



## **AGRIBUSINESS AND TRADE PROMOTION (USAID ATP)**

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**A lessons learned publication on MIS development and sustainability, with a proposal on how sustainability of MIS can be enhanced**

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# **LESSONS LEARNED ON MIS DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY**

## **AGRIBUSINESS AND TRADE PROMOTION PROJECT (USAID ATP)**

March 2013

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# I. INTRODUCTION

The Agribusiness and Trade Promotion (ATP) and Expanded Agribusiness and Trade Promotion (E-ATP) were engaged, from 2008 to 2013, in efforts to facilitate market information for the region's value chain actors, with the goal of increasing regional trade in staple commodities. From the beginning, the Projects worked with Accra-based Esoko Networks (previously TradeNet), and later on, as a result of an assessment conducted in 2011 (Ungana-Afrika, Market Information System Assessment) the project also worked with another private market information system (MIS), Dakar-based Manobi. ATP also collaborated with a public MIS, the regional network *Réseau des systèmes d'information de marché de l'Afrique de l'Ouest* (RESIMAO). Most of the activities with RESIMAO took place in 2012-2013.

There are no proven, long-term models on how to effectively transmit market information to traders and farmers in Africa. Each of the three market information systems the ATP projects collaborated with is no longer than roughly a decade old (Manobi was established in 2001, TradeNet 2004, RESIMAO 2005). The private ones have been mainly supported by public funding, and neither has found fast success, with quick expansion. RESIMAO, the network for public information MIS, is expanding in area and reach – to include value chain actors – partly due to collaboration with ECOWAS. Processes of learning and modifying approaches take time, and a decade is a short time, particularly given the challenging conditions for agriculture in West Africa, and for regional trade in particular.

This brief document describes lessons learned on MIS during the ATP Projects. After a brief review of the efforts made, it first recapitulates the assessment of the Ungana-Afrika, from 2011. It then highlights the results of a team meeting with the project technical team at end of project, as well as management reflections, on what was learned during the course of the ATP projects on effective ways to disseminate market information for regional trade to increase in West Africa.

## 2. A BRIEF OVERVIEW: EFFORTS OF THE ATP PROJECTS IN MARKET INFORMATION SYSTEMS

During the project period, the ATP Projects partnered with three MIS providers. Two of them are private, Esoko Networks and Manobi, and one public, the regional network for market information systems, *Réseau des systèmes d'information de marché de l'Afrique de l'Ouest* (RESIMAO). Brief overviews of these three providers and their efforts are below.

**Esoko Network:** Esoko manages a web- and mobile phone-based platform that provides market information to private sector subscribers. Esoko Networks Ltd is a Mauritius-based company that has operated Esoko MIS in many countries of Africa as well as in Afghanistan. In Ghana, BusyLab is a subsidiary of Esoko Networks. Esoko was born as TradeNet during, and as a result of, efforts by USAID Market Information System and Traders' Organization of West Africa (MISTOWA) project in 2004; the platform was formally launched in 2007; it offered information, through internet and mobile phones, on prices, offers to buy and sell, and contacts. ATP collaboration with Esoko, since 2008, focused on Mali, Burkina Faso and Ghana, and included funding for data collection, licenses and training. In Mali and Burkina Faso, Esoko operated through licenses with project partners *Association malienne pour la sécurité et la souveraineté alimentaires* (AMASSA) in Mali and *Association pour la promotion de la sécurité et de la souveraineté alimentaires au Burkina Faso* (APROSSA) in Burkina Faso; in Ghana, efforts have been in collaboration with Esoko Ghana which is the company's subsidiary in the country.

**Manobi:** Manobi is a Senegal-based ICT company established in 2001 that provides various types of mobile-based services, including T2M (take to market; an MIS platform for commodity prices, market location, bids and offers, and customer profiles); 2GIS+T2M (a Geographical Information System [GIS] integrated on-farm management tool that links farmers to buyers, to optimize logistics and for price transparency); and Fresh Food Trace (for Malian and Senegalese mango growers, to complete product information to comply with export requirements). Manobi approach is to provide basic MIS information for free, but additional services for fee; this approach was attractive way to build sustainability for Ungana Afrika which conducted the 2011 assessment for the project. ATP efforts from Manobi emerged from an FY 2011 assessment of ATP work conducted, which recommended Manobi as a potential tool for disseminating market information. Efforts with Manobi have focused on building an MIS with AMASSA and APROSSA (although efforts with AMASSA ended with suspension of activities in Mali) and a GestOp service with cereals organizations in West Africa.

**Le Réseau des systèmes d'information de marché de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (RESIMAO):** This not-for profit organization is a network of the national MIS systems of the ECOWAS region. The network was created in 2000, and formalized in 2004. The ECOWAS Commission has adopted the RESIMAO platform as an integral component of AGRIS, its information system for agricultural inputs and outputs. As part of this initiative, RESIMAO and ECOWAS are implementing the

www.resimao.net website. Since 2010, RESIMAO has collaborated on the inputs component of the RESIMAO MIS with the ECOWAS-UEMOA MIR Plus project, which is implemented by IFDC.

Collaboration with ATP has been based on a tripartite partnership plan (RESIMAO-MIR Plus-ATP) developed in November 2011. In the context of this plan, ATP equipped RESIMAO with mobile kits and a specific Java application form for timely collection and dissemination of information for www.resimao.net and supported RESIMAO to pilot a project to monitor cereal stocks.

Details of ATP efforts can be found in Annual Reports and specific publications on MIS.

## 3. LESSONS LEARNED

In the following, the lessons learned during the implementation of the AT Projects are discussed. First, a brief review of findings of Ungana-Afrika 2011 assessment is given. After that, the project reflections are presented, grouped under general observations, lessons on the approach taken to develop and disseminate market information, and lessons at value chain actor level.

### 3.1 UNGANA-AFRIKA FINDINGS

Ungana-Afrika made various observations and recommendations based on the work undertaken. They included:

- Expectations and communication between partners must be improved, with service level agreements and data sharing agreements being a priority;
- The MIS should not be seen as an stand-alone project but should have more integration with other divisions focused on stimulating intra-regional trade;
- Regional apex organizations should be brought on as partners for growing regional trade using the MIS;
- More follow-up should be done on bids and offers to determine their outcomes;
- Mechanisms should be investigated to make the MIS more accessible, such as interactive voice response systems and user guides;
- MIS partners should utilize the available features of the Esoko platform more effectively, and should place greater emphasis on developing and supporting regional trade.

These recommendations reflect Ungana-Afrika's assessment of some of the shortcomings of the approach employed. They also include hints on what lessons learned were emerging from the projects work, including importance of:

- Communication in multi-partner arrangements
- Follow-up efforts which need to build on market information dissemination
- Close work with value chain partners
- Attention paid on the complexities of regional trade and its impact on how market information should be addressed; and
- Need to ensure that information is communicated through diverse channels.

Many of these lessons are echoed in the assessment of ATP staff, discussed below.

### 3.2 GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

First, some general observations about the context in which the Projects' MIS work was undertaken.

*Observation 1: There are no proven models for effective transfer of market information to African farmers and small scale traders*

Instead, providers and MIS partners are engaged in trial and development, and prolonged successes at field level – whether in terms of spontaneous adoption, sustainability of services (e.g., willingness of recipients to pay), or others – are often hard to show.

*Observation 2: The obstacles for using internet or mobile phone-based systems in regional trading are great*

While these MIS have not found a widespread use in the past years, it is clear that obstacles to their use in regional trading are still greater than in domestic trading. Such obstacles include, among others, lack of confidence in an unknown trading partner with whom no personal contact is immediately possible; inability to communicate by phone or through internet due to language; non-use of contracts, quality standards, and payment methods that facilitate long-distance trading; and the somewhat *ad hoc* nature of trading where needs for supply are perceived urgent. Even with focused attention on particular traders and their needs, the project found that eventually, arriving at business deals based on information derived from mobile phone or internet was difficult.

*Observation 3: It takes time to build functioning systems*

Facilitating relationships between providers, partners and value chain actors, as well as training and developing systems of data collection all take time. The project rather optimistically started to work with Manobi in 2011 which was too late. The development of agreements with value chain partners alone took some months after which actual work could only start. Minimum duration for working with such systems should be 3-5 years.

*Observation 4: Models for sustainability of private systems are largely lacking*

Within the project framework, there has been little progress in this regard, and it is not clear how such sustainability can be built in, beyond saying that when approach is built on the needs of value chain actors, instead of a particular system (Lesson 1 below), financial sustainability is more likely to occur. What is clear is that current operation of the private sector MIS in West Africa is largely based on public sector funding.

### **3.3 LESSONS ON THE APPROACH EMPLOYED**

*Lesson 1: De-emphasize technology (platform), emphasize tailored solutions*

Provision of market information (and not market information systems) should start from value chain actor needs, and be tailored to these needs. This concerns the type of information (e.g., crude data, summary data or analyzed data), time intervals when it is needed, and media through which it is transmitted (e.g., phones, computer, paper, or orally). Partner needs are greatly dependent on a multitude of factors, including their business orientations and on their abilities to access information (e.g., through internet).

*Lesson 3: Before you start, take time to focus – geographically, on certain value chain actors, on certain needs*

This lesson ties in what is above but also emphasizes that often, rather than to have a blanket approach, it is better to start slowly and from small base, and then expand, while making adjustments.

*Lesson 4: If focus is on transactions, information on price and availability is only the first step (or, in other words: Real-time information does not necessarily translate into real-time opportunities)*

Whereas in some situations information can empower, obstacles to regional trade are great (cf. Lesson 2 above) and information itself does not necessarily – or easily – lead to transactions. If transactions are the goal, information is only the first step and much support is needed for even a small percentage of the transactions to be realized.

*Lesson 5: Focus on relevant information and on market intelligence, not on data*

Most commonly, market actors need processed data that helps them move business forward. While some of the MIS may provide information for this purpose, what is equally important is digestion of this data and sharing with value chain actors in suitable fora.

*Lesson 5: One should go beyond market information, to agricultural information*

Value chain actors need a broad range of information, including farming tips, progression of the growing season, policy and regulatory framework, and obstacles at roads and borders. This observation has found widespread acceptance.

### **3.4 LESSONS ABOUT VALUE CHAIN ACTOR INVOLVEMENT**

*Lesson 1: Close work with value chain partners is needed, and only based on it, successful approaches can be developed*

Market information systems embody certain suppositions about value chain actors, their needs, abilities, and orientations, which may, or may not, be correct. Only by closely working with the value chain actors will tailored solutions be found.

*Lesson 2: Value chain partners commonly have limited technology skills*

Whereas associations of value chain actors can have a key role in development and extension of market information to their members, they commonly are short staffed, particularly in staff with good knowledge of information technology. At the same time, solutions proposed should appeal to elected officials and members, and they only have that appeal if they “make sense” for them, and can be well explained. Relatively low technological base may mean that low-tech approaches work best.

*Lesson 3: Do not underestimate the importance, in the market place, of trust and traditional trading patterns*

West African regional markets work, albeit with inefficiencies and idiosyncrasies. They are based on trading patterns developed over long term, and in some cases (e.g., livestock), are often quite organized and complex. Understanding this base will likely lead to improvements that are gradual, but more acceptable to the value chain actors engaged in it.