

INSTITUTIONAL LESSONS FROM THE PARTNERSHIP TO IMPROVE FOOD SAFETY MANAGEMENT AND LIVELIHOODS OF STREET FOOD VENDORS AND CONSUMERS IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

The growth in urban populations in Ghana offers both opportunities and risks for resource-poor groups in urban and peri-urban environments. One important opportunity has been the increase in sale and patronage of street-vended foods (SVFs). However, the livelihoods of these street-food vendors, their raw material input suppliers as well as the health of consumers could be jeopardized if problems of food safety are not addressed. This paper emanates from a project executed in 1999/2000 to establish whether food hazards occur in some popular Ghanaian foods sold along the streets of Accra and establish the contributions street-vended foods were making to the economy of Ghana. The coalition team formed was made up of partners from different interest groups. Conflicts resulting from vested interests involving key coalition partners in the project became evident and were addressed. A key lesson from the project is that while key partners may have all the technical capabilities to ensure the success of the project, their poor inter-personal relationships may present a major setback to the progress, timely execution and realization of the project's goals. The ability of coalition members and the project leaders to effectively manage such conflicts was a key step in realizing the success of the project. Finally, it was also learnt that an unwieldy size of partnership impedes the smooth execution of the project.

Keywords: Institutions, Partnership, Food safety management, Livelihoods, Street foods

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of people moving from the rural to the urban centres in Ghana. This growth in urban populations in offers both opportunities and risks for resource-poor groups in urban and peri-urban environments. One important opportunity has been the increase in sale and patronage of street-vended foods (SVFs). Resource-poor groups have developed livelihood strategies with limited capital assets to take advantage of this opportunity. The livelihoods of these street-food vendors, their raw material input suppliers as well as the health of consumers could be jeopardised if problems of food safety are not addressed. This is because if there are concerns with the quality and safety of the street-vended foods, there is likely to be low patronage by consumers leading loss of incomes to the street food

operators. Improvements in food safety can only be effective and sustainable if policy makers appreciate the importance and contribution that vendors make to the urban economy as well as the potential food safety hazards. The challenge is to improve the adaptive capacity, not only of the street food operators, but also of the respective authorities (government, public agencies and civil society), to jointly and synergistically develop system-wide resilience thereby reducing levels of vulnerability and potential health hazards from the consumption of street foods.

The conceptual backdrop to using partnerships to address the street food sector is that knowledge creation and management are more dependent on relationships, communications (i.e. process) and context, than on simply conveying information about research findings. This is where users and manufacturers of

technologies are always interactive and fully involved in the process as 'equal partners' (Douthwaite, 2002; Biggs and Matsuert, 2004). Even though, the relevance of partnerships and institutional alliances to the development of sustainable systems of food safety management is widely acknowledged, this aspect is often taken for granted and not addressed systematically and explicitly in the food sector. Where some semblance of concern is shown for partnership and institutional alliances, the experiences is often unreported or given limited circulation. Andy (2002) opines that pursuing a broader range of partnership is justified because it improves the impact of research and poverty. There is bound to be institutional lessons from working with other partners and these lessons are to be carefully understood and properly appropriated in order to ensure smooth collaboration both now and in future. The more that is known about potential partners, the better it is to work with them.

PROJECT APPROACH

Between 1999 and 2000, the Crop Post-harvest Programme (CPHP) of the Department for International Development (UK) of the UK Government sponsored a research team from Ghana and the UK, Project R7493, to undertake an exploratory investigation to establish whether food hazards (pathogenic micro-organisms, heavy metals, mycotoxins and agro-chemicals residues) occur in some popular Ghanaian foods sold along the streets of Accra. In addition, the project was to establish the contribution the street-vended food sector was making to the economy of Ghana. Project R7493 established that the SVF sector significantly contributes to the economy with an annual turnover of over US\$100 million, employs around 60000 people (mostly female with minimal education) and that microbiological and heavy metal residue hazards were potentially found in popular foods sold on the streets of Accra.

A stakeholders' workshop was held in September 2000 to present and discuss results obtained and to chart the way forward after Project R7493. One of the outcomes of the workshop was the decision of the then Ministry of Environment Science and Technology (MEST) of Ghana to initiate the formation of a Street Food Working Group in Ghana. This group served as the precursor of the coalition project team formed for Project R8270. The coalition team formed was made up of partners from a number of organizations. These were the Food Research Institute (FRI) of Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, Ghana, the Natural Resources Institute (NRI) of University of Greenwich, UK, the Food and Drugs Board (FDB) of Ghana, the University of Ghana (UG), Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, the Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research (NMIMR) in Accra, Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA), Kumasi Metropolitan Assembly and Ghana Traditional Caterers' Association (GTFC). The FRI and NRI were the joint managing partners in this project.

Project R8270 carried out a number of activities in Ghana to determine the sources and extent of these hazards as well as develop and implement strategies that could be used to control and/or eliminate these hazards in an economical and socially-acceptable manner. The project also sought to explore the wider framework of policies, institutional linkages and food laws under which the street food vending businesses are carried out in Ghana. This write up summarizes the institutional lessons learnt by the coalition formed for Project R8270.

INSTITUTIONAL THEMES AND LESSONS

Conflict management

It is quite common that the protection of one's ego and the quest for recognition usually influence one's behaviour in a group. This can lead to personality clashes in inter-organizational project work. Conflicts resulting from these clashes require tactful and diplomatic approaches to

olve; especially when this involves key coalition partners in that particular project (FAO/WHO, 2004).

A key lesson learnt from Project R8270 is that while partners may have all the technical capabilities to ensure the success of the project, their poor inter-personal relationships may present a major setback to the progress, timely execution and realization of the project's goals. The ability of coalition members and the project leaders to effectively manage such conflicts was a key step in realizing the success of the project.

In Project R8270, representatives of two partner-organizations, with overlapping mandates in food control at the metropolitan level in Ghana, could not agree on mechanisms of implementation of some of the project activities. At a point in time these representatives became so emotional about their differences to such an extent that they nearly derailed the project. Their differences dragged on for nearly three months. Indeed other partners were worried about the differences between the two. The local project manager had to personally intervene by pleading several times over the phone, even by visiting the homes of the feuding partners as well as visiting them in their respective organizations. At meetings with the feuding partners, the local project manager was careful to use some known conflict mediation techniques as explained by Adebayo (2004). These include avoiding taking sides, using the step by step approach and controlled communication to get round the problem. Thankfully, other coalition members reacted maturely and assisted with diplomacy and tact to resolve the problem. In particular, one of key female member of the coalition commendably elected to assist the local manager to bring the feuding partners together.

Identification of partners

Experiences from previous projects influenced and facilitated the selection of partner organizations for Project R8270. This was facilitated by the fact that the local

project manager had worked on other research projects with some of the partner organizations. He therefore had personal knowledge of the capabilities of the individual partners within these organizations. This was a major factor that influenced the identification of the partners for the coalition during the thematic workshop, organized by the CPHP, to facilitate the development of the street food coalition partnership for R8270 in July 2002. During this workshop, there was however an unfortunate interpretation of the development process for the coalition. There was controversy on the proposed role of Natural Resources Institute (NRI) of the University of Greenwich as a managing partner, since the NRI had led a group that successfully presented an earlier project proposal to the CPHP in early 2002. This led to uncertainties regarding the role of the NRI in the coalition. Luckily, this was amicably resolved when the coalition accepted the joint management approach for FRI and NRI for R8270.

One major objective of the project was to ascertain the levels of heavy metals in street vended foods. This has a lot of implications for the health of consumers, as well as the livelihood of street food vendors. It was therefore important that a competent laboratory be sought to ensure that results obtained are credible. For the selection of such a laboratory, the project was provided with a consultant who assessed the capabilities of all the proposed laboratories in Ghana. The selection process greatly relied on his expertise in that field.

Two other factors influenced the selection of partners. These were whether some of the proposed project activities were in line with the mainstream activities of some of the partner organizations as well as whether partner organizations could be flexible enough to accommodate the activities of the project.

Another challenge in developing partnership of this kind is size. An unwieldy size of partnership impedes the smooth

execution of project objectives. With the benefit of hindsight, there was a feeling later that there were far too many partners in Project R8270.

Another institutional arrangement developed in Project R8270 was procedures for accepting new partners into the coalition. During the inception stakeholders meeting for the project in March 2003, the local representatives of StreetNet International, a South African NGO, with affiliations with the International Labour Organization, impressed the coalition so much so that members felt they should be encouraged to join the coalition. To determine the eligibility of this potential new partner, the representatives of StreetNet were asked to submit a profile of the NGO for consideration by the coalition at one of the quarterly meetings in October 2003. Coalition partners collectively and thoroughly examined the backgrounds of local StreetNet. The background information sought included the legal status of the partner, its management structure, capabilities in relation to project activities etc. Even though the coalition found them to be working in the area of assisting street food vendors in certain parts of Accra, they were however not happy that the NGO had not registered with Registrar-General's Department in Ghana, as required by the laws of Ghana. The coalition was therefore unable to recommend them to the Regional Coordinator of the CPHP. Members however felt that local StreetNet International members in Ghana could still be invited for the training programmes and other promotional activities.

Another consideration identified in developing partnership was for regular technical backstopping, especially in a project like R8270 in which sensitive analysis had to be carried out on food samples. In this project, the analysis of heavy metal residues in the street vended foods was being carried out by the Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research (NMIMR) of the University of Ghana. Unfortunately, in the third half of the first

year of the project equipment breakdown at NMIMR led to delays in the analysis of heavy metals. At the project coalition quarterly meeting in February 2004, the issue was discussed by the coalition members. The alternative would have been to use the backstopping facilities at Department of Chemistry at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi, Ghana. Regrettably, the partners from KNUST also informed the coalition that their equipment for heavy metal analysis at KNUST had just had a problem. The coalition then agreed to use the backstopping facilities provided by the School of Sciences of the University of Greenwich, UK. One key lesson from this is that if the initial dispute over the role and participation of NRI had not been resolved amicably, it would, perhaps, have been difficult for the coalition to approach the School of Sciences, University of Greenwich to come to the aid of the project.

Partner organizations should also have arrangements where more than one person would be involved in project activities so that in the event where the main expert in the respective organization is not available, his/her assistant may replace him/her. In project R8270, the main expert from NMIMR inadvertently had to travel to the USA. He was immediately replaced by a colleague scientist.

Project planning and report writing

The writing of projects and reports requires skills. Given the diverse educational backgrounds of the partners within the coalition, it was clear from the on set in Project R8270 that not all the partners could effectively write the mandatory quarterly and annual reports required by CPHP. However in the write ups for the call to new project concept notes and proposals, even by members who did not routinely write the reports assisted to conceptualize problems and provide justification of key themes and activities used in the proposals. This happened in R8270 for the quarterly and annual reports as well as for the writing of

the concept note and project proposals in later part of 2004. Subsequent to this, the managing partners were entrusted with the responsibility of refining project proposals, especially in relation to request for revision of activities and budgets by CPHP.

Reaching consensus on reports

One major issue in the development of partnerships to meet the set goals of the project is how reports are collated. In order to ensure that reports are balanced, credible and in a form useful for target groups, project R 8270 developed a participatory approach towards report writing, which allowed all partners to make inputs. Before finalizing quarterly reports, due for submission each quarter to the regional coordinator of the DFID, draft reports from partner organizations are presented and critically discussed at the quarterly coalition meetings. It was only draft reports deemed credible that were included in the final report.

Consensus to develop promotional materials

The project developed a number of promotional materials to assist with the training of street-food vendors as well as sensitize consumers on issues about food safety. The promotional materials produced were leaflets, posters, billboards with food safety messages and documentaries on food safety. These materials were developed through a number of steps. The first step was to organize a meeting of the target groups and other stakeholders to discuss the best approaches to be used in the dissemination of project outputs. Once the types of promotional were agreed upon, several draft samples were made and again sent back to the stakeholders for their comments. The best materials were selected.

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The development and production of the documentaries and billboards also went through a series of discussion until the finally what should go into these were agreed upon.

Effective communication with target groups
Given the low educational levels of the participants of the training programme (i.e. street food vendors); the project adopted the use of local dialects as an effective communication tool.

Another issue which came up for consideration was how to effectively convey the message about hygiene to the street food vendors. As part of the training programme, practical sessions were organized during which street food vendors had to be taken to the microbiological laboratory to gain first hand experience of how microorganisms easily contaminate foods. To demonstrate cross contamination resulting from poor hand washing or failure to observe personal hygiene a special dye was used. This innovative hygiene training technique greatly impressed the participants to appreciate the menace caused by microorganisms.

CONCLUSION

The coalition partnership formed for the Street Food Project, Project R8270, has thrown up a number of institutional lessons. These include the issue of identification of partners, joint management approach, conflict resolution as well as consensus on development of promotion materials. It is hoped that these lessons from this project will guide others interested in forming similar coalitions to assist the street and/or informally vended food sectors in other developing countries.

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