

Empowering West Africa's Farmer Collectives: Mastering the Business of Farming

West Africa's agricultural sector is dominated by smallholder farmers, who are confronted with a variety of interconnected challenges. These include limited crop productivity, inconsistent product quality and high transaction costs. Farmers also struggle to access markets, essential services, timely information and productive assets such as land and equipment. Meaningful participation in policymaking processes is often out of reach. Women farmers face additional barriers when it comes to accessing inputs, extension services, and formal financial systems. Although farmer groups and cooperatives offer a promising way to overcome these challenges, many are hindered by poor record keeping, limited access to credit, low adoption of modern farming techniques, and an inability to negotiate fair prices and governance issues. These issues often hinder their growth and sustainability.

The Evolving Solution: From Farmer Group Strengthening to the Cooperative Business School (CBS) Approach

In recognition of these challenges and the immense potential of collective action, MOVE developed a cooperative strengthening program to promote more resilient and inclusive farming organisations. The initial approach aimed to improve the operational effectiveness of farming groups and ensure equitable participation, particularly among women and young people. To expand this fundamental intervention, MOVE collaborated with Matching Grant Fund (MGF) partners within the rice value chain. The core aim was to build the capacity of farmer groups to organise, manage and access collective opportunities, enabling them to achieve more together than they could as individuals.



This capacity-building intervention was delivered in three distinct phases:

Training Material Development:

The content was developed or adapted to reflect the context of each country and then validated with the relevant agricultural ministries and private partners.

Training of Trainers (ToT):

Selected field staff participated in a structured, three-day program covering three focus areas: financial & business management; market linkages & added value; and leadership & governance. This approach promoted both peer-to-peer and adult learning.

Farmer Level Training and Monitoring:

In order to put their newly acquired knowledge into practice, trainers delivered three-day workshops directly to groups of farmers. MOVE conducted follow-up surveys and field visits.

This approach was adapted and piloted in Ghana, where four private rice mills partnered with MOVE to train their field staff. These staff then trained their affiliated farmers, thereby boosting the project's outreach. Due to its success, the model has since been replicated in other MOVE countries.

The Necessary Evolution

While the initial strengthening of the farmer group was highly effective in building foundational collective action and addressing basic organisational challenges, MOVE recognised a deeper need. In order for cooperatives to truly move beyond subsistence and transform into thriving, self-sufficient rural enterprises with a business vision and robust management, a more advanced, business-focused intervention was essential. This led to the development and scaling up of the Cooperative Business School (CBS) approach. Inspired by the successful Farmer Business School (FBS) model, the CBS provides a more specialised, structured pathway to help producer groups become strong, market-oriented and inclusive businesses.

Since 2023, CBS has expanded into the rice sector, in addition to its work with cocoa, maize and Irish potatoes. It now operates in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo and Nigeria.

The CBS approach addresses the key issues that cooperatives face when scaling up their businesses. It teaches them to manage their operations more effectively, treat their employees and customers fairly, and reduce their reliance on handouts. Both the farmer group strengthening approach and the CBS approach use dynamic, direct learning styles involving role-playing and real-life examples. Training sessions involve cooperatives from public, private, and community groups, with strong participation from women and young people. Certified trainers also provide post-training and field coaching to ensure that the new knowledge leads to lasting change.

Tangible Results: From Collective Action to Thriving Businesses

The combined impact of these approaches is already showing concrete outcomes:

- **Training of Trainers (ToT):** In Ghana and Sierra Leone 101 trained (31 women)
- **Farmer-Level Outreach:** In Ghana and Burkina Faso 1826 farmers trained (881 women and 603 youth)

Additionally, surveys and field visits were conducted to assess the effectiveness of the training.

The results:

- The total area covered by **climate-adapted methods increased** from 20,000 to **50,000 heactars**
- **Farmers' average income increased to 677 EUR.**
- **80%** of the 20 cooperative leaders trained by CBS have **launched at least one new service**, such as land preparation or collective marketing.

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Before CBS, we were just a group of producers. Today, we think like a business. We have management tools, and we know how to negotiate our sales.

~ Sanou Soumana, cooperative secretary from Bama, Burkina Faso, benefiting from CBS

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Looking Ahead: Towards a New Generation of Cooperatives & Sustained Growth

This integrated approach is creating a new generation of cooperatives and farmer groups. These organisations are more resilient, market-oriented and inclusive, and capable of creating sustainable jobs. This model provides a strategic means of supporting the continuous improvement required in the agricultural sector.

