ACCESS TO MARKET – AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH

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A significant part of a market systems development consultant's day job is helping programme teams analyse constraints, reviewing what other people thought constraints were, and writing reports about constraints. And every time we see the all too familiar combination of the words *access* + *to* + *market*, a shiver runs down our spine, setting off our inner feasibility alarm. At its simplest, the very phrase assumes there *is* a market, and that the problem is one of access. Let's start with *market* (we also have a bone to pick with *access*, but we'll come back to that).

More often than not, the convenient constraint of 'access to market' masks the fact that there really isn't a feasible opportunity (read: market) for whatever we think somebody should make more of. No amount of training, infrastructure, inputs, or information is going to change that, if nobody wants to buy what you've got to sell. Or if what you're selling is simply too far away, too expensive or too difficult to secure in the face of more competitive alternatives.

Recently, we were involved in some old-fashioned MSD myth-busting gathered around the virtual water cooler, discussing why some seemingly successful pilot innovations were struggling to scale. The most common response was 'no market', which begs the question, why would one be working to increase production of something for which there was no market? Answers abound to that question, but in practice, we are convinced part of the problem is that we over-analyse constraints and under-reflect on the real opportunity.

Programmes begin with a target population or geographic area, look at their available resources (vegetables, handicrafts, beautiful beaches, labour) and conclude that they will be better off if 'only' they could sell more of what they have. So sell more of it they must – and the programme must help them. It's just a matter of better access to markets: '*if you build it,* [they] *will come*', to borrow from the movie 'Field of Dreams'. Unfortunately, that dream is rarely achieved in the real world.

Now 'access' – don't worry, you're not getting off easy. Let's say there *is* a market for what your target group is selling. Constraints to access could be physical – i.e. difficult logistics or inadequate infrastructure – or relational – i.e. not knowing the right people or being trusted to provide the right product. Here, we would argue, we need to be more curious: why does the specific access problem persist and can you realistically do anything about it?

It's problematic when programmes take this vague access to market constraint and reframe it as an equally nebulous 'access to market' function that somehow needs to be strengthened. It's the equivalent of going from an excess of darkness to working on an 'access to light' function, not being clear whether you're working on the supply of electricity, lightbulbs or optical surgeons. Surely, we can collectively put in the effort to be a bit more specific in our analysis of access constraints?

This is not to say that accessing markets isn't a bottleneck between poor producers and wealthy buyers. There may well be issues of accessibility that are important and feasible to improve. But if we're going to elevate it to a constraint of concern across so many sectors and programmes, let's borrow from John F. Kennedy and ask ourselves not what we can do about access to markets, but rather what are the markets to access?