



Kouzari, a tomato producer dries tomatoes in the sun, Niger.

PHOTO: CONCERN WORLDWIDE

Understanding the barriers to equitable market access for smallholder farmers in Burundi, Liberia and Niger

FS4FS inception research report summary

December 2025

1. Project overview

This brief summarises Phase 1 findings of the Concern Worldwide Multi-Country Research Programme on Food Systems for Food Security (FS4FS).

FS4FS is a multi-year research project examining the barriers to economic improvement and livelihood strengthening within food systems in three locations where Concern Worldwide is currently working: Burundi, Liberia and Niger.

The research focuses on the social, economic and political mechanisms that lead to persistent economic precarity and marginalisation among food system actors living in extreme poverty. To date, global food system transformation has failed to accrue benefits to marginalised actors earning living within food systems. In this context, this research aims to understand how smallholder farmers and micro food businesses currently interact with agri-food markets, and what support – from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), donor agencies, and policy makers – can help them participate in markets more equitably. Specifically, the project explores the links between marginalised actors and small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) and identifies potential interventions to remove the barriers to economic improvement for those living in extreme poverty in the three countries.

The programme is an Irish Aid-funded research partnership between Concern Worldwide and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK; the University of Burundi (UoB), Burundi; Statistical and Research Services Consortium (SRSC), Liberia; and the Laboratoire d'Études et de Recherche sur les Dynamiques Sociales et le Développement Local (LASDEL), Niger.

Study rationale and approach

Agri-food markets offer vital opportunities for marginalised people to earn livelihoods even with limited resources such as land and financial collateral. Participating in agri-food markets, as smallholder farmers and/or micro food enterprises, has been long argued as an effective tool to lift marginalised people out of persistent poverty and improve their food security. However, because of the social and



Rebecca Suah of Benson River Community, Liberia in her home garden.

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economic marginalisation they experience, these actors often struggle to participate in agri-food markets and value chains, and even when they do, the terms of market participation keep them trapped in a vicious cycle of poor economic returns, poverty, and food insecurity. Therefore, we need to better understand how marginalised actors can participate in agri-food markets in a way that benefits them, and how development actors – e.g. governments, NGOs and donors – can support such market participation.

Our research aims to:

- Generate broader evidence that links market participation and equitable outcomes for marginalised people in food systems.
- Assist Concern Worldwide, specifically, through identifying how their programmes in Burundi, Liberia and Niger can help support equitable market participation.

This project does so by exploring the interaction between SMEs that operate in domestic markets and marginalised actors. This builds on recent evidence, suggesting that SMEs offer an important gateway for marginalised actors to supply domestic markets, which tend to have less stringent product standards than export-oriented markets. However, SMEs face challenges themselves to survive in competitive agri-food markets, preventing them from working with marginalised actors.

2. Summary findings from Phase 1

Through a review of the literature, national policies and Concern's programme activities, Phase 1 identified three critical areas for further empirical inquiry:

- **Equity and power relations:** the literature documents challenges that marginalised actors face in food systems, but provides limited empirical data on how gender, age, and socio-economic status shape negotiation power and market participation. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing equitable value-chain interventions.
- **Financial inclusion:** marginalised actors face persistent barriers to access loans to enable market participation and increasing scale. There is a need to explore how formal and informal credit systems interact and how financial products can be tailored to marginalised actors.
- **Policy instruments in fragile contexts:** national policies to boost market participation and sectoral development exist, but the implementation gaps seem large particularly in remote areas. More evidence is needed to understand how political instability, trade restrictions, and institutional weaknesses affect private-sector engagement and food market resilience.

3. Literature review: detailed evidence and methodology

Phase 1 employed secondary research methods, consisting of a literature and policy review to identify the barriers experienced by smallholder farmers, micro businesses and SMEs to facilitate equitable participation of marginalised actors into agri-food markets and value chains. This project also conducted a document review to outline Concern's Theory of Change.

Smallholders

Smallholders primarily engage in informal spot markets, relying on small traders and intermediaries^{1,2}. Formal market participation is rare, largely due to infrastructural deficits, low-quality inputs, limited extension services, and gender inequities. Women and youth face particular disadvantages in market access and bargaining power. Collective organisation through cooperatives and social networks increases market participation and price negotiation power^{1,3} but this remains uneven across contexts. The literature highlights a persistent cycle of low productivity, low returns, and low reinvestment—further intensified by climate risks.

Analytically, these dynamics illustrate how structural constraints and power

imbalances—rather than individual capacity gaps—limit market integration^{4,5}. The literature often treats exclusion as a technical problem rather than a systemic outcome shaped by policy, gender norms, and market power asymmetries^{6,7}.

Micro-enterprises

Micro-enterprises operate almost exclusively within informal economies, serving as traders, vendors, and processors^{8,9}. Women dominate ownership but face gendered barriers, harassment, and financial exclusion¹⁰⁻¹². Enabling factors include informal credit systems, community networks, and targeted NGO training, yet formalisation remains unattractive due to high administrative burdens, unpredictable regulation, and corruption. The informality observed is not merely a constraint: it functions as an adaptive mechanism for survival within restrictive institutional environments.

Informality in food micro-enterprises is a rational livelihood strategy given the absence of inclusive regulation, infrastructure, and credit systems. Gender and informality intersect to shape the limits of entrepreneurial growth.



Jacqueline Bacamugwanko is a previous Concern Programme participant in Burundi. She has started her own businesses, including a grocery shop, where she sells cassava flour, and a restaurant. Jacqueline also has livestock and rents land to cultivate beans, maize and cassava.
PHOTO: EUGENE IKUA/ CONCERN WORLDWIDE

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs)

SMEs act as the ‘hidden middle’ of food value chains, linking smallholders to markets through purchasing, input provision, and processing¹³⁻¹⁵. They are critical to domestic market development but face barriers including poor infrastructure, lack of finance, and regulatory inefficiency. Successful SME-smallholder partnerships rely on trust, consistent quality supply, and reduced transaction costs. Policy frameworks often overlook SME needs^{16,17}, limiting their transformative potential.

Country policy contexts

Burundi’s agricultural policies emphasise modernisation and diversification but face challenges from land scarcity and limited private investment. Liberia’s frameworks prioritise value-chain development and Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) empowerment but suffer from weak implementation and overdependence on donor funding. Niger focuses on agro-industrial clusters and local processing but is hindered by political instability and disrupted trade. Across all three, implementation gaps and contextual factors affect the transition from subsistence agriculture to resilient market systems.

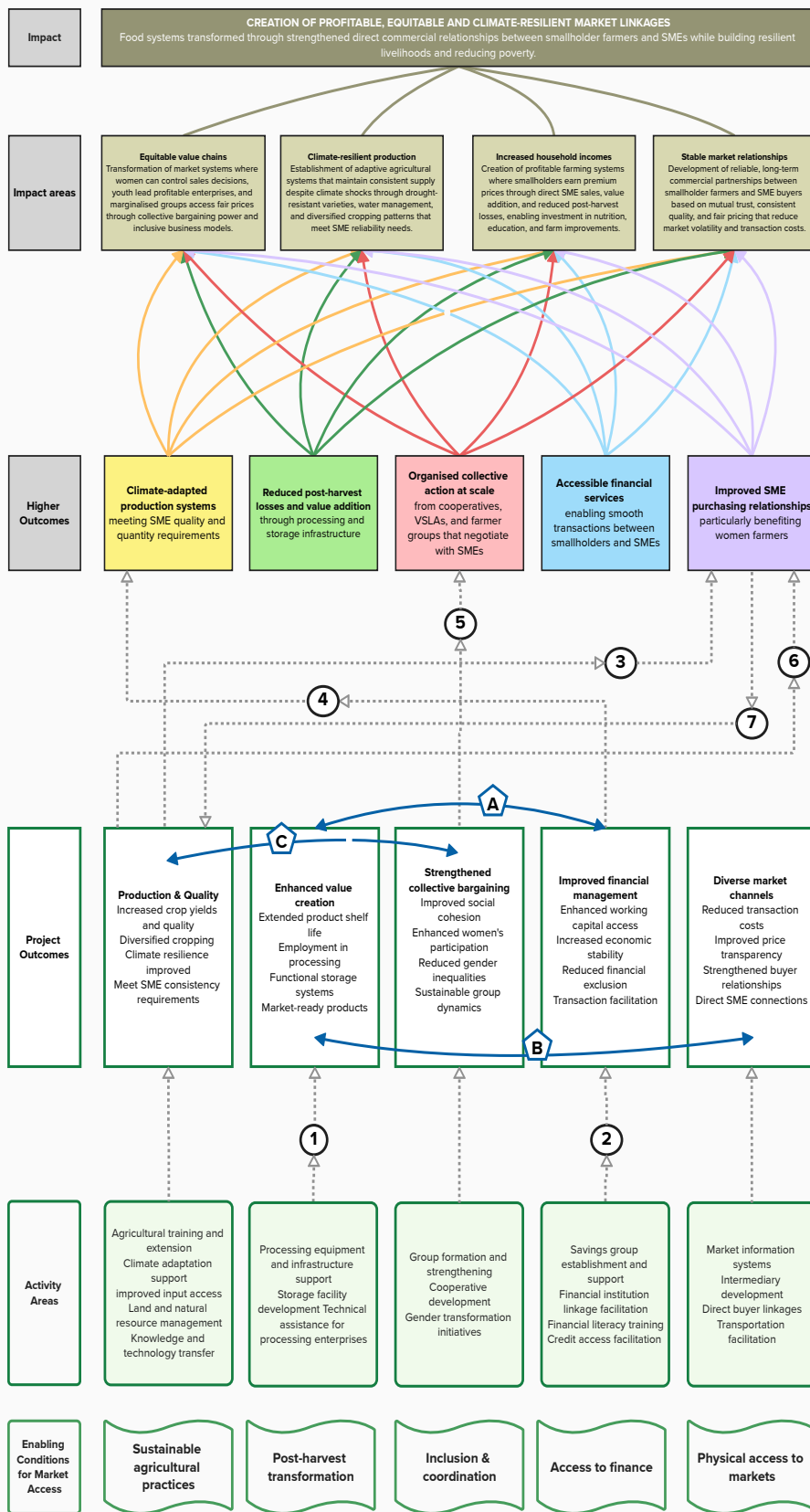
4. Theory of Change (ToC)

The theory of change (ToC) articulates how and why Concern has designed its interventions to influence certain outcomes in the research contexts. The final ToC is presented in Figure 1 below. The ToC is informed by a combination of evidence from the literature with practical insights from Concern’s operations across the three study countries. It serves several purposes: a planning tool intended to guide strategic decision-making; a communication tool to build a shared understanding; and a

learning tool that aims to enable reflection and adaptation. The ToC will help to frame future phases of this research.

Unlike with a linear logic model, the ToC acknowledges the complexity of social systems by mapping the messy, non-linear pathways through which change unfolds. This recognises that sustainable impact emerges through multiple nested impact pathways operating in parallel and overlapping, rather than through sequential cause-and-effect relationships.

Figure 1: Concern's agri-food commercialisation impact pathways



5. Next steps

The FS4FS’s Phase 1 research provides a conceptual and evidential foundation for applied research in Phase 2. Phase 1 research highlights the role of structural inequities—particularly gendered access to resources, asymmetric power between traders and producers, and governance fragility—in shaping market outcomes.

In Phase 2, the project’s empirical work in the three countries will further investigate:

- The role of SMEs in supporting smallholder farmers and micro business owners to access the goods, services and markets that they need to increase engagement in food systems.
- The barriers SMEs face in providing support and opportunities to micro businesses.

- On what terms does the incorporation into food system value chains and markets empower and enable those living in poverty, particularly women, to strengthen their livelihood strategies and security.
- The existing policies, norms, and practices that enable or disable engagement between micro businesses and SMEs.
- What policy influencing and advocacy can focus on at national, sub-national (regional, provincial, etc.), and bilateral levels to promote more enabling environments for food systems SMEs to engage with micro businesses on terms that strengthen the livelihood security of those living in extreme poverty.

The project timeline is as follows:

Activities and deliverables	2025				2026				2027			
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Phase 1: inception	■											
Phase 2: empirical research			■		■							
Phase 3: analysis and communication								■	■			
Phase 4: designing pilot studies with Concern									■			
Progress so far	■	■	■	■								

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