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Regional Interventions to Improve Cross- Border Trade and Food Security in West Africa

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1. Summary

Growth in cross-border trade in agricultural products can have direct benefits for food security and gender equality in West Africa. Practiced by both small-scale and more-established traders, cross-border trade in basic foodstuffs creates employment in the field and in the market, boosting rural incomes and rationalizing food distribution across a broader geographic area.

The paper discusses several areas of opportunity for USAID-supported interventions to encourage cross-border trade in agricultural products. Opportunities exist for activities related to production and processing, market information, and trade logistics. Twelve detailed potential interventions are recommended and briefly outlined. These involve reinforcing production and processing for the market, better market information; and trade facilitation.

Given USAID's stated objectives for AICHA, the top investment priority should be a program to improve the quality of shea butter produced and marketed by poor, rural women in the main shea-growing belt in Mali, Burkina Faso, and elsewhere. Specific interventions for USAID to support in this and other areas might include:

Reinforcing Production and Processing for the Market

1. Establish standards for shea butter in the principal markets in Mali and Burkina Faso in order to improve marketability.
2. Draw upon research by TECHNOSERVE in Ghana to reduce the odor of shea in shea butter in order to upgrade the quality of shea butter for use in cosmetics.
3. Upgrade the quality of rice hulling, using known technology, sort the milled rice for better quality, and develop a label for locally-grown (Malian) rice, which is often preferred in the region, to create cross-border markets.
4. Eliminate restrictions on imports of ingredients for animal feeds (e.g., maize, fish meal) and encourage their importation for the feed industry when prices of these ingredients on the local market are high.

Better Market Information

5. Expand the collection and dissemination of market information for staple foodstuffs and other products, which are critical to the food security of the poor.
6. Install electronic billboards in market towns to report the price and availability of basic foodstuffs in local and regional markets, including vulnerable areas identified by FEWS-NET or other food security monitoring systems.

Trade Facilitation

7. Disseminate and publicize information on the costs of delays and bribes, as well as who is causing these costs to be incurred, at various barriers along major transportation corridors.
8. Complement World Bank efforts to establish customs posts in close proximity opposite each other along the frontiers to facilitate cooperation and assure no cheating.
9. Continue to examine how to develop a system of warehouse receipts that can be used as collateral for bank loans to finance trade.
10. Develop an ECOWAS badge for small-scale cross-border women traders in order to identify these traders as knowledgeable regarding the rules and regulations applying to trade within ECOWAS.
11. Produce informational tools (cards, pamphlets) on the free movement of basic foodstuffs within ECOWAS.

12. Encourage the creation of community-based economic interest groups among women traders, giving them the right to fill out customs declarations and lobby for improvements linked to trade.

2. Opportunities for Increasing Cross-Border Trade in West Africa

Facilitating cross-border trade in all products and services will help promote food security through an overall increase in economic activity. Increasing volumes of cross-border trade in agriculture and food products, in particular, will help rationalize distribution of food across West Africa and provide economic opportunities for women and smallholder farmers. Small-scale cross-border trade in basic foodstuffs is largely free of customs duty under the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme. As pointed out recently at a USAID-supported activity on regional integration, “trading food commodities to achieve greater regional food security enhances the welfare of both sending and receiving countries” (Tyner 2002, p.11). Unfortunately, not all customs officials and other authorities recognize this principle. Female traders cite government inspections and police/customs roadblocks as the two most important obstacles to cross-border trade (Morris and Dadson 2000, p.4).

Women make up a large share of those participating in small-scale cross-border trade. Women cross-border traders now exist at all scales of operation, from carrying individual loads to owning a number of trucks.¹ Support for women traders has proven to be a way to help new, female-headed small businesses to grow (Morris and Saul, 2000, p.8). In West Africa, women economic operators are often able to organize themselves more coherently in groups and associations than male counterparts. In the interest of promoting food security through increasing cross-border agricultural trade, trade facilitation measures could increase “border tolerance” for female traders carrying basic foodstuffs across regional borders and help these businesses grow.

The goals of AICHA are to “rapidly and sustainably increase agricultural growth and rural incomes in sub-Saharan Africa.” Facilitating cross-border trade in basic foodstuffs, at both formal and informal levels, can contribute significantly to deepening the integration of regional markets and smoothing out food deficits in vulnerable areas.

Given the small-scale nature of production and marketing within West Africa, the potential USAID interventions discussed below would reinforce the smallholder-oriented agricultural growth strategy of AICHA. The principal measures involve: reinforcing production and processing for the market, better market information; and trade facilitation.

2.1 Reinforcing Production and Processing for the Market

2.1.1 Raising the Quality of Shea Butter

Shea butter is a value-added product with outstanding export growth potential for West Africa, given the region’s predominance in the number of trees worldwide. A proven export market exists for shea

¹ While the use of a truck is usually the most common mode for cross-border trading, according to one estimate for Ghana, substantial shares of trade occur via headloading (27%) and either a donkey cart or pushcart (19%) (Morris and Dadson, p.16).

nuts, but as a result of the lack of quality standards, West African shea butter is considered to be a sub-standard product on the international market (CAE/Chemonics, Vol. III, p. 16). Given the direct impact of the shea nut sector on the rural poor, building local capacity to meet export demand for this unique product should be the highest priority in a regional strategy for boosting cross-border trade.

The main export markets for shea nuts are the EU and Japan, with annual imports of about 20,000 tons at a value of 2 billion CFA francs (equal to about \$3.3 million). The recent change in European Union rules to permit the use of up to 5 percent shea butter in the production of chocolate provides an excellent opportunity to expand shea production. Demand for shea butter is also strong and growing in the cosmetic industry.

The AIRD sectoral contribution to the Integrated Framework analysis for Mali² identified lack of consistent quality as the main hindrance to greater exports of shea butter made by small-scale producers. The quality of butter from Mali, the largest producer, is not as good as that from other neighboring countries such as Burkina Faso (Abt Associates, 2002, Vol. II, p. 75). Complicating the search for a solution is the range of processing methods presently in use across the main shea tree belt in Mali, Burkina Faso, and elsewhere, with no one technique standing out as necessarily better than the others.

Shea butter is produced almost exclusively by women in rural villages. About 4-5 million women in West Africa are involved in the collection, processing, and marketing of shea nuts and butter, providing about 80 percent of their incomes. These women must be the target of capacity-building efforts to encourage them to produce shea butter of more consistent, higher quality. Therefore, explaining the demands of the end-users to the women harvesting, storing, and processing the shea nuts could rapidly lead to better quality in the market, improving sales of both shea nuts and shea butter in local markets, and attracting the interest of traders serving international market demand.

Action: Develop **marketing standards for shea butter** in Burkina Faso and Mali, where most of the shea butter markets are located, and disseminate those standards to the women in the villages. A small number of local female trainers could be employed to train the village associations in the proper techniques for drying shea nuts and producing shea butter of a consistent quality.

2.1.2 Reducing the Shea Odor of Shea Butter

An important use of shea butter is in the fabrication of cosmetics. The demand for butter for this purpose has increased very substantially in recent years. One of the drawbacks limiting the use of shea butter in the manufacture of cosmetics has been the shea odor that is introduced by the shea butter. TECHNOSERVE in Ghana has worked on this problem and has come up with a technique for eliminating the shea odor. This technique should be transferred to other countries in West Africa, where potential production for the market is greater than in Ghana.

Action: **Draw upon research** by TECHNOSERVE in a Ghana **to reduce the odor of shea** in shea butter in Burkina Faso and Mali in order to upgrade the quality of shea butter for use in cosmetics.

² Stryker, Plunkett and Coulibaly (2002).

2.1.3 Creating Cross-Border Markets for Malian Rice

West Africa is one of the largest rice-importing regions of the world, importing nearly 4 million tons worth more than a billion dollars per year. At the same time, Mali has a unique asset in the irrigation potential of the Office du Niger, which could lead to substantially different trading patterns for rice within the region over the next 10-20 years (Barry et al 1998; Abt Associates 2002). Mali is on the cusp of becoming a net exporter of rice and could provide substantial quantities of rice to other countries within West Africa, competing in northern regions of the coastal countries and even in coastal cities. This would benefit both producers, many of whom are very small scale, and consumers, who even at very low levels of income consume substantial quantities of rice. This would make a substantial contribution to improved food security.

One problem is that the quality of Malian rice is often considered by consumers in the coastal countries to be low in relation to that of imported rice. This is the case, for example, in Cote d'Ivoire, where consumers prefer a less broken rice than is produced and consumed in Mali. This problem can be alleviated through better milling and by sorting, a need highlighted by the Mali Trade Team (Abt Associates 2002, Annex C, p.7). The Centre Agro-Entreprise has been working on this for several years with good results. However, in order to advertise the rice as of superior quality, there is a need to package and label the rice so that it can be distinguished from other rice in the market.³

Action: **Upgrade the quality of rice hulling**, using known technology, **sort the milled rice for better quality**, and **develop a label** for locally-grown (Malian) rice to be sold in the markets of neighboring countries. Consider development of a rice trading warehouse in Sikasso to attract regional traders.

2.1.4 Eliminate Restrictions on Imports of Feed Ingredients

In many regions of West Africa, livestock production contributes an important part to the national economy. Throughout the region, there are established trading patterns in both live animals and meat. In West Africa, expanding livestock production has usually meant greater numbers of animals under traditional extensive grazing patterns. However, these traditional resources are limited, and future expansion of production based on the use of these resources is not likely to be very great. Although some further expansion may occur using crop residues and by-products, this avenue, too, is highly constrained. Any attempt to go past these limits using traditional production techniques risks overgrazing and severe environmental damage.

The market for livestock products in West Africa continues to expand as a result of rising incomes and growing urbanization. The ability of the interior countries to meet this demand without destroying the environment depends on the intensification of livestock production through use of cultivated forage and livestock feeds, including poultry as well as supplementary ruminant feed. There are a number of feed producers in Mali, Burkina Faso, and the other interior countries, but production is limited by the availability and price of the ingredients going into these feeds. As an example, feed producers are currently having a difficult time supplying feeds at reasonable prices because of the high cost of maize and fish meal. These ingredients could be imported at lower cost

³ This is consistent with the findings of the Mali Trade Team that USAID can best promote export development through interventions in "downstream performance" (Abt Associates 2002, Annex C, p.6).

than their prices on the local market, but this practice is not encouraged because of the belief that the West Africa countries should be able to produce locally all of its requirements. There is a major need to promote market and trade liberalization in these products in order to promote feed production. This will also help to stabilize the prices of maize and other feed ingredients, which will further encourage their production.

Action: **Eliminate restrictions on imports of ingredients for animal feeds** (e.g., maize, fish meal) and encourage their importation for the feed industry when prices of these ingredients on the local market are high.

2.2 Better Market Information

2.2.1 Nontradables

A program for greater market information on nontradable staples would encourage more efficient trading and investment in market infrastructure for the processing and distribution of basic foods such as yams, cassava, potatoes, cowpeas, dry beans, shea nuts, fish, and fruits and vegetables. Further, by gaining improved access to information about what food is available in local markets and at what cost, the poor and food-insecure of the region could make better spending decisions within their limited means. If combined with basic nutrition information, overall food security could be reinforced.

While some form of market information system exists in most countries of West Africa, the market price and availability observations of these systems are not easily available to the public, especially small-scale women traders. Furthermore, the range of products is limited primarily to cereals and livestock. Providing up-to-date information in public marketplaces on observed prices for basic foodstuffs in local and nearby regional markets will allow traders of all sizes to better gauge the profitability of transporting foodstuffs to neighboring regions.

Action: Collect and disseminate **expanded market information on nontradables**, which are the basic foodstuffs of the poor. As these products attract no customs duty, there exists the potential for greatly increasing the volume of food products traded across borders within West Africa to meet shortages in food-deficit areas. As much of this trade is conducted by women traders, both small-scale and more-established, expanding trade in basic foodstuffs could hold significant benefits for household incomes and nutrition.

2.2.2 Vulnerable Areas

After widespread hunger during the droughts of the early 1980s, West Africa, with the help of the donor community, has made impressive progress on improving food security and combating drought at the regional level. Among West African institutions, CILLS has primary responsibility for matters related to food security and agriculture (Stryker 2002, p.7). In order to promote regional trade in agriculture and food products, national officials and stakeholders have been organized into National Coordinating Committees (*Cadres Nationaux de Concertation*), permitting sectoral interests to be expressed at the regional level.

The USAID-supported Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS-NET) and other efforts have greatly improved the analysis of food insecurity and vulnerability within the region. One benefit is a

greater capacity to coordinate the interaction of food aid shipments with local commercial market trade in basic grains and other foodstuffs. In vulnerable areas, it can be expected that the price of basic foodstuffs will be higher than elsewhere. Reporting the market prices of basic foodstuffs and other information in vulnerable areas within the region-wide information system should encourage regional traders to take advantage of the opportunities provided in those food-deficit areas. One mechanism might be to install electronic billboards in market towns to report price and availability of basic foodstuffs throughout the region and especially in vulnerable areas identified by FEWS-NET and other providers of vulnerability analysis.

Action: To reduce the vulnerability of the poor, provide electronic billboards showing local and regional market information on a daily basis.⁴ The billboards could also be employed to provide basic nutritional education and advertise to mothers where they can get help feeding and inoculating their babies. Link with FEWS-NET and other providers of vulnerability analysis to provide market information on prices in food-deficit markets within the West Africa region.

2.3 Trade Facilitation

2.3.1 Administrative Roadblocks

Government inspections and police/customs roadblocks are often cited as the two most important obstacles to cross-border trade. This has been a persistent and intractable problem after more than a decade. The system of compensation for the police, customs, and gendarmes (known by the French acronym, PDG) officials involved in trade must be reformed, since the unauthorized bribes are the means for these officials to assure their own livelihood security. The police and gendarmes, in particular, often go unpaid for months on end, and must live from what they can reasonably get along the roadways. National Customs services are said to be the least problematic of the PCG, given that they are the best-paid, have the best working conditions, and are transferred with regularity on a scheduled basis (Morris and Dadson 2000, p.24). However, even here there exist multiple problems, some of them emanating from recent changes in customs taxes and procedures as a result of the establishment of a customs union within the West African Economic and Monetary Union and its extension to other ECOWAS countries.

Over the past few years, there has been an effort to establish observatories for documenting unauthorized taxes by PDG officials. The intent of the observatories is to provide evidence of the abuses that regularly take place to national and local officials, as well as to the general public, in an effort to foster political will based on the demonstrated unnecessary costs of regional trade. For example, the numerous stops to check papers increase transaction costs due to long delays and the need to stop dozens of times en route to show papers and pay a small fee. It is estimated that traders often lose 8 or more days in wages per year in delays and in paying the requisite bribes and unauthorized fees (Morris and Dadson 2000, p.14).

It is clear that the PDG system can only change if national authorities at all levels demonstrate political will that is backed by widespread public awareness. This will require both increasing the

⁴ Given the unreliability of electricity supply, a simple backup such as a car battery is advisable. One of the downsides of installing an electronic billboard in market towns would be the risk of theft. An alternative method would be expanded dissemination of food price information within regional markets via radio.

compensation of PDG officials and focusing on greater transparency and publicity regarding the actual costs of doing business en route. The information collected by the observatories is useful market information that should be incorporated as part of the region-wide market information system and very widely disseminated. This requires effective use of the press, radio, and television. There may also be a role for voluntary reporting of the costs of doing business by truckers and traders in public marketplaces along cross-border routes.

One other practical trade facilitation measure to reduce administrative roadblocks would be cooperation in the construction of joint border posts. As the World Bank is also considering investing in joint border posts along key transportation corridors of West Africa, there may be ways for USAID to support the World Bank's process or to invest in complementary facilities. There would be many benefits to the establishment and operation of joint border posts, including reduced opportunities for corruption, faster inspection of goods, improved customs cooperation, more uniform application of customs tariffs, and more reliable trade statistics.

Action: Support establishing **joint customs posts** opposite each other along the frontiers to facilitate customs cooperation and reduce the possibility for cheating. This effort should be coordinated with the World Bank, which is preparing to support joint customs posts along certain key transportation corridors (Abidjan-Ouagadougou-Niamey, Abidjan-Bamako-Ouagadougou).

Action: Produce and distribute **informational tools** (laminated cards, pamphlets) on the free movement of basic foodstuffs within ECOWAS to increase the leverage of cross-border traders in dealing with police, customs, and gendarmes. Dissemination efforts could include training-the-trainers activities led by community-based groups, such as women's groups.

Action: Develop an **ECOWAS badge for women traders** belonging to community- or producer-based associations who have undergone some basic training in the rules related to cross-border trading in duty-free commodities. Such a badge could facilitate border procedures, as women on foot or on public transport could pass more easily.⁵ The badge, which could be awarded based on standards developed by women traders themselves, would contribute to the greater professionalism of the main small-scale traders.

Action: Disseminate **market information on illicit costs of doing business along** key regional routes, such as between Sikasso-Abidjan and Ouagadougou-Accra. One method could be to provide a facility at public marketplaces for truckers and traders to regularly record their actual costs of doing business along key cross-border routes and provide this information through public billboards or radio. These efforts should be led, to the extent possible, by local private sector groups. Information from already-existing observatories can be integrated with new information reported voluntarily by truckers and shippers. The information should be posted on billboards in market towns and available on the region-wide agricultural market information system (SIM), coordinated by CILLS.

⁵ Such a badge could include an embedded hologram for storing information and could conceivably represent a means of collecting VAT from small-scale traders.

Action: **Move to increase compensation of PDG officials** to the point that they do not require bribes as a means of supplementing their incomes to bring them up to a satisfactory living standard.

Action: **Link bilateral and regional assistance** from USAID to measured improvement in reducing the number of customs checkpoints and administrative hassles.

Action: **Link eligibility under AGOA** to measured improvement in reducing the number of customs checkpoints and administrative hassles.

Action: **Link eligibility to the Millennium Challenge Fund** to measured improvement in reducing the number of customs checkpoints and administrative hassles

2.3.2 Warehouse Receipts

Warehouse receipts are designed to increase liquidity in commodity markets, allowing producers as well as traders to consolidate marketable and exportable commodity volumes (Mandl and Mukhebi 2002, p.24). Under a collateralized warehouse receipts system, producers and traders can convert inventories of agricultural products into readily tradable products. Warehouse receipts are negotiable instruments that can be traded sold, swapped, and used as collateral to support borrowing (La Grange 2002, p.4).

Often, the issuing of tradable warehouse receipts is linked to inventory financing. Such schemes have been undertaken elsewhere in Africa, notably South Africa, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Zambia, and Ethiopia (Mandl and Mukhebi 2002, p.19).

A recent feasibility study on establishment of a warehouse receipts program in three countries (Guinea, Mali, and Senegal) recommended undertaking such a program in the latter two countries (La Grange 2002). Significant work remains to be done to determine the feasibility of actually implementing such a scheme. The study cites weak legal systems as the principal constraint to developing a warehouse receipts program, with the evident need to create a regulatory environment to reduce the risks to banks and traders. Other needs include: a system for certification of warehouses in rural areas; quality standards for the specific products; oversight of the scheme; and campaigns to familiarize farmers and traders with the system. A successful warehouse receipts system would contribute to the upgrading of the consistency and quality of basic grains and other commodities. Working with associations of smallholders or rural cooperatives could be one method for attracting large numbers of participants.

Warehouse receipts programs are established for specific commodities with transparent quality requirements. In Mali, stakeholders are reportedly interested in warehouse receipt programs for maize, sorghum, millet, rice, livestock, dried fish, and vegetables, all products that are critical to the food security of the poor. In Senegal, where La Grange suggests a warehouse receipt program might have the best chance for success, the products to be considered include groundnuts, certified groundnut seed, maize, rice, sorghum, and dried fish. For Guinea, the likely commodities would include coffee, cashew nuts, millet, and rice (La Grange 2002, pp.9-14).

One area of risk for a warehouse receipts program is the lack of interested guarantors. It may be possible to involve one of the three regional guarantee funds, backed by multilateral organizations. These include the “Fonds africain de garantie et de coopération économique” in Benin, the “Fonds de solidarité africaine” in Niger and the “Fonds de garantie des investissements privés en Afrique de l’Ouest” based in Togo.

The issue of available options for greater trade financing at the regional level deserves more in-depth study, perhaps within the context of the USAID-supported Trade Hub Activity.

Action: Continue to support the conceptual planning and implementation for establishment of a system of **warehouse receipts** in order to increase liquidity and improve trade financing. Based on the consultant’s recent study, the initial pilot countries should be in Mali and Senegal. While many details remain to be examined to determine the feasibility of such a scheme, a warehouse receipts program would encourage aggregation of local production into sufficient volumes for export to regional markets. Training in the use of the new instruments could be directed at associations of commercial traders, including women’s groups. The most immediate action for USAID to take is more-detailed work regarding the potential planning and implementation of such a scheme, perhaps based on the model legislation developed by the IMF’s Common Fund for Commodities.

The terms of reference for a design-and-implement project could include:

- Work with associations of smallholders or rural cooperatives on aggregation techniques for marketable -sized loads.
- Work with the three regional guarantee funds on a joint mechanism for guaranteeing warehouse receipts that could be used throughout ECOWAS.
- Develop rural collateral management companies.
- Effect changes to the national regulatory environments to reduce the risks to banks and traders.
- Develop a system for certification of warehouses in rural areas.
- Develop quality standards for the specific products to be included in each country.
- Launch campaign to familiarize farmers and traders with the system

2.3.3 Economic Interest Groupings for Women

“Trans-border trade is typically handled by traders with fewer assets than overseas traders. More women are involved in trans-border trade than overseas trade; and thus its economic impact is felt by middle and lower-income households in Ghana” (Morris and Dadson 2000, p.22).

In many West African countries, licensed freight forwarders hold a rather privileged position in the infrastructure of trade, for example, by holding the authority to fill out customs declarations. Most freight forwarders do not have large fleets of vehicles. The dangerously overloaded trucks one sees creating potholes in the roads of West Africa are operated by independent owner-operators or by drivers working for someone wealthy enough to own a truck. Under this fragmented system lacking vertical coordination, the freight forwarders cannot be held accountable for the poor condition of the

trucks. In some countries, the truckers' unions do little to serve the interests of the industry, representing simply one more group to pay off to get things rolling.

In at least one country of West Africa, Mali, the establishment of economic interest groups (*groupements d'intérêt économique*) has facilitated cross-border trade as these small groups, comprised largely of women traders, are now permitted to fill out customs declarations (Morris, p.17). With a clear legal identity, these groups provide economic empowerment for women traders. Two activities that might be taken by these groups include (1) awarding badges to women traders that identify them as knowledgeable regarding ECOWAS rules and procedures for regional trade, and (2) creating and distributing informational tools (laminated cards, pamphlets) on rules and regulations regarding the free movement of basic foodstuffs within ECOWAS to increase the leverage of cross-border traders in dealing with police, customs, and gendarmes.

Efforts to harmonize the commercial law of the region (OHADA) also present an opportunity to intervene in order to improve the competitiveness of community-based groups and associations of women traders gathered together for their economic interest.

Action: **Encourage the establishment of economic interest groupings among women traders .**

These groups provide much-needed competition for freight forwarders, who otherwise have a legal monopoly to fill out customs declarations.

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