and machine operations. Any farmer could become a member of a small farmer group, the group should however be able to pay its annual contribution. The cooperative covered eight districts and was registered as a cooperative society. The cooperative warehouse and office were located in Kole district, northern Uganda, 30 kilometres from Lira town, the commercial hub for Lango region. The northern part of Uganda had seen a civil war from 1985 till 2005 between the Lord Resistance Army (LRA) and the government. The peace agreement in 2005, as well as changes in the international market, triggered investments in the oilseed sector (oilseeds form an essential part of the diet in this area) by major processing companies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the government. This led to an increase in production and a stronger competition between traders for that produce (Schoonhoven-Speijer & Heemskerk, 2014).

In Mali, Miena, Nyetaa Waale cooperative engaged in the trading of sesame in Miena, Koutiala district in South-East Mali. Koutiala is one of Mali's main cotton production areas. Cotton has been the major source of revenue for farmers for decades. All cotton producers are organized in cooperatives that supply the Malian state company, CMDT (*Compagnie malienne pour le développement du textile, Malian company for the development of textiles*). However, being dependent on cotton showed to have its drawbacks. At the beginning of the 1990s, cotton prices dropped dramatically and many farmers in the district experienced problems supporting their households. In 2000, farmers in Miena responded to a call from the crisis committee of the national farmers' organization SYCOV: by boycotting production they showed their discontent with low cotton prices and the management of CMDT. A drought occurred in the following season and many farmers had to sell their equipment and oxen to cope with the crisis. In 2003-2004, farmers took up cotton cultivation again but could not realize its full potential due to a lack of equipment. Many farmers could not repay loans they had taken out with their associations and a large number ran into debt. By 2006, many farmers in the district had abandoned cotton (Roy, 2010). To survive farmers started to look to cash crops other than cotton. In view of the increasing international demand, sesame offered an opportunity. A group of farmers in Miena organized to engage in sesame trading, first informally, and since 2010 formally as a cooperative. The cooperative had a board with 15 members. Seven of the board members had a specific function, such as secretary, cashier, responsible officer for collection, responsible officer for trading. Eight others were assigned delegate. The board members all belonged to a different cotton cooperative and sourced sesame from this cooperative. An ex-employee of the state cotton company was the external advisor to the cooperative and assisted with market linkages.

Findings

Alito farmer group in Uganda

Making do. Alito was founded in 1996 by 5 farmers (3 men, 2 women) as an informal farmer group. The chairman (who is still the chairman today) was a clergy in church and mobilized the farmers. From the beginning the group relied on his experience and expertise in management. The farmers were motivated by the low prices paid by traders buying their produce and selling it in Lira town. They aimed to 'by-pass' these intermediaries and receive better prices. In addition, they intended to improve production practices.

From the start, the group received support from the Ugandan Oilseeds Producers and Processors Association (UOSPA). UOSPA was founded in 1995, an association focusing on increasing oilseed production, with both farmers and millers as members. UOSPA contracted farmers for the multiplication of an improved sunflower variety, and Alito was one of the groups chosen for seed multiplication (Ton, Opeero, & Vellema, 2010). UOSPA also assisted Alito in marketing their sunflower seeds and provided them with extension services.

Between 1998 and 2004, the group prepared to officially register as a cooperative. UOSPA helped them to elaborate a statute. The official registration as community-based organization (CBO) at both the district and the national level in 2004 made the cooperative officially recognized and more visible to development organizations. Indeed, the formal registration, as well as partnering with a well-recognized player such as UOSPA, helped to gain trust from donors. NGO's started to engage Alito in their development interventions. Making connections with NGOs was enhanced by the end of the civil war in 2005, after which many NGOs developed interventions for rebuilding the agricultural sector in northern Uganda. Over the years, Alito received assistance from at least seven NGOs, two governmental organizations, three international donors (such as FAO and the Worldbank), three seed companies, and one bank. Alito thus successfully engaged with the opportunities available.

Overall, the group has done well and owned several assets during the time of the research: one main store, and eight other stores (one for each cluster) are rented during harvesting time. The cooperative owned its own truck and rented extra transport when necessary to collect the produce at the level of the cluster. Alito also employed four extension officers who provided technical advice and extension services to cooperative members. Lastly, Alito had its own motorized sunflower oil mill, with a capacity of 2 MT, which was granted by FAO in 2006 and started operating in 2007. The installation of the mill attracted more farmers to the cooperative, as it enabled the cooperative to give farmers a slightly higher price. Normally, they processed about one third of the sunflower seeds themselves and sold the rest to other millers in the area. Unfortunately, the oil mill was not functioning during the time of research, as some parts broke down. Spare parts were very hard to find, as the mill was already outdated when they received it (stemming from 1914) and spare parts were to be imported from Kenya.

Making use of resources at hand. The cooperative was initiated during the civil war period (1985-2005). This context was of major influence on the operation, functioning and finally the structure of the group. To start with, due to the insecurities of the war, it was difficult to organize transport. In the first year after establishment the farmers sold their produce to the same traders they were aiming to by-pass. However, the traders were now offering them a better price because of the bulk they were selling as a group. As a group they also had a better position to negotiate. In addition, the founding members started in Kole, a district that was relatively little affected by the war. People would take refuge here and started farming in the area. After the war many of these farmers moved back to their own villages, taking home their knowledge and enthusiasm for working cooperatively. This offered Alito an easy opportunity to expand to other districts.

Alito's organizing structure was also opportunistic. Being organized in small groups is an advantage for the cooperative in terms of bulking; they can collect from groups of on average 30 farmers, instead of going from farmer to farmer. In addition, often donor programmes from both NGOs and the government required farmers to be organized in groups.

However, the capability of acting in response to opportunities of *individual* farmers sometimes came at the harm of the cooperative: several members engaged in what is termed 'side-selling', marketing oilseed destined to the cooperative to traders and other buyers. There was competition for the sourcing of raw material, especially for sunflower. Survey data (own survey, 2015) showed that on average 75% of the farmers sell their sunflower and soya output seeds to Alito farmer groups. Two other main buyers are a big processing company with its own outgrower scheme (20%) and intermediary traders (15%). This while the reported price for sunflower received at cooperative was 7% higher. However, intermediaries and the processing company offered ready cash to farmers, which farmers needed for pressing issues such as school fees, or upcoming emergencies like illness or funerals (See Milford, 2014 for similar findings among coffee farmers in Chiapas, Mexico). The cooperative's official rules against side-selling were as follows: if it happened once, farmers were pardoned and counselled by the clergy or other elderly members of the cooperative. If the same person side-sold for three seasons, he or she was expelled from the group. The enforcement of these rules was less straightforward. One the one hand members of the management committee stressed the importance of bulking enough produce. On the other hand, they understood the need of farmers for ready cash, which was something they could often not offer: 'we allowed farmers to side-sell their produce, so that they could use that money for domestic problems'. Within the small farmer groups, farmers also hold each other accountable as it profits the group to be reliable sellers to the cooperative. To solve the problem of side-selling, the management stimulated farmers to grow other crops next to sunflower and soy, which they did not need to sell to the cooperative. In this way, farmers could raise income or provide in their own food during the period that the cooperative was waiting for payment from selling crops. To this end, the cooperatives not only distributed seeds on credit to produce sunflower and soy, but also for maize and beans. The costs of the seeds were distracted from the money a farmer received when selling to the cooperative.

Combination of resources for new purposes. The embodiment of using existing resources for new purposes was the clergy who mobilized his church network for trading purposes and was now chair of the executive committee. He provided counselling services for farmers who did not adhere to the rules. This was a source of morality that generated trust and commitment to leaders and each other (Enzama, 2013).

Another example were the extra functions the cooperative has been fulfilling over time. The main goals of the cooperative were bulking oilseeds, overcoming middlemen, and enhancing bargaining power to acquire higher prices. Alito trained its farmers to improve the productivity and quality of their oilseeds. However, as the survey showed, an important motivation for farmers to join the group was 'VSLA': village savings and loans association. This is a system where group members jointly saved money, which was reimbursed at the end of the year. During the year, members could borrow from the group savings with a small interest, to use for small emergencies.

Another example of this was a low interest rate loan of the Ugandan Development Bank (UDB). The cooperative received the loan for the first time in 2014. An amount of 100,000 USD, of which 25% was used for buying produce from farmers. Farmers could apply to receive an amount of the remaining 75% and could use the money as they saw fit. Some invested it in farming, by renting or buying extra land, or for farming inputs, but it was for instance also used for the payment of school fees. The cooperative was responsible for distributing the money and reimbursing it to UDB. The cooperative management estimated that the loan increased the number of members; if individual farmers were to access a loan, the interest rate would be much higher than when receiving it from the cooperative.

Nyetaa Waale, Mali

Making do: Two people can be regarded as the founders of the sesame cooperative in Miena, Mali. The first is an ex-field officer, here called Adama, from the state-owned cotton organization CMDT living in the regional capital Koutiala. After Adama was laid-off in 2003 because of the reorganization of CMDT, he engaged in trading. He identified sesame as a crop with market opportunity. Due to increasing demand by traders from India and China the neglected crop attracted farmers to cultivate it on a larger scale. Within four years Adama built a network of big traders based in regional trading hubs and even in Burkina Faso. These sometimes pre-financed him to procure sesame from farmers. To collect the sesame at farmer level Adama used his contacts from his previous job at CMDT. He delivered planting material to the secretaries of cotton cooperatives and asked them to distribute it, and then collect the sesame produced. At the end of the season he picked it up. However, often he was confronted with the fact that the farmers had already sold his sesame.

The second founder of the cooperative is a farmer, named Seydou, who was the secretary of a cotton cooperative Adama was working within the municipality of Miena. Adama already engaged in trading sesame. In 2001 he sold his sesame on the market in Koutiala. The trader buying his produce asked him to procure sesame in the villages and pre-financed him on a weekly basis. As secretary of the cotton cooperative, he contacted the secretaries of other cooperatives in the district and asked them to help him out. He distributed money so they could collect the sesame for him. They were remunerated with a percentage of the profit. He aggregated all the sesame at his house where the trader picked it up. At this time the demand of the traders was still irregular, they called him whenever they were approached by traders or companies from India. Consequently, his payments to the farmers were also irregular. For the farmers money gained by sesame was a bonus, cotton still formed their major income source.

In 2005, Adama met a woman who informed him that there was a considerable number of sesame farmers in the municipality of Miena. She brought him into contact with Seydou. Together Adama and Seydou decided to form an informal group to collect and market sesame. This would provide Adama with a stable supply and offer farmers a guaranteed outlet.

In 2007 the group organized a district meeting in collaboration with the mayor to increase membership in their organization. Twenty-three of the 38 cotton farmer cooperatives based in the district participated. It was decided that all interested cotton cooperatives would have a representative on the board of the sesame association, either as a board member or as a delegate. Under the supervision of the ex-field officer they divided roles and responsibilities. The ex-field officer was appointed in the role of external advisor.

In 2008 the group concluded its first contract with a company that would buy 100 tons of sesame. However, the company did not respect the contract and the farmers were left with their sesame. The ex-field officer decided that in order to be able to fight such fraud it was necessary for the group to register as a cooperative. In 2010 the association was finally registered as a cooperative.

Resources at hand: Closer scrutiny of the functioning of the cooperative makes clear how the group of farmers uses the resources at hand, thereby not always taking law and prescriptions too strict. In 2001, the cooperative law was revised in line with the principles of the International Labour Organization. Under this new law, groups could not any longer register as an association, only as cooperatives. Within two years more than 7000 cotton cooperatives were created. However, though the government required farmers to organize in cooperatives and operate according to the cooperative principles as framed by the law and international conventions, the shortfall in capacity to assist farmers created room for manoeuvre at the local level. Davis (2000) found that cooperatives in Mali rarely changed board members, decision-making was seldom democratic, and 'elite capture' occurred more frequently as the secretaries gained more and more power. This local interpretation of the law is clearly reflected in the functioning of our case study cooperative. As explained by Adama: 'The farmers had selected board members who had never produced sesame. People trusted them because they had leadership positions in the district.' The influence of pre-existing relations is also reflected in the fact that few sanctions were in use, as one of the delegates formulated: 'We have all known each other for a long time, we are brothers. If something happens, it can be discussed, and the person won't be expelled.' From 2005 to 2011 cooperative members did not pay their yearly contribution as was stipulated in the statutes. If there were expenses, for example for the registration as a cooperative, every board member would contribute.

One of the rules of the cooperative was to buy from farmers who were members of one of the cotton cooperatives represented on the board. Nevertheless, oftentimes sesame was also bought from non-members. The distinction between trading for the cooperative and engaging in other trade relations was blurred and the formal cooperative rules were not always exercised.

The cotton cooperatives were engaged in shared learning, input dissemination and bulking of cotton. They had little experience in trading themselves. For this the members of the sesame cooperative copied expertise from local traders. Like local traders lacking their own working capital, the ex-field officer and president looked for a big trader willing to pre-finance procurement. After pre-financing was arranged, the president made several secretaries part of the board to start collecting sesame within their cotton cooperatives. He sent them money. The board members thus functioned like a network of collectors who, depending on their negotiation skills, gain an individual profit.

Combination of resources for new purposes: Why did the farmers trust Adama? And why did they invite specifically the secretaries of cotton cooperatives to establish the cooperative? A side-step into the history of the cotton sector in Mali shows how the cotton cooperatives formed a sound base for the sesame cooperative.

Since its establishment in 1974 the state cotton organization CMDT forced- and facilitated- farmers to be organized in groups. To facilitate efficient input dissemination, knowledge transfer and cotton collection the cotton cooperatives are composed of farmers that lived close to each other. Secretaries played an important role in the management of cotton cooperatives. To this day the secretaries bear the responsibility for book-keeping and relation management with CMDT extension field officers. The established organization of cotton farmers thus lent itself perfectly for the bulking of sesame and the choice for a board composed of secretaries was a logical foundation for the new association. Secretaries were responsible to acquire information on the planned production of each of their members and as such were also easily informed about the availability of sesame in their cooperatives. Secretaries knew each other through meetings organized by CMDT. This combination of knowing each other, being informed, known by farmers and having management experience, made the secretaries well positioned to lead a sesame trading collective. In addition, the relationship of the sesame cooperative with Adama was similar to the relationship the cooperatives had with CMDT field officers. Without Adama it would have been difficult for the sesame farmers to access external stakeholders. Moreover, he brought in knowledge, inputs and cash. The established structure and social relations in cotton organization thus facilitated cooperation and were partly reproduced in the new sesame cooperative.

The establishment of the group as a formal cooperative also fostered changes in functioning. Over the years the relationship between the group and Adama changed. After the registration of the cooperative Adama established his NGO. Subsequently, he was approached by donors to support and monitor cooperatives that were part of their programmes. He gradually took on a role as a technical assistant for different development programmes. In his new role, he encouraged the cooperative to apply the rules and principles as prescribed by the cooperative law and gradually the organization absorbed new organizational practices. Participation in the development programme, 'improving sesame commercialization for small scale farmers', which the cooperative was linked to by Adama required the application of rules like transparent budgeting and joint decision-making. The programme offered opportunities like access to trade fairs where they could meet other traders.

Analysis and discussion

In order to enhance our understanding of how cooperatives organize sustainable market linkages we traced the development and functioning in practice of two cooperatives that were successful in trading.

In both cases existing relations and brokering relations already present turned out to be of great influence on the emergence of the case study cooperatives. In Uganda the church network formed the basis for collaboration in oilseed trading. In Mali, the foundation for cooperation was an ancient cotton network. Both cases show that existing institutional arrangements, relations and ways of collaborating were re-used for new objectives; namely trading oilseeds and trading sesame. In both cases, a leader that had the capacity to mobilize and guide farmers and who was able to facilitate linkages with external stakeholders such as traders and service providers, turned out to be essential. In Uganda this role was fulfilled by the church leader, in Mali this was realized by a collaboration between a farmer leader and a field officer.

In addition to these existing (market) arrangements, also several specific events encouraged the emergence of the cooperatives. In Uganda the civil war turned out to facilitate farmers to come together. The end of the civil war caused a surge in NGO support, as well as a broadening of the cooperative's network due to farmers returning to their homes. In Mali a crisis in cotton and an increasing demand for sesame encouraged farmers to shift to sesame and search for new market linkages. It was however the agency of the farmers to make use of the new opportunities offered, that resulted in success.

Over time both organizations adapted to changing circumstances in order to be able to continue realising their objective. In both cases, the registration of the organization as a formal cooperative turned out to be important for acquiring access to service providers and markets, both necessary for succeeding in the objective of trading. Again, for successful continuation members who were alert to changes and emerging opportunities were key. All achievements of both cooperatives were a result of active problem-solving rather than following an a-priori designed plan. The management of Alito cooperative was for instance pragmatic in effectuating rules concerning side-selling and compromised for the sake of good relations with their farmers. In a similar way, the UDB loan was used in a pragmatic way. The UDB didn't set strict requirements of how to use the money, and the cooperative as well as individual farmers were creative in how to use it. In Mali similar practices took place; board members gained a percentage of the sesame they collected and the cooperative bought from members as well non-members to fulfil its contract obligations. The formal procedures and principles for cooperation were secondary to pragmatism, in order to achieve collective objectives.

Our observations correspond with the findings of Porter and Lyon (2006) in Ghana, were researchers identified a diversity of collective action arrangements in one village. Effectively this had nothing to do with formality and transparency. Even temporal organizations, such as cooperative labour groups and community road-maintenance groups could be successful in realizing their objective. The researchers criticized donors that imposed formalization and expected groups to exist for a substantial period as stable entities. In Ghana's traditional informal group's membership, focus, rules, and external alliances shifted rapidly in response to changing social, economic, and political conditions in a way which was not anticipated by donors. De Weerdt (2001) observed a similar dynamism and fluidity in collective action in Tanzania.

Using the concept of bricolage, we recognized that both organizations were impactful because of their ability to respond to changes and opportunities. Success in trading was not achieved by following a prescribed set of procedures or adopting an ideal type of organization structure. It is therefore impossible to foresee where organizations will emerge and in which form. The cases showed that the reactive problem-solving and response to opportunities is of more relevance to foster market linkages, then the formal structure and procedure, often required or imposed by external interventions.

Conclusion

We took a critical institutionalist perspective, an institutional bricolage approach, to understand how cooperatives become viable organizations to cater for sustainable market relations. Institutional bricolage departs from NIE in that it regards institutional formation as a socially embedded process rather than a deliberate and transparent managerial activity. To analyse our objective, we studied the functioning and development of two farmer cooperatives in Uganda and Mali. Using a NIE lens, one could claim the two cooperatives to be efficient arrangements to manage the transaction costs in their specific context. However, our case studies showed that there is more that explains their existence and viability. The bricolage approach encouraged us to specifically look at how the two organizations emerged, interacted with, and developed in their specific environment. This focus on emergence enabled us to see that in both cases the socio-historic context and specifically the organizational infrastructure existing turned out to be of great influence. A closer scrutiny of the internal operation of the cooperatives taught us the importance of informal relations, authority, and flexibility. Moreover, the bricolage approach encouraged us to study the agricultural and market environment allowing us to better understand the specificities of each cooperative. The ability to strategically navigate in a context was of crucial importance to successful collective action in both case studies.

Based on our findings we suggest development policy and practice to include a critical institutionalist approach when designing interventions aiming to enhance sustainable market access for small farmers. We recommend shifting attention to the ability of a cooperative to embed in a socio-historical shaped local reality, rather than to comply to an ideal-type organization, which is in line with recent research on institutional diagnostics (Schouten, Vink, & Vellema, 2018). Interestingly, both case studies also shed light on the role of support delivered by NGOs. Both cooperatives did not solely depend on development programmes but did make strategically use of services offered. The objectives of the collective were leading in the way the cooperatives engaged with these external services providers. This teaches us that for NGO's and development practitioners it is important to well understand the 'raison d'etre' of the groups they intend to support.

We realize that our study also has limitations. We took two successful cooperatives as a starting point for the use of a bricolage approach, while it might be interesting for further research to apply a bricolage approach to the study of cooperatives functioning less well. Scrutinizing the emergence and functioning of such cooperative might shed interesting light on why cooperatives are successful in certain situations but less so in others.

By focusing on how cooperatives use both old and new resources at hand to realize a collective objective, we shifted focus from the structure and its effects, towards the functioning of an organization. We conclude that, in these cases, achieving sustainability is not so much about putting the right institutions in place, as it is about the capacity of an organization to continuously navigate a certain context successfully, and make strategic use of both old and new resources. Cooperatives can provide sustainable access to markets only when they know how to 'bricole' i.e. when they are capable of forming and altering the way they organize farmers in such a way that they remain embedded within the local context, and at the same time comply with the requirements of an external market.

Notes

1. Brass (2007), for example, concludes that the failure of agrarian cooperatives in the 1970s in Peru is a consequence of the class distinctions within cooperatives. In their study of farm supply and grain marketing Feng, Friis, and Nilsson (2016) find that the smaller the size of membership, the more social capital cooperatives in Sweden have. However, Totin et al. (2014) find that the larger and more diverse group of producers is best organized. Another group factor of importance is accountable leadership (Kaganzi et al., 2009). Mude (2007) explains how corruption, political opportunism and mismanagement reduce efficiency of coffee cooperatives in Kenya. Trust among group members is considered as the basis for reciprocity and emergence of cooperative behaviour (Poteete & Ostrom, 2004; White & Runge, 1995). However, contrary results are also found, Berdegue (2002), for example, observed that close social relations prevented members of cooperatives in Chile from enforcing rules for fear of alienating friends and neighbors. Totin et al. (2014) emphasize the importance of clear sanctions. Cooperation should be economically feasible for farmers to invest effort and time (Mujawamariya, D'Haese, & Speelman, 2013). So called 'inadequate policies and disabling regulation' would undermine collective action (Chirwa et al., 2005; Hussi, Murphy, Lindberg, & Brenneman, 1993; Shiferaw, Obare, Muricho, & Silim, 2009; Stockbridge, Dorward, & Kydd, 2003). Lastly, staple crops are thought to be of too little added value to be commercialized through a farmer organization (Barham & Chitemi, 2009). Local markets are assumed to be easily accessible for individual farmers thus making group marketing unfeasible (Narrod et al., 2009; Poulton, Dorward, & Kydd, 2010). Thorp, Stewart, and Heyer (2005) find that poorer farmers are often excluded. Oftentimes cooperatives payment systems do not align with farmer's needs (Milford, 2014). Many studies refer to dissolution of groups due to internal tensions or ceasing of subsidies from donors. (Berdegue, 2002; Kasabov, 2016).
2. The group is called 'joint Christian' because the backgrounds of the founding members were both protestant and catholic. With 'joint' they want to demonstrate their close community ties, despite differences in religion.

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