

Strengthening Urban Farmer Organisations and their Marketing Capacities: The RUAF “From Seed to Table” programme

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Introduction

Many poor urban households are active in local production of food and related activities (e.g. food processing and street vending of food, compost making, supply of animal feed). Some of these poor urban and periurban producers are mainly interested in producing food for their own household consumption, to save some cash that would otherwise be used to buy food (poor urban households often spend more than 50 per cent of their cash income on food) and to earn some additional income from occasional sales of surplus production. Others produce vegetables, herbs, fruits, mushrooms, eggs, milk, ornamental plants, etc., for sale on the urban market as a main source of income for the household. A comparative advantage for the urban producers is their close proximity to the urban consumers. Research has shown that market-oriented, small-scale urban agriculture is often more profitable than small-scale agricultural production in rural areas and generates incomes above formal minimum wage level (Van Veenhuizen and Danso, 2007).

However, the urban producers who seek to produce for the market also encounter a number of constraints, including a low degree of organisation and low productivity. Most urban farmers are organised informally, if at all. This limits their capacity to improve their production system and hampers the development of concerted efforts to acquire a stronger position in the market, engage in direct marketing to urban consumers and/or undertake processing activities, adding value to their primary products. It also limits the representation of their interests in decision making at various levels.

Productivity in small-scale (intra- and peri-) urban production is generally low. This is partly because urban agriculture has for a long time been seen in most cities as an unacceptable form of urban land use and its importance for poverty reduction, food security, waste recycling and sustainable urban development has gone unnoticed. Consequently security of land use for urban agriculture is often low (making producers unwilling to invest in the land) and agriculture research and extension organisations and other service providers have paid little attention to urban agriculture. Due to the historical lack of recognition for urban agriculture by national and city authorities, appropriate technologies for



Just-harvested good-quality fresh carrots, Magadi
Photo: IWMI South East Asia

the specific conditions of urban agriculture have been slow to develop and urban producers still have very limited access to agricultural information, credit and infrastructure.

The RUAF “From Seed to Table” programme

Against this background, the RUAF Foundation² initiated the “From Seed to Table” programme (RUAF-FStT), which helps groups of poor urban producers organise themselves, analyse market opportunities, improve their production systems and develop short marketing chains for selected products through retailers or directly to urban consumers.

RUAF-FStT builds on the results of the RUAF “Cities Farming for the Future” Programme (RUAF-CFF), which was implemented from 2005 to 2008. During those years RUAF Foundation partners supported local governments, urban farmer groups, NGOs, universities and other stakeholders in 20 cities of 17 developing countries in multi-stakeholder situation analysis and strategic planning on urban agriculture. These processes have led in many of these cities to the legalisation of urban agriculture and its incorporation in local development policies and the programmes of local organisations³.

In these same cities, and as part of the new policies and action plans, the RUAF “From Seed to Table” programme cooperates with local development NGOs to:

- strengthen the organisation of urban farmer groups and

- enhance their capacities;
- formulate and implement innovative “From Seed to Table” projects in a participatory way (e.g. projects that will innovate the farming systems of the urban producers and develop joint processing and marketing activities based on a market analysis and participatory business planning);
- enhance urban producers’ access to credit and financing.

Starting points: farmer-led learning and action

Reducing poverty through micro-enterprise development, while maintaining nutrition

The FStT projects target low-income urban households involved in some kind of agricultural production that want to engage more intensively in market-oriented production as a means of self-employment and income raising, and that meet the minimal conditions for commercial farming (e.g. secure access to land and water). Although the FStT projects enhance the marketing and income-generating capacity of the urban producers, this should not lead to deterioration of household food security and nutrition. These aspects are thus given due attention in FStT projects.



Pig-raising project Agrosilves in Belo Horizonte, Brazil
Photo: IPES

Enhancing farmer innovation capacity, experiential learning

Given the dynamic and challenging urban conditions, FStT support to the urban producers focuses strongly on building their problem-solving capacities (problem analysis, identification and testing of alternative solutions) as well as their capacity to identify and utilise new market opportunities (analysis of specific requirements of various market segments, adaptation of crop choice and production practices, certification and trademarks, establishing strategic alliances, etc.). In the FStT programme, farmers participate directly in market analysis and business planning in order to develop the required analytical and innovative capacities. Market analysis, design of marketing strategies and business planning are usually seen as very complicated and highly technical tasks that can only be done by specialised organisations and consultants. In FStT we seek to demystify

them, offering a method for market analysis and project design that is understandable to the producers and that involves them in all stages of the process.

The FStT programme also stimulates a hands-on capacity development process in which learning, planning and doing are closely interwoven. The main instruments used are: a. participation of farmer representatives in the local team that is coordinating the project activities, b. implementation of “urban producer field schools” (based on the same principles as the “farmer field schools” methodology⁴ but simplified and adapted to the specific conditions of the urban producers) and c. organisation of farmers in functional committees at group and association level and their direct involvement in and responsibility for the development and management of their own businesses from the very start.

Interactive

This does not mean that the farmers have to do everything by themselves. The interaction with “knowledgeable outsiders” is crucial in FStT in order to stimulate the analysis and planning process and to inform the producers about aspects they have little knowledge about. But the knowledgeable outsiders take part as *advisors* who help the producers make well-informed decisions, not tell them what they should do. Moreover, the knowledgeable outsiders are not only production and marketing specialists, but also farmers who already have experience with producing, processing and marketing of a certain product, managers of small-scale agro-enterprises, traders, managers of supermarkets and other people with knowledge and experience of relevance for the intended business.

Gender

FStT projects encourage women producers to actively take part in all activities. This will help them make full use of their experience and knowledge, ensure that their interests are taken into account, strengthen them in their roles as food producers and marketers and enable them to participate in leading roles in the farmer organisation and its activities. To that effect, special emphasis is given to enhancing the leadership skills of women producers.

The process

Capacity development of local partner organisations and work planning

To initiate the programme in January 2009, NGOs were selected in each of the RUAF partner cities. Most had already participated in the local Multi-stakeholder Forum on Urban Agriculture and Food Security previously established in that city with support of RUAF-CFF. Various staff of these NGOs were brought together in two planning/training workshops for each of the seven regions in which RUAF operates. The first workshop focused on the FStT approach, the selection and strengthening of urban producer groups and the situation analysis. The second workshop was held three months later, once the results of the situation analysis were available, and focused on business planning, project design and the organisation and implementation of urban producer field schools.



Participatory diagnosis and market analysis, Magadi
Photo: IWMI South East Asia

Selection of urban producer groups and initial training of local team members

On the basis of the established criteria the local partner NGOs selected urban producer groups and organised meetings to inform the producers on the formulation and implementation of the intended project. The interested producers selected the male and female producers (often two of each) who would participate in the local team to coordinate preparation of the project together with the NGO staff. The NGO staff organised a short introductory training for these producers on the situation analysis.

Situation analysis

The situation analysis included:

- A rapid and participatory review of the actual production systems of the selected urban producer groups (main products, production and marketing practices, gender aspects, access to land and other resources and security of use, main constraints).
- An analysis of the main strengths and weaknesses of the selected urban producer groups with a view to the challenges ahead.
- A rapid and participatory market analysis. The RUAF staff developed a three-step methodology for the participatory market analysis⁵. First, available secondary information was analysed and key informants were interviewed in order to identify a limited number of “promising options”: products that are or can be produced by the urban producers and that have interesting market prospects (e.g. production and packaging of organically grown green onions for sale under the group’s own brand to high-end restaurants and hotels). Second, more information on each of these options was collected to enable the producers to make the final selection of the “most promising option” (often shortened to MoPO⁶). The selection was done by making a group assessment of a number of pre-established criteria (production costs, market price, level and stability of market demand, competitiveness, availability

of required licenses and support services, value adding potential, level of investment needed, etc.). For the selected MoPO, additional information was collected that would be needed for the development of a business plan.

Business planning

The local team developed a business plan for the MoPO selected by the producers. The business plan included:

- The business idea: what is the business the producers want to develop? This includes the selected product and related marketing concept: e.g. selling cut, mixed, washed and packaged green vegetables for stir-fries, soups and curries.
- The marketing strategy: to whom and how do the producers plan to sell this product?
- The operational plan: the activities through which the producers will realise the production, processing and commercialisation of the MoPO, including planning and administrative activities.
- The financial plan: the calculation of costs and benefits of the production at the individual and group level; investment needs and financing strategy.
- The partner strategy: with which other actors will the producers (need to) cooperate in order to get the business

Production and Processing in Belo Horizonte
Photo: IPES





Flyer to promote upcoming urban producer field school meeting
Photo: IPES

running (licenses, technical and management support services, transport, bank services, etc.)

Urban producer field schools

The main instrument used to get the businesses started was the urban producer field school (UPFS). Starting from the business plan, the most important technical and organisational changes that would have to be realised in order to get the business up and running were identified. Subsequently the required knowledge and skills related to these technical and organisational changes were spelt out and structured in learning modules. The technical changes could have to do with the production of the MoPO as well as the processing/packaging and marketing of the product (e.g. how to assess and grade the quality of the product as delivered by the individual producers or subgroups to the association). The organisational changes would relate to operation, management and administration of all steps in the process of producing and marketing the MoPO.

Each of these modules/sessions were implemented in the weeks before the related activities had to be implemented in practice (e.g. a session on how to organise and operate the buying and distribution of newly required inputs a few weeks before this had to start functioning, a session on production practices in the weeks before the new crop variety had to be planted, or a session on the technical and organisational aspects of the collection, washing and packaging a few weeks before the harvest was initiated). In most UPFS sessions both technical and organisational aspects were discussed and practiced. All sessions started with a review of the activities implemented so far, and possible solutions to problems that had arisen were discussed. All sessions ended with planning the activities to be performed by the producer groups in the coming weeks. In this way the UPFS was not only a learning platform but also a vehicle for periodic work planning and evaluation with the producers.

Each session was prepared and guided by a facilitator from the local project team together with one or more invited “experts” (experienced farmers, technical specialists of the extensions service, university staff, managers of small-scale enterprises, etc.). Sessions were implemented as much as possible in locations where the producers could observe and/or practice themselves what was discussed in that session (in the field, in a packaging shed, etc.).

In most cases the UPFS was repeated during more than one production cycle, focusing the new sessions on gaps in knowledge and skills and technical or organisational problems identified during the first cycle.

Some examples of FStT projects being implemented

The FStT programme started in January 2009 and by September/October in most of the RUAF partner cities, local producer groups (each involving between 50 and 150 urban producers) had formulated a business plan and the FStT projects were ready to be implemented. Since then a variety of farmer-led agro-businesses have started focussing on cherry tomatoes, mushrooms, baby potatoes, strawberries, dressed chickens, cabbage, carrots, green chillies, packages of mixed vegetables, boxes with a variety of vegetables, dried herbs, spring onions, eggs, piglets and other products.

In the limited space available we can present below only three of the 18 projects that are currently being implemented. A fourth case (community gardeners in Cape Town marketing their organic vegetables through a box scheme) is presented in the following article.

Diversifying into organic mushrooms, Beijing

In Huairou (a periurban village of Beijing, China) RUAF Foundation cooperates with the Beijing Agricultural Bureau and the Huairou Vegetables Cooperative, which had been growing grapes for many years but wanted to diversify. Based on the market study, the cooperative decided to also start growing mushrooms. With help from the Agricultural University of Beijing, UPFS training was organised to familiarise a core group of producers with the ins and outs of mushroom growing; and the university also supplied the quality seed. The mushrooms are now grown in the same semi-permanent plastic tunnels in which the grapes used to grow. One mushroom cluster was established at the original Huairou cooperative (50 members) and two other clusters were established in two neighbouring villages (20 members each). The Huairou cooperative trained the producers, sells the inputs (bags/mushroom seed) and buys the produce (through a type of contract farming/outgrowing system). Huairou Cooperative also linked up with a marketing coop-



Organic mushrooms in Beijing
Photo: IGSNRR



Integrated Pest Management training on chili cultivation

Photo: IWMI South East Asia

erative to sell the top-quality mushrooms to supermarkets. The second-grade produce is sold locally.

The main challenges include: a. quality management (the production practices still need further upgrading), b. quality control (the produce delivered to the Huairou Cooperative does not always meet the required standards but effective monitoring systems are not yet in place).

Spring onions under the olive trees in Amman

RUAF Foundation is cooperating with the Urban Agriculture Bureau of the Municipality of Greater Amman and the Iraq El Amir Women Cooperative Association located in a periurban area of Amman. After performing the market analysis the Cooperative decided to start organic production of green spring onions under their olive trees, to package them in small bunches and sell the packages under their own brand name. Over eighty families are part of the business, 75 per cent of which is represented by women. An Urban Producer Field School was organised with assistance from various university staff and a farmer-entrepreneur with wide experience in production and marketing of spring onions. The UPFS sessions included various cultivation aspects (seeding under plastic, fertility management, pest and disease management, etc.) as well as organisational aspects of the new business (administration, buying/distribution of inputs, collection, grading, packaging and marketing of the produce).

The group designed its own label based on a “Responsible Production Protocol” that guarantees that a. the produce comes from a radius of 10 km or less from the centre of Amman, b. ecologically sound production practices were applied, c. its production did not involve any abusive women or child labour, and d. 75 per cent or more of the price paid by the consumers flows back to the producers. The first spring onion harvest was a big success. Produce was sold to high-end restaurants and hotels at JD1.2 to 1.5 (JD1 = €1) per bunch of onions (around 1 kg), while predictions made in the business plan were for JD0.7 to 1.0.

The main challenges here relate to the maintenance of soil fertility and preventing incidence of diseases and pests in the onions. At present the best crop rotation options are being evaluated (with regard to technical and marketing aspects) including lettuce, basil and coriander. In a new round of UPFS sessions the group will be trained in the cultivation and marketing of these additional crops. The cultivation of spring onions will in future be concentrated in those months of the year during which demand and prices are highest.



Spring onions are weighed and packed in plastic bags or sold in bulk in large bunches

Photo: Salwa Tohme Tawk

Bottling of fruit juice in Freetown

In Freetown, RUAF-FStT is being implemented in cooperation with the NGO COOPI and the National Association of Farmers (NAFSL). One of the participating producer groups is Lelima Women's Group in the popular Kissyeastern area of Freetown, a 30-strong self-help women's group. The group considered several products and innovations during the inventory of options and tested them during the market scan. While initially very keen on yoghurt, during the process of comparing market demand, prices and possible returns and profits they chose bottled fruit juice as their MoPO. The UPFS took the group through technical training in hygiene, safe food handling, pasteurisation and bottling as well as training in

organisational strengthening, business management and marketing.

The group set up a basic processing and bottling facility. They use recycled sterilised glass to bottle fruit juice (currently mainly mango). An adapted non-commercial blender is used to prepare the juice while pasteurisation is done in a large local pot on a screened fire; and the juice is bottled and capped while hot. A number of testing sessions with customers in bars and restaurants were organised to compare three different mixes before the final recipe was chosen.

In May 2010 SALONE Mango Juice “proudly produced in Sierra Leone” became the first locally bottled fruit juice in Sierra Leone. The group is able to offer the juice commercially at a trade and retail price lower than imported juice.

The main challenge is that the market demand is considerably larger than the production capacity. The group is now moving into organising year-round production of juice from several seasonal fruits. The group currently targets the Freetown capital market, but investors have shown an interest in sub-contracting the group to produce and bottle juice, which would then be transported cold to and sold in the provinces. However, the group still lacks the required business experience to negotiate with seasoned investors and the sudden expansion of their business has already put considerable strain on group dynamics and cohesion. These aspects will need to be carefully monitored and addressed to prevent the group from falling victim to its own success.

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FSTT training in Accra

Photo: René van Veenhuizen



Group saving and internal lending, Magadi - organisational strengthening

Photo: IWMI South East Asia

Note

- 1) I thank my colleagues René van Veenhuizen, Marielle Dubbeling, Marco Serena and Femke Hoekstra for their contributions to this article
- 2) RUAF Foundation is an international network of one Northern and seven Southern-based development organisations collaborating since 2000 to support the development of pro-poor urban agriculture in developing countries. DGIS, the Netherlands, and IDRC, Canada, are the main funding agencies of the RUAF Foundation programmes.
- 3) A book on the experiences gained in the RUAF-CFF programme with the multi-stakeholder approach to policy development and action planning in urban agriculture has recently been published (Dubbeling et al., 2010).
- 4) Ample information available at: www.farmerfieldschool.info
- 5) In this process we used a number of manuals on participatory market analysis that had been published recently or were available in draft version, e.g. Joss et al. 2002; Lundy et al. 2004; Ostertag 2004; Dixie 2005; Tracey-White 2005; Bernet et al. 2006 (in earlier Spanish draft version)
- 6) In several cases the selected MoPO was not one product but a combination of products e.g. “small packages of washed and cut mixed green vegetables for wokking, soups and curries” or “boxes with sorted fresh seasonal vegetables for home delivery”

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