Governments and research and development organizations are increasingly interested in understanding and promoting rural agroenterprises as a way to combat rural poverty. Attention to rural agroenterprises and processes of agroindustrialization in general are related to two fundamental global economic tendencies. First, increasing income levels and demographic changes such as increased female labor force participation have fueled demand for high-value and processed products. At the policy level, structural adjustment and liberalization policies have reduced barriers to trade globally and allowed markets to reach even the most isolated rural areas. Taken together, these trends are fueling a process of agroindustrialization that is transforming agriculture in the developing world. The changes are most visible in Asia and Latin America, but Africa is beginning to show similar effects.

Agroindustrialization brings major opportunities but also many challenges, especially to poor farmers and small agroenterprise entrepreneurs. Market forces cannot be denied, but governments and other organizations must be proactive to ensure that benefits are socially and economically positive and equitably distributed.

The agroindustrialization process has three main characteristics. First, there is the growth in off-farm agriculture-related activities, such as the supply of farm inputs or the processing, distribution, and sale of farm products. The suppliers, farmers, and distributors form supply or product chains. The second characteristic of agroindustrialization is an increased level of integration among actors in the supply chain, ranging from loose coordination to contracting and even subsidiary relationships. Finally, changes in products, technologies, and market structures accompany these shifts in number and integration of actors.

IMPLICATIONS OF MARKET ORIENTATION FOR SMALL-SCALE AGRICULTURAL PRODUCERS

Market orientation means adjusting production processes and products to respond to specific consumer demands and market signals and trends. Although many small farmers in developing countries will continue to grow subsistence crops, increased production for the market is the trend in many countries. What small farmers grow and how they grow it are increasingly determined by what urban consumers want. Agroindustries are important economic actors that link producers with consumers.

Agroindustrialization processes are often accompanied and stimulated by liberalization of economic policy. This reality means that agroindustries—and the producers supplying them—must be competitive internationally to survive. To be competitive, agroindustries typically work only with those farmers who produce the best-quality products at the lowest possible cost. Often, the competitiveness of the agroindustry is strengthened through strict grades and standards, imposed on their farmer-suppliers through contracts. In negotiating and enforcing those contracts, power relationships between agroindustries and farmers—especially small and poor farmers—tend to be highly asymmetric, favoring industry.

Agroindustrialization processes are often accompanied by privatization of land and other natural resources. The rationale is to facilitate the development of markets that permit transfers of assets toward the highest-productivity uses. Typically this situation has meant a net transfer of productive assets from small farmers and poor rural communities to commercial growers and large-scale corporations, both domestic and multinational. Where customary rights and communal ownership were important, the shift to private property may disadvantage those whose access rights are not recognized under the new regime. To the extent that these people are more marginalized in a society, there is the risk of widening existing inequalities. Similar patterns can be observed with shifts away from traditional labor exchanges toward wage labor.

Where the costs of accessing markets are high due to poor infrastructure, inadequate technology, or information barriers, collective action can help small producers be more competitive. A study of Associative Peasant Businesses in Chile found that cooperation benefited producers in markets where transaction costs were high and where product differentiation was important. In traditional markets for undifferentiated crops, no benefits to association were found. Associations were also found to be good vehicles for introducing new managerial and farming practices that enhanced farm profitability. Only a fifth of these small farmer associations achieved their objective of helping their members participate in new markets, despite extensive government support. The reasons for their many failures included, among others, their inability (1) to develop and enforce adequate systems of rules to direct relations among the members and between each of them and the organization; (2) to establish effective networks with public and market agents; and (3) to become competitive in the market in which they operate. Collective action is not a substitute for competitive behavior, but rather a vehicle for it.

IMPLICATIONS OF INTEGRATION FOR SMALL FARMS AND FIRMS

More striking than the changes in agricultural products and practices is the integration that has occurred in agroindustry over the past decade. The rise of mega-processors and retailers has resulted in very little produce being traded on the open market. A striking example is the rise of supermarkets in Latin America, which in a decade moved from 10–20 percent to 50–60 percent of the retail food sector. Collective action can
levels of commitment are often hard to maintain, even if the economic and social objectives and require high levels of consideration. Cooperative forms of organization are based on the basis of legal costs and potential access to government subsidies for certain types of businesses. Different organizational structures, however, have fundamental differences that firms need to consider. Cooperative forms of organization are based on economic and social objectives and require high levels of commitment and collective action to function. In practice these levels of commitment are often hard to maintain, even if the groups are subsidized. Partnerships have lower legal and administrative costs, but they assume high levels of trust among the partners, a condition reflected in the shared, unlimited liability for the firm's obligations. Corporations have the highest administrative costs, but they may be the best structure for firms where investors do not share high levels of trust and are likely to change frequently. Evidence from Colombia shows that no one organizational structure is best for either economic performance or social impact. The appropriate structure depends on the individual characteristics and objectives of the members.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Agroindustrialization is transforming agriculture and rural communities in developing countries. As a result, farmers and entrepreneurs need to change the way they do business. Part of the solution is precisely that: to think about and organize themselves as a business and to be more attentive to market signals and opportunities. Because they are in markets that are not perfect, investment in collective action and networking can bring high returns.

The reality of agroindustrialization also means that the public and private sector research and development organizations that support agriculture and rural development must reevaluate how best to support agroenterprise development through policy, technology, and institutional innovations. High-value products and opportunities for adding value should complement the focus on productivity improvement in undifferentiated commodities. Capacity building in business skills, accompanied by more and higher-quality business development services, can improve the competitiveness of small rural businesses. A better understanding of how to develop and support networks and innovative forms of organization beyond traditional agricultural cooperatives is also needed. On a more fundamental level, organizational and institutional innovations often arise in response to high transaction costs associated with market failures. Ameliorating these market failures, especially in the area of information and communication, will contribute to a more efficient and equitable agribusiness sector.


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