

**SOCIOECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GILO GROUP'S AFRICAN EGGPLANT TRADE
(*Solanum aethiopicum* L.) IN THE MUNICIPAL MARKETS OF BRAZZAVILLE (REPUBLIC OF THE
CONGO)**

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to determine the socio-economic characteristics of the african eggplant trade in the municipal markets of Brazzaville. The study was carried out in Brazzaville with a sample of 150 traders involved in this trade. The analysis of the survey data was done with the Sphinx Plus software. V.5. The results show that this trade is dominated by women of various profiles. It mobilizes young people, adults and constitutes an opportunity for professional integration and women empowerment. The African eggplant sold in Brazzaville comes mainly from rural production areas, and mobilizes long-type marketing circuits. During the procurement, the actors of this sector maintain several types of relationships based on their social capital. The sale of eggplant is a profitable activity with average gross profit rates on sale of 22%. It allows to diversify the income of vegetable sellers.

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INTRODUCTION

The urbanization of cities in sub-Saharan Africa results in an increase in food demands and a modification of the access conditions to productive resources (Temple and *al.*, 1998 quoted by Mahoungou, 2018). Urban populations are therefore looking for a diversification of their consumption, mainly on fresh and perishable products such as fruit and vegetables (Temple and Moustier, 2004). In the market gardening sectors, the development of market gardening production has led to that of commercial activity and the specialization of actors directly involved in these sectors (Berton-Ofoueme and Moustier, 1991).

One of the most commonly grown and consumed fruit vegetables in tropical Africa is the African eggplant (*Solanum aethiopicum* L.) from the Gilo group. It is a shrub plant belonging to the Solanaceae family, it is cultivated in the tropical zone of Africa, Latin America, Asia for the exploitation of its edible fruit (Chen and *al.*, 2000). It occupies the 4th place interms of consumption volume after tomato, onion and okra (Lester and Seck, 2004). Production is carried out by small producers living in rural and urban areas (Fondio and *al.*, 2007).

In the Republic of the Congo, the consumption of African eggplant fruits (photos 1 and 2) is part of the eating habits of the population.

They are associated either with found in many dishes, mostly salted fish, peanut paste, sorrel from Guinea in palm oil, etc. (Mialoundama and *al.*, 2001).



Photo 1 round fruits of African eggplants from the Gilo group

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Photo 2 elongated fruits of African eggplants from the Gilo group

The African eggplant is widely traded in the Brazzaville markets and it provides income to traders involved in this informal trade. Despite the importance of this vegetable, very little information is available on the socio-economic characteristics of this trade. The objective of this study is therefore to determine the socio-economic characteristics of the African eggplant trade in the urban markets of Brazzaville.

METHODOLOGY

The data collection on the socio-economic characteristics of the African eggplant trade took place from July to December 2017. The study took place in 16 urban markets in the city of Brazzaville chosen according to the importance of business transactions. It favored both the load breaking points of the agricultural production and the large retail markets in the city of Brazzaville (Figure 1). The markets selected for the study were: Thomas Sankara, Moukondo, Poto-poto 1, Poto-poto 2, Plateau des 15 ans, Ouenzé, Port Yoro, Port ATC, PK-Mfilou, GVA and PV stations, Total 1, Total 2, Bourreau, Bifouti, Madibou.

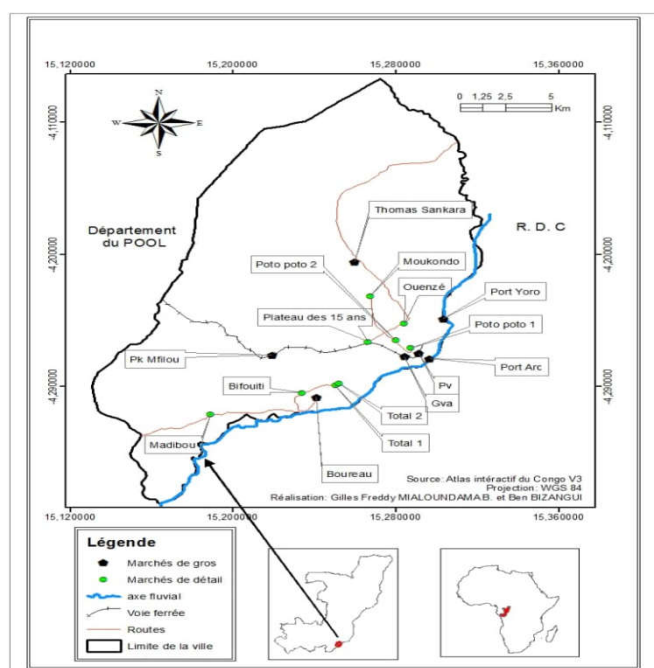


Figure 1 Location of the main markets surveyed in Brazzaville

The primary data collection was preceded by an exploratory phase which consisted in the collection of secondary data via local libraries and websites, obtaining survey authorizations.

The primary data were collected through a survey sheet intended for African eggplant traders in the municipal markets selected for the study. Reasonable choice sampling allowed 200 traders to be chosen. The selected traders met the following criteria: first, they had to be traders and exerting in one of the selected markets, secondly they had to be present during the survey and finally they had to be available to answer the survey questions. The direct observations as well as the free talks were carried out simultaneously with the individual interviews through the survey sheets.

The data collected through the survey sheets were typed, treated and analyzed by Sphinx Plus V.5 software. However, the information collected through free chat, secondary data collection and direct observations were subject to content analysis.

RESULTS

The profile of African eggplant traders in Brazzaville

The African eggplant trade activity in Brazzaville is largely dominated by women. It mobilizes both young people (48 %) and adults (52 %). The 25 to 34 year-old age group is the most represented (45 %) of all the actors surveyed. Live-in women (47 %) and single (34 %) are the most represented. Divorced (2 %), widowed (8 %) and married (9 %) women are insignificantly involved in this trade. Almost 56 % of the women surveyed lived in households. The african eggplant trade enables women who are involved in this activity to participate in family expenses.

The literacy rate of the women surveyed is 100 % (Table 1). The proportion of traders who have reached high education remains very insignificant, 2 %. However, it should be noted that 87 % of women traders have a high school level; 74 % of them have a lower secondary level. The fact that all the traders have been to school is certainly an advantage in the perspective of popularization actions aimed at professionalizing the actors involved in this value chain. Finally, 70 % of the surveyed traders have a more than 4 years experience, thus testifying the socio-economic impact of this activity.

Table 1 Typology of African eggplant traders

Variables	Characteristics	
	Modalities	Frequency (%)
Kind (gender)	Women	100
	Man	-
Age range	< 24 yearsold	3
	25-34 yearsold	45
	35-44 yearsold	28
	> 45 yearsold	24
Marital status	Single	34
	Free union	47
	Married	9
	Divorced	2
	Widower	8
Educationallevel	Primary	11
	Secondary	87
	University	2
	< 4 yearsold	30
Professional experience	05-09 yearsold	28
	10-14 yearsold	4
	15-19 yearsold	15
	> 20 yearsold	23

The main characteristics of the African eggplant trade in Brazzaville

A value chain dominated by long circuits, involving several actors, some of which mobilize their social capital

Several actors are directly involved in the African eggplant value chain in Brazzaville. Producers are the first types of actors, they are found in vegetable production areas, both in urban and rural areas although they are more found in rural areas. This value chain mobilizes three types of traders characterized by their mode of sale, in particular wholesalers, semi-wholesalers as well as retailers. Some wholesalers get their supplies directly from the production places and resell the goods in bulk (conventional wholesalers). On the other hand, other wholesalers have developed a cooperative strategy with producers who are located in production areas found in rural areas. The strategy spares the wholesalers from provisioning stays in rural areas. The cooperative relationships that are developed between these actors (producers, wholesale receivers) of the same network are based on trust, which is at the origin of the purchase of goods on credit. A category of wholesalers sells the production, sometimes in wholesale, sometimes in detail; they supply themselves in both rural and urban areas at the various load breaking points. The most important (actors) in this value chain in the urban areas are retailers, they retail the product to households, restaurant owners (upscale and makeshift) and rotisseries.

The trading of the African eggplants in Brazzaville is dominated by a diversity of long (trading) circuits (Figure 2). Direct and short circuits are rare and mainly concern the low production from urban market gardens.

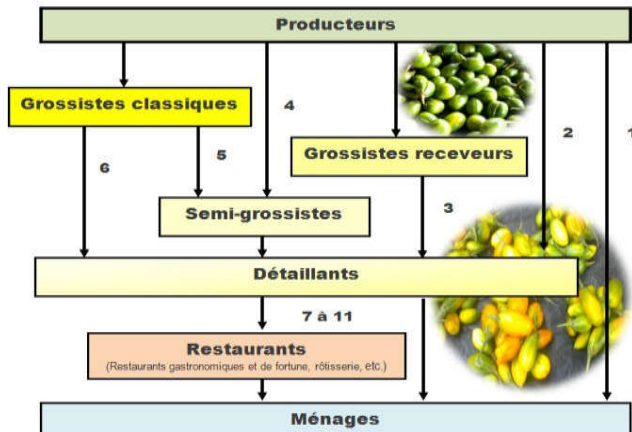


Figure 2 Mapping of actors involved in the African eggplant value chain

The different direct actors involved in the African eggplant value chain have diverse relationships based on their social capital. Thus, they develop several types of relationships, including cooperation, business, competition, mutual aid, trust, etc. Producers and traders have in most cases developed trade relationships, which in the long term has helped to build trust among them. These different relationships allow the creation of social capital which can be mobilized during periods of product scarcity on the market.

A diversity of production basins supplying markets with African eggplants

The African eggplants sold in the markets of Brazzaville come mainly from three departments of the Republic of Congo. Almost 51% of the African eggplant production encountered in

the surveyed markets comes from Pool department. In this department, the main production areas are located in the sub-prefectures of Igné (Mati, 100 km, 45 km), Ngabe (Imvoumba and Léfini), Kindamba, Mindouli and Boko. The localities of Mouyondzi and Loutété are the two main ones in the department of Bouenza which supply the Brazzavillian markets with African eggplants.

The localities of Ngo (department of plateaux) and Igné are the two main areas of the African eggplants production sold in Brazzaville (Figure 3). The production from market garden spaces in Brazzaville is low; these market gardeners are more attracted by more popular and profitable vegetables.

In the city of Brazzaville, the survey identified the main wholesale markets for African eggplants, corresponding to the breaking point of production load from rural production areas. The production sold by the wholesalers and semi-wholesalers of Texaco and Thomas Sankara markets comes from the production areas of the Plateaux department (Ngo, Lékana, Djambala, etc.) and in the sub-division of Igné (Mati, Léfini, Imvoumba, etc.) located in the north of the Pool department. However, total and Bourreau markets are the main breakpoints of the African eggplants production from production areas in the localities of Mindouli, Kindamba, Boko, Louingui, etc. Finally, Pk-Mfilou market is the main breaking point for eggplant production from the production areas of Bouenza (Loutété, Mouyondzi, etc.). Retailers of African eggplants are supplied directly from wholesale markets. The method of payment by excellence when supplying African eggplant is cash payment.

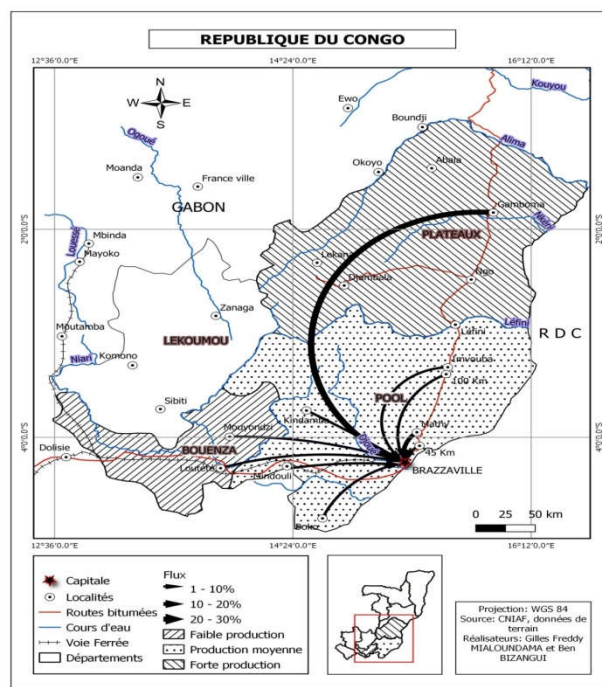


Figure 3 Origin of African eggplant sold in Brazzaville

Seasonality of production affecting the price structure of African eggplants

The African eggplant is a vegetable fruit belonging to the Solanaceae family. The investigation revealed the existence of a period of scarcity and also a period of abundance of the product within the market. From October to May, the product is abundant whereas from June to August the product is scarce. This seasonality of production significantly affects the

structure of the buying and selling prices of sacks of African eggplants (photo 3) on the markets.



Photo 3 View of a 50 kg sack of African eggplant

The average prices charged during periods of product scarcity on the market are twice higher than the ones during periods of the product abundance (Table 2). The average purchase price of a sack during the period of scarcity is 30,000 FCFA, this price drops significantly during the period the abundance of the product, i.e. 11,900 FCFA.

Table 2 Structure of the average price of a 50 kg bag according to food availability

Characteristics	Period	Purchase price (FCFA)	Sale price (FCFA)
Period of rarity	June to August	30 000	33 000
Availability period	October to May	11 900	15 350

In Brazzaville markets, the majority of traders sell African eggplant in detail, that is to say by heap. There are three types of eggplant heaps depending on the sale price (Table 3). The average price per kilogram of African eggplant is 1,170 FCFA. In times of product scarcity, retailers simply reduce the number of fruits per heap.

Table 3 Number of fruit, weight and price per kilogram of African eggplant sold in detail

Heap sale price (FCFA)	Number of fruit	Average heap weight (g)	Average heap weight (kg)	Price per kg (FCFA)	Average weight of 1 fruit
100	6 à 7	95,26	0,09526	1050	14,43
200	9 à 12	155,34	0,15534	1287	14,95
500	25 à 30	426,70	0,4267	1172	16,65
Average				1170	15,34

In the spatial organization of retail markets, sellers of African eggplant belong to the vegetable commodity. A first category of sellers of African eggplants also sells other products in order to diversify their income (photo 4). The product ranges often associated with eggplant are mostly vegetables (tomato, purple eggplant, cabbage, spinach, okra, etc.). This category of traders is the most represented. However, the second category of traders is specialized in selling only African eggplants (photo 5). They practice this trade as well as in times of scarcity, as in that of food availability.



Photo 4 pile of 200 FCFA of African eggplant and pile of tomatoes belonging to a retailer



Photo 5 pile of 500 FCFA and 250 FCFA African eggplants

Profitable trade to fight poverty and unemployment

The number of 50 kg sacks handled by African eggplant traders are ranged from 4 to 64 sacks, with an average of 23 sacks of eggplant per month. The majority of traders buy from 10 to 29 of 50kg sacks of African eggplants, or 79% (Figure 4). Very few traders buy more than 30 sacks; this category of trader represents only 8% of all traders surveyed.

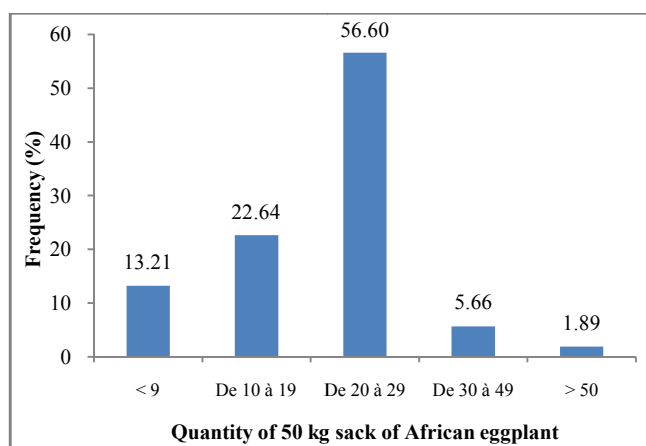


Figure 4 Number of bags purchased by African eggplant traders

The sale of African eggplant generates commercial margins. It is on average 3,450 FCFA per bag of African eggplant sold, representing a margin rate of 22% (Table 4). Wholesalers represent the category of traders with the largest gross commercial margin per bag of eggplants sold, namely 4,000 FCFA. However, it should be noted that they face many selling constraints; hence they do not always represent the category of actors that benefit more from the African eggplant value chain.

Table 4 Gross margin rate on sales made per bag of African eggplant sold

Types of sellers	Purchase price (FCFA)	Sale price (FCFA)	Gross Commercial Margin (FCFA)	Gross margin rate on sale (%)
Retailer	11 800	15 050	3 250	21,59
Semi-wholesaler	11 900	15 000	3 100	20,67
Wholesaler	12 000	16 000	4 000	25,00
Average	11 900	15 350	3 450	22,42

The monthly turnover realized for the sale of African eggplant is an average of 265,435 FCFA, it reaches 960,000 FCFA for traders who sell more bags of eggplant. The proportion of 19% of traders surveyed achieves a monthly turnover of less than 99,000 FCFA (Figure 5). This category of traders sells other products and the sale of eggplant is not for them a main activity; it is a marginal product. The majority of sellers (43%) have a monthly turnover of between 100,000 and 299,000 FCFA. For this category of traders, the contribution of eggplants to the overall turnover is average. Finally, nearly 38% of the merchants surveyed achieve a monthly turnover of more than 300,000 FCFA. In this category of traders, the sale of eggplant is of considerable importance compared to other products sold; the contribution of eggplants to overall turnover appears to be high.

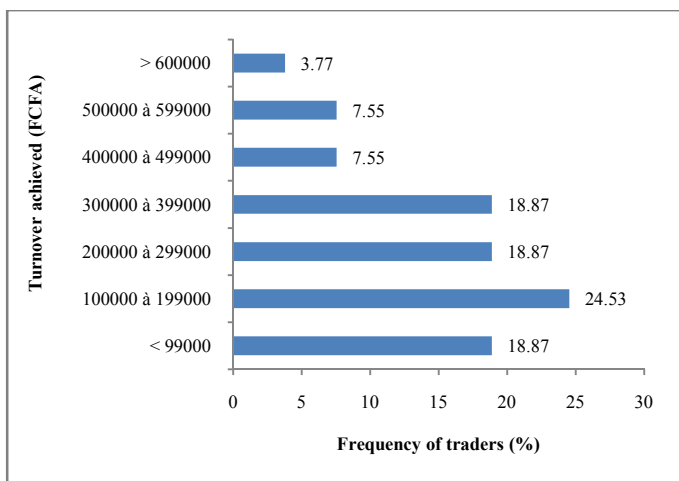


Figure 5 Variability in monthly turnover by African eggplant traders

The experience in the African eggplant trade, the gross profit margin on sales as well as the turnover achieved by the traders surveyed testify the socio-economic importance of this trade. The income generated by this activity allows traders to participate in family expenses but also to participate in social life. It is therefore an activity which makes it possible to fight against poverty, unemployment and to diversify the incomes of households involved in this trade. The words of an eggplant seller at the Total market confirm this when she says:

"The eggplant business is my main activity. With the income generated, this allows me to meet the family expenses as head of household, to participate in patronage dividends, but also to pay the contributions of the brotherhood"

However, to make these jobs more sustainable, it is important to help these micro entrepreneurs to professionalize themselves through a capacity building program (better bookkeeping, savings, access to finance, social security contributions, etc.) also by improving the business climate (opening up of production areas, emphasizing on salubrious

markets, construction of warehouses for suitable agricultural products, setting up an information system for the African eggplant market, etc.).

DISCUSSION

Social and cultural norms behind an exclusively female business

The study showed that the African eggplant trade in Brazzaville is a female activity from which 56% of women live in a couple. These results confirm those obtained in Congo by Berton-Ofoueme and Moustier (1991), Berton-Ofoueme (2005) and Mahoungou (2018). These authors also note that the vegetable and fruit trade in Brazzaville is dominated by women. Mahoungou (2018) obtains 93% representation rates of women in the vegetable trade and confirms that the profession of vegetable seller in Brazzaville is typically reserved for women.

In Ouagadougou in Burkina Fasso, Nebié (1999) shows that women take an active part in the informal vegetable trade, since the retail sale of fresh vegetables is their de facto. In Cotonou, the work of Berton-Ofoueme (2005) goes in the same direction when she asserts that local eggplants are sold with other vegetables (tomatoes, peppers, okra, onion, etc.) by women and young girls of all ages. Working on peri-urban areas in Africa, Moustier and Pages (1997) show that more than 90% of vegetable retailers are women.

In the peasant food chain of Bas Congo in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mpanzu Balomba (2013) notes that the retail trade is exclusively for women. Similarly, work carried out on the banana sector in the Republic of Congo has shown that the retail trade in sweet and plantain bananas remains largely dominated by women of various profiles (Mialoundama Bakouetila, 2017; Mialoundama Bakouetila, 2018).

The dominance of women in the vegetable trade in general and in the retail trade in particular is explained by the existence of social and cultural norms within the Congolese society which makes the vegetable trade exclusive to women. Indeed, social action is guided by standards (unwritten rules but obvious to everyone) and culture which are an integral part of the explanatory factors for human behaviors acquired during the socialization process. The high representation of women in this trade is the result of a process of social acquisition rather than a social component of subjectivity (Dubet and Martuccelli, 1996; Dubar, 2010).

The local eggplant trade attracts young people as well as adults. The proportion of young people aged between 25 to 34 is 45% compared to 52% of adults from various age groups. Mahoungou (2018) obtains a frequency of 55% of vegetable sellers whose ages are between 20 and 39 years; testifying the involvement of young people in this business. In the context of the economic crisis and difficulties in integrating young people, the vegetable trade is a means of professional integration for young people looking for work. However, institutional support for the professionalization of these informal jobs is necessary in order to reduce the precariousness of these trades and ensure better empowerment of women involved in this sector.

Actors involved in the African eggplant sector mobilizing their social capital

The African eggplants sold in the Brazzaville markets come mainly from the production areas located in rural areas. The localities of Ngo and Igné are the two main production areas; the production of market gardening spaces in Brazzaville is low. The supply of vegetables from the city of Brazzaville does not only concern the production of intra and peri-urban market gardens. Moustier and David (1996) show that wholesalers move around producer fields, village wholesale markets or even urban wholesale markets which are key points for commercial transactions between actors in the sector. The results of Berton-Ofoueme (1996) corroborate these remarks, the city of Brazzaville is supplied by the market gardening space Brazzavillois (intra-urban and peri-urban areas) but also from within the country and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The results of the study show that the African eggplant sector creates many direct jobs (producers, wholesalers, semi wholesalers, retailers, etc.) whose actors are involved in various sale chain. The direct and short circuits mainly concern the low production from urban market gardens. These results confirm those obtained in the standard organization of sales chain for market gardening products in the major cities of West and Central Africa (Moustier and David, 1996; Nebié, 1999; Berton-Ofoueme, 2005), these are short and long circuits with 2 or 3 intermediaries. Commercial transactions between producers and final consumers (households) are infrequent.

The results of the study show the absence of transformation of African eggplant in the marketing channels of this vegetable fruit in Brazzaville. In Ouagadougou, Nebié (1999) notes that almost 20% of the production of vegetable crops is subject to industrial transformation. He also notes that 75% of vegetable production is consumed in urban areas by households and other consumption units.

The actors involved in the African eggplant sector maintain a diversity of relationships (cooperation, commercial, mutual aid, trust, etc.) based on their social capital. According to Ponthieux (2006), social capital depends on the resources or information held by the actors and the structure of their relationships in a network. Market participants in the major cities of West and Central Africa have many relationships, including friendly, family bonds and also trust (Berton-Ofoueme, 2005). These relationships favor the sales and purchases observed along the vegetable chain. Likewise, Moustier and Pages (1997) also highlight very strong relationships of trust and loyalty between producers and traders. Under competitive conditions, wholesalers favor people they know or relatives confirms Mpanzu Balomba (2013).

The study highlighted a category of wholesaler known as "receiving wholesaler", this type of trader are supplied directly from the load break points located in urban areas unlike other wholesalers who get supplied in rural production areas. Thanks to the relationships of trust, cooperation and mutual support developed with producers in production areas located in rural areas, receiving wholesalers access goods on credit, while achieving economies of scale relating to the costs of staying in rural production areas. This situation was also observed in the study of the banana sector in the Congo by Mialoundama

Bakouetila (2018). In this case, commercial transactions between wholesalers and retailers are no longer based solely on simple commercial relationships, but much more on informal relationships based on mutual trust. Long-term commercial relations between actors therefore end up generating social relations which in the long term constitute social capital which can be mobilized during periods of shortage of goods. Bourdieu (1980) describes this social capital as a lasting network of more or less institutionalized relationships of interconnection and inter-recognition. In the sectors, social capital therefore promotes the collection and circulation of information, which are decisive element to facilitate collective innovation (Rigolot, 2016) but also transactions on the markets and the implementation of the collective action (Coleman, 1988).

A seasonal trade that can diversify the income of vegetable traders

The results of the study show that the sale of a sack of African eggplants makes it possible to achieve gross margins of more than 3,000 FCFA and gross margin rates on sales of more than 19% during periods of food availability of the product. The selling prices in time of scarcity (June to August) are twice as high as in time of food availability (October to May). These results confirm those obtained by Mahoungou (2018) who points out that the net margins of intermediaries in the horticultural sectors experience seasonal variations and the income generated by horticultural activities contribute to the welfare of the actors directly involved in them. For Moustier and David (1996) vegetables generally have two retail price ranges: one for the shortage period, another for the abundance period.

The monthly turnover for the sale of African eggplant is on average 265,435 FCFA, it reaches 960,000 FCFA for traders who sell more sacks of eggplants. These figures show the socio-economic importance of the sale of eggplant, which allows these vegetable sellers to diversify the income from their commercial activity and to ensure the empowerment of women involved in this sector. Business practices are the results of the socialization of a process of social acquisition (Bourdieu, 1970). The lack of proper bookkeeping by traders makes it difficult to conduct a more rigorous financial assessment of these very small commercial enterprises (VSEs) all operating in the informal sector. The popularization of management tools among these micro-entrepreneurs should give added value but also help to give a more rewarding look to commercial VSEs.

CONCLUSION

This study has identified the main socio-economic characteristics of the African eggplant trade in the urban markets of Brazzaville. The study shows that this business is run by women of various profiles. It interests young people as well as adults and constitutes an opportunity for professional integration and the empowerment of women who are involved in this sector. The study also reveals that the African eggplants sold in Brazzaville mainly come from rural production areas (Ngo, Igné, Kindamba, Mindouli, Boko, etc.) and are mainly produced through long-type marketing channels. In the goods supply, the actors in this sector maintain a diversity of relationships based on their social capital. The eggplant trade

is a profitable business that does not only diversify income but also fights against poverty and unemployment. However, it is important to conduct other complementary studies, in particular on: (i) formal and informal productive alliances between actors in the African eggplant sector, (ii) the technical and economic analysis of African eggplant production in one of the major production areas, (iii) the drivers and consumption patterns of eggplant.

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