



Charter on the operation of  
**local food reserves**  
in West Africa



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# Charter on the operation of **local food reserves** in West Africa



ROETABA

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# 1. Background, objectives and status of the Charter

## 1.1. Background

In 2012, West Africa adopted a regional food reserves strategy to address the issue of food security. This strategy hinges on four complementary lines of defence: (i) the local food reserves managed by farmers' groups or cooperative organisations; (ii) the national food security reserves managed by the States; (iii) the Regional Food Security Reserve (RFSR) implemented by ECOWAS through the Regional Agency for Agriculture and Food (RAAF), and iv) the solidarity and international aid mechanisms (United Nations humanitarian agencies, development partners and international NGOs).

Local food reserves play a key role in addressing the various aspects of food security and especially in preventing and managing food crises. There are three main types of local food reserves in West Africa: group supply systems, set up in food-deficit areas to ensure that local households have a secure supply of food; stockfeed supply systems, or feed banks, to ease livestock farmers' access to these commodities, particularly during the pastoral lean season; group marketing systems, situated in food-surplus areas, and which are designed, among other things, to give farmers greater negotiating power opposite buyers.

This first line of defence generally relies on farmers' or pastoralists' organisations with the capacity to anticipate and respond swiftly when a crisis hits rural populations, pending the intervention of the other lines of defence in the event of a serious crisis. The farmers' organisations (FOs) involved in managing food reserves also play a key role in generating income in food surplus areas and in supplying the national and regional food reserves through group marketing systems.

There was a boom in local food reserves during the 1970s and '80s, fuelled by strong support from the States, NGOs, United Nations organisations and technical and financial partners (TFPs). Then, in the 1990s, they went through a transitional phase when market deregulation obliged them to develop a more professional approach. The current level of structuring and performance of the FOs engaged in local food reserves, which varies from one country and ecological zone to another, was achieved by adopting best practices and adjustment mechanisms that have enabled them to weather the crises and even, in many cases, prosper.

## 1.2. Development process

This Charter on the Operation of Local Food Reserves is the outcome of two processes. The first of these saw the FOs themselves draft a "Handbook of Local Food Reserves in West Africa", covering every aspect of the FOs' storage and presenting the best practices they developed over the years. The second process institutionalised a dialogue between the three levels of defence, spotlighting the first line of defence for added credibility and permanence. These processes are unfolding against a backdrop of far-reaching changes in the region, prompted by the climate crisis and the security crisis, crises in natural resource management, changes in agricultural technologies, and the need to promote the role of women and young people in agriculture and pastoral farming.

This Charter springs from a determined effort by the FOs engaged in local food reserves to work together more closely on effectively improving local food reserve systems' governance, storage costs and the quality of the commodities, etc. It is, therefore, part of an individual and collective drive for progress, backed by all of the signatory FOs.

### 1.3. Objectives

The main objectives of the Charter on the Operation of Local Food Reserves are as follows:

1. Present the commitments made by the FOs engaged in local food reserves, and by their networks and national and regional umbrella organisations, when they sign the Charter.
2. Document the principles and best practices for organising and operating the various local food reserve systems, which guarantee their efficiency and permanence.

The signatory FOs' fulfilment of the commitments set out in the Charter can be expected to yield the following benefits:

- Facilitate coordination among the different levels of food reserves by defining the conditions to be met by the organisations engaged in local food reserves. This objective mainly relates to contractual arrangements between FOs and institutional buyers and consists in creating a quality label for the FOs. It also concerns the role that group supply systems and livestock feed banks could or should play in national crisis response plans to address food crises and pastoral crises.
- Help hone the performances of the FOs currently engaged in - or in the process of becoming engaged in - local food reserves by disseminating best practices, and enlist the States, West African regional organisations, NGOs, United Nations organisations and technical and financial partners to foster their adoption.

### 1.4. Status

The Charter reflects the voluntary commitments made by the organisations that sign it. To date, it is not binding, except for the articles referring to existing national regulations (such as national cooperation laws). The commitments contained in the Charter are consistent with and in synergy with the policy directions and principles of the ECOWAS Regional Agricultural Policy (ECOWAP), the ECOWAS regional food reserve strategy and the PREGEC Charter for Food Crisis Prevention and Management, adopted by the stakeholders in the Food Crisis Prevention Network (FCPN).

Alongside training initiatives, for example, the Charter is one of the mechanisms that will help FOs upgrade their management of local food reserves. When the signatory organisations deem it necessary, it may develop into a more binding system of incentives and penalties.

## 2. The three main systems of local food reserves

Most local food reserves are managed by groups or cooperatives of farmers, livestock farmers and pastoralists, which are generally members of larger organisations such as unions and federations. There are three main systems of local food reserves.

### 2.1. Group supply systems

These types of food reserves go by a variety of names, including “cereal banks”, “village granaries”, “village or community shops” and “food security granaries”.

The great majority of group supply systems are run by farmers’ organisations in food-deficit areas, most of which are situated in West Africa’s Sahel strip. Group supply systems usually operate along the following lines: just after harvest, when cereals are in plentiful supply and less expensive, the organisation in charge of the reserves buys a large quantity of cereals, which it stores for several months then resells in small quantities during the so-called “lean season”. Today, most group supply systems continue to operate on this principle, though some have diversified their offering to include other basic foodstuffs. Some also carry out several rotations per year. There has been a steep increase in the number of group supply initiatives in the Sahel countries over the last 40 years. However, various internal and external factors combined make them very vulnerable and many have encountered major difficulties that have sometimes jeopardised their very survival.

The main purpose of storing reserves in these systems is to ensure that food-deficit households can draw on a secure supply of food. It gives villages a supply of cereals during the winter (physical availability) and provides cheaper cereals during the lean season (affordability). These systems accordingly have a major direct impact on household food security and infant nutrition, particularly in villages that are difficult to access and situated at long distances from markets. They also play a role in community extension initiatives on the collection, storage and sale of agricultural products. Lastly, they play a role in regulating local markets by helping to curb price hikes in areas where there may be little competition among traders.

### 2.2. Group marketing systems

Group marketing systems are located in areas where cereal crops yield a surplus. They generally rely on cooperative-type organisations (such as unions or federations of farmers’ groups or cooperatives), which pool their members’ output, store and standardise the foodstuffs, then sell them to institutional buyers or traders. This system of deferred group marketing reaps scale economies, places farmers in a stronger position for negotiating with buyers and lets them sell when prices are higher.

These systems have a major positive impact on the value generated by family farms’ output (the price and quality of the products sold) and, it follows, on incomes and poverty levels in rural areas. When they are combined with supplies of agricultural inputs, these systems also play an important role in easing farmers’ access to credit, boosting yields and increasing overall availability. Lastly, when the stored produce is pledged as collateral, group marketing systems make it easier for FOs to obtain credit from a bank: double-lock community warrantage systems and warehouse receipt systems are prime examples.

FOs engaged in group marketing systems have forged business relationships with national food reserve structures and, more recently, with the ECOWAS Regional Food Security Reserve (RFSR). They bid for contracts with these public-sector organisations and sometimes negotiate direct purchasing contracts. Supplying public-sector mar-

kets is a major outlet for these FOs; it is also an opportunity to learn how to market products that must meet strict standards, insofar as these markets are generally far more demanding than the markets usually supplied by the FOs.

### 2.3. Stockfeed supply systems

Stockfeed supply systems, also known as “feed banks”, operate along similar lines to group supply systems for cereals. They were set up by livestock farmers’ organisations to counter livestock farmers’ (and in particular pastoralists’) growing vulnerability to pastoral crises in recent decades. In short, the systems make group stockfeed purchases when prices are reasonable (at the beginning of the dry season, in November or December), then resell them when forage resources becomes scarcer (from February to June). The livestock farmers set up a working capital fund in the first year, with or without the help of outside subsidies. The stored stockfeed is intended essentially for cattle and small ruminants. It consists primarily in agro-industrial by-products (brans, feeding cakes, etc.) and processed feeds.

These systems make it possible to protect and save the herd, which is the main livelihood of households engaged in livestock farming and mixed farming, thereby preventing these households from falling into food insecurity. By helping to ensure supplies for transhumant herds, stockfeed supply systems also lower the risks of conflict in the host areas. These systems are all the more important as stockfeed is scarce during the fodder lean season in the ECOWAS area and it is harder for food security stakeholders to take swift, appropriate action if a pastoral crisis strikes.

Given the difficulty of entering conflict areas and the highly variable routes taken by transhumant pastoralists, livestock farmers’ organisations and pastoral communities are testing the establishment of mobile livestock feed banks, close to areas hosting a high concentration of transhumant pastoralists.

## 3. The FOs' commitments to ensuring the effective and efficient operation of local food reserves

### Chapter I – Setting up local food reserves

#### *Article 1 – The objectives of local food reserves*

We, the farmers' organisations that are signatories to this charter, undertake to follow a clearly-defined objective when setting up local food reserves and throughout their management, namely:

- to promote the group marketing of our members' surpluses by carrying out various post-harvest operations;
- and/or to guarantee food security through the group supply of food (for humans or for livestock) for the use of our members or of a community.

Whichever of these objectives is pursued, we undertake to promote best practices in local food reserves.

#### *Article 2 – Participatory approach*

We undertake to adopt a participatory approach to setting up and managing local food reserves, by involving all of our members at every stage and ensuring that women and young people are included, without overlooking other stakeholders such as traditional systems of chiefs, regional authorities, local government bodies, etc.

#### *Article 3 – The importance of conducting a feasibility study before setting up reserves*

We undertake to condition the establishment of new local food reserves on a minimum feasibility study to gauge the economic and social likelihood of success.

#### *Article 4 – Applying best practices*

We undertake to gradually and consistently implement the best practices set out in the "Handbook of Local Food Reserves in West Africa" in order to improve our outcomes.

### Chapter II – The establishment, governance and administration of the organisations engaged in local food reserves

#### *Article 5 – Recommendation to form a cooperative*

We, the farmers' organisations signatory to this charter, are mindful of the advantages of the establishment, governance and administration of local food reserves in accordance with the provisions of the OHADA Uniform Act on General Commercial Law in Africa. We undertake to gradually amend our articles of association and operational procedures to bring them into compliance with these provisions. For those of our member organisations operating in non-OHADA member countries, we undertake to gradually amend our articles of association and operational procedures to bring them into compliance with the national provisions governing cooperative societies and other legal forms of professional organisation.

*Article 6 – Existence of clear, common rules*

We undertake to lay down and abide by clear governance rules (articles of association, rules of procedure) that are understood and accepted by all of our members.

*Article 7 – Members' cooperative spirit and loyalty*

We undertake to foster a cooperative spirit in our members and promote member loyalty by rewarding those who honour their commitments to the cooperative and in particular commitments to supply cereals (or other commodities).

*Article 8 – Non-members' access to services*

We undertake to define the rules by which farmers or households who are not members of our organisations may access the services provided (purchase, storage, sale). When our objective is food security, we ensure that these rules facilitate vulnerable households' access to the services provided.

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## Chapter III – Financial and administrative management

*Article 9 – The required human resources*

We, the umbrella organisations signatory to this charter, are mindful of the benefits of having at least one accountant in our administrative management unit when we are engaged in managing local food reserves; we undertake to work towards such a situation and, to the best of our abilities, to provide a minimum of training in administration and accountancy to the managers of the unions and groups that do not have the means to employ an accountant.

We undertake to promote training in financial and administrative management for elected members so that they can acquire a sound understanding of their organisations' situation.

*Article 10 – Standards-compliant accounting*

We undertake to maintain transparent accounting records in accordance with the national accounting standards. We are mindful of the benefits of cost accounting and, as far as possible, we strive to adopt it.

*Article 11 – Maintaining sufficient funds to operate*

We undertake to define and apply management rules that will allow us to constitute and maintain sufficient working capital for our operations.

*Article 12 – Striving for financial autonomy*

We undertake to gradually set up internal resource-usage mechanisms to increase our financial autonomy and make it easier for our members to obtain bank credit.

*Article 13 – Diversifying sources of financing*

We undertake to diversify our relations with financial institutions as far as possible in order to improve financing opportunities and promote the interests of our member unions and groups in a fair manner.

## Chapter IV – Technical management of local food reserves

### *Article 14 – Existence of a technical manual on inventory management*

We, the farmers' organisations signatory to this charter, are mindful that having a specific manual clearly setting out the standards for the use and handling of the stored commodities is of great assistance for the sound technical and administrative management of the stored commodities. We undertake to work on producing such a manual, drawing on the best practices and recommendations contained in the "Handbook of Local Food Reserves in West Africa". This manual must also be understood and accepted by all those involved.

### *Article 15 – The quality of the infrastructures*

We are mindful of the need to have buildings (and the associated infrastructures) that are fit for purpose, i.e. that meet the standards for storing foodstuffs and are equipped with tools and instruments for checking the stored commodities and maintaining them in good condition. We undertake to gradually acquire such infrastructures and take the appropriate measures to reduce the risks of fire and flooding.

### *Article 16 – Infrastructure maintenance*

We undertake to perform proper maintenance of the storehouses and invest the necessary resources in repairs.

### *Article 17 – Required equipment*

We undertake to invest in the equipment and services necessary for efficient quality control of the stored products.

### *Article 18 – Procedures for maintaining the quality of the stored commodities*

We undertake to set up systems to maintain the quality of the stored commodities to the standards in force in the region.

### *Article 19 – Traceability of the commodities<sup>1</sup>*

We undertake to gradually set up system of traceability (origin – destination) of the stored foodstuffs.

### *Article 20 – Mutual support among organisations*

We, the farmers' organisations signatory to this charter, are very mindful of the benefits and usefulness of mutually supporting each other, with the more experienced inventory management organisations providing support for those experiencing difficulties.

### *Article 21 – Networking and pooling services*

To promote the long-term viability of our organisations, we undertake to look for opportunities to pool our services (such as accounting and inventory tracking) among groups and unions, and set up networks (between unions or federations) that will enable us to achieve scale economies.

1. This article mainly concerns group marketing systems.

## Chapter V – Risk management

### *Article 22 – Mandatory insurance*

We, the farmers' organisations signatory to this charter, undertake to insure our food reserves against risks for which insurance is mandatory (theft, fire, stock spoilage) and accessible. Where we do not have access to insurance services (for want of providers on the market), we undertake to define, with our members, mechanisms that would enable us to assume, at our level, the losses caused by a potential claim.

### *Article 23 – Price risk management<sup>2</sup>*

We undertake to adopt practices that will minimise the risks associated with price fluctuations. More specifically, this consists in setting a cautious purchase price<sup>3</sup> for farmers and granting variable discounts, depending on the selling price and the organisations' costs. We are mindful of the benefits of setting up a buffer fund (after a preliminary feasibility study) and engaging in year-round sales.

### *Article 24 – Climate risk management<sup>4</sup>*

We intend to actively search for insurance services on the market that are capable of covering the financial losses caused by climate events.

### *Article 25 – Transport risk management*

We undertake to improve our practices with regard to monitoring transport conditions, by gradually introducing written, signed contracts with the hauliers (requiring them to comply with transport procedures, in particular), by making sure that the transport takes place in the proper conditions, and by checking that the haulier holds Carte Brune insurance for cross-border transport.

2. This article pertains more to group marketing systems than to the other two systems.

3. The price the FO pays farmers after taking two factors into consideration: to limit the risk of losses for the FO (in the event that prices do not increase significantly between harvest time and the lean season), the FO should set a price for purchasing from the producers that is not too high; to encourage farmers to sell to the FO, the FO should set a purchase price that is not too low.

4. This article mainly pertains to group marketing systems.

## Chapter VI – Improving information about the markets

### *Article 26 – Establishment of monitoring information*

We, the umbrella organisations signatory to this charter, undertake to gradually set up an information system to inform us of the situation of our member unions and groups, so that we can make investment and operational decisions on the basis of clearly identified needs.

### *Article 27 – Sharing information with humanitarian programmes<sup>5</sup>*

Insofar as the material and logistic conditions allow, we undertake to participate in consultation mechanisms on preventing and managing food and pastoral crises, and to share the information requested by these mechanisms. The characteristics of the information shared (subject areas, frequency, geographical coverage, level of detail, etc.) will be specified by local agreements between the FOs and the humanitarian programmes. This dialogue with the other stakeholders aims to more effectively coordinate actions to prevent food and pastoral crises and, in so doing, prevent sales slumps during the lean season (cf. *article 35*).

5. This article mainly concerns group supply systems and livestock feed banks.

## Chapter VII – Local food reserves' welfare role

### *Article 28 – Promoting equity*

We, the farmers' organisations signatory to this charter, undertake to refrain from any discrimination on the grounds of religion, political affiliation, gender or ethnic origin. The establishment of local food reserves effectively promotes equity in the local economy and helps prevent social conflicts.

### *Article 29 – Vulnerable groups' access to food reserves and the welfare function*

When our objective is food security, we undertake:

1. to establish mechanisms to ensure that vulnerable groups have access to quality food reserves at an affordable price (cereals and stockfeed).
2. to the best of our ability, and circumstances permitting, to deliver foodstuffs, free of charge, to households unable to buy them because of temporary hardship or chronic vulnerability. To do so, we may actively seek the support of government welfare or food security programmes to cover the specific costs of these initiatives to aid vulnerable households.

## Chapter VIII – Members' equal rights

We are mindful of the importance of paying great attention to ensuring equal rights for all members of our organisations, regardless of their gender, age or ethnic group.

### *Article 30 – Upholding gender equity*

We, the farmers' organisations signatory to this charter, undertake to uphold gender equity by encouraging women to exercise responsibility in local food reserve governance bodies, in order to leverage the local economy's full development potential.

### *Article 31 – Encouraging women and young people to get involved*

We undertake to reach out to women and young people to encourage more of them to become members.

### *Article 32 – Adapting the products stored to women's needs*

We undertake to move towards diversifying the stored products in order to more effectively meet women's needs.

### *Article 33 – Women's access to credit*

We undertake to make it easier for women to obtain credit, if necessary by laying down different conditions for men and women. At general meetings, we undertake to inform members of the proportion of credits granted to women.

### *Article 34 – Representation of women and young people in the governance bodies*

We undertake to set targets for women and young people's representation in our governance bodies and to analyse the extent to which these targets have been met at each annual general meeting.

## Chapter IX – Relations with institutional stakeholders

### *Article 35 – Compliance with institutional procurement contracts<sup>6</sup>*

We, the farmers' organisations signatory to this charter, undertake to abide by the prices, volumes, quality and delivery dates laid down in contracts for supplying national public reserves and the RFSR Regional Food Security Reserve.

### *Article 36 – Coordinating food crisis prevention and management<sup>7</sup>*

We undertake to coordinate our initiatives with the government programmes for managing food and pastoral crises, insofar as these programmes allow us to do so. In particular, this coordination implies that we take part in the national crisis management units (cf. *article 26*).

### *Article 37 – Conducting advocacy initiatives*

We recognise our responsibility to help bring about changes in the legislation pertaining to us by lobbying the public-sector institutions closest to our sector, while upholding the principle of subsidiarity.

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6. This article concerns only group marketing systems.

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7. This article concerns only group supply systems and livestock feed banks.

## 4. Charter application procedure

### 4.1. External conditions propitious to application of the Charter

While application of the Charter is primarily at the initiative of the FOs engaged in local food reserves, it also depends on a number of external conditions. They include:

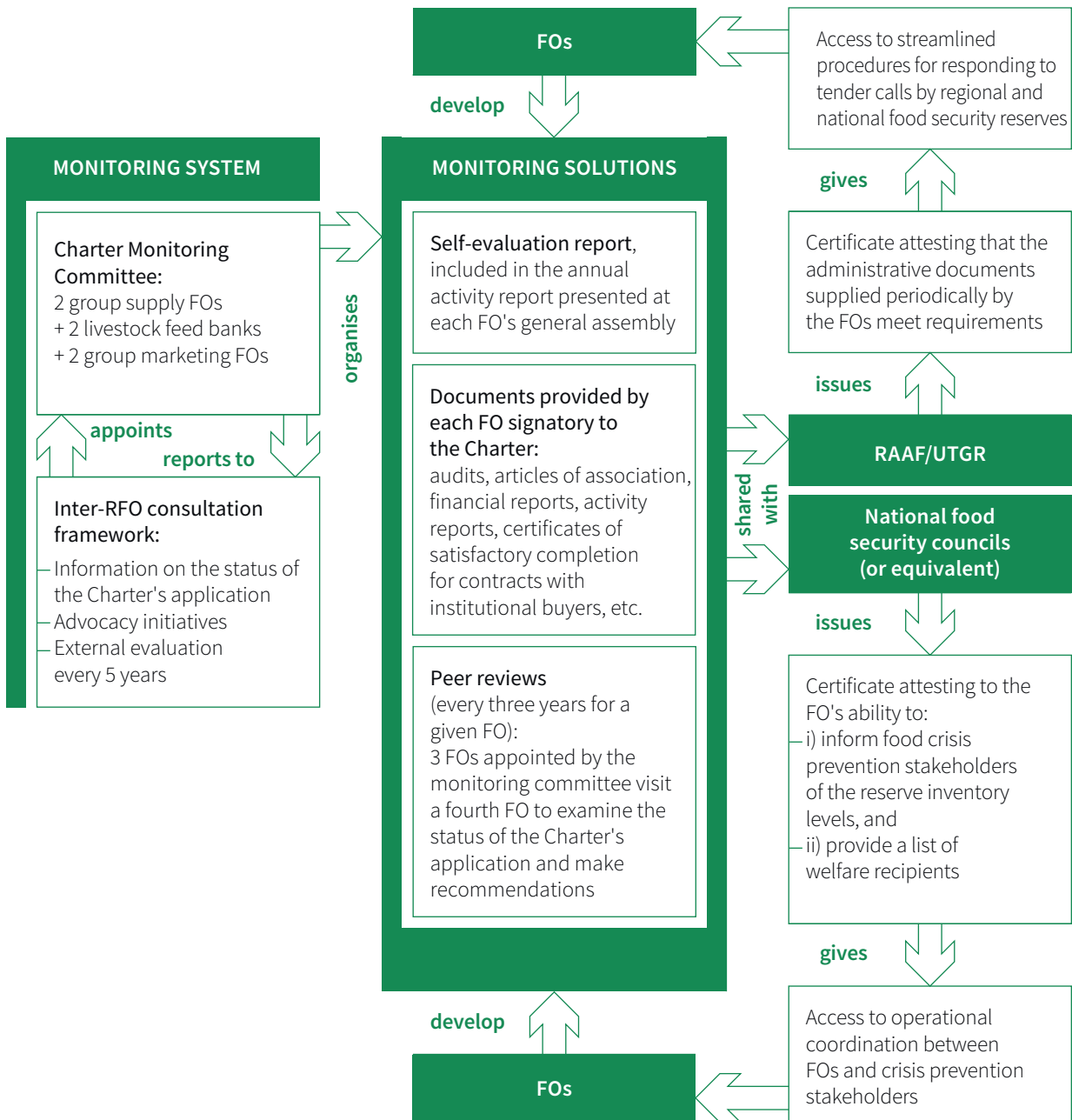
- The implementation by the States and the regional institutions, with the support of their technical and financial partners, of all of the actions to bolster and promote local food reserves, as defined in the “ECOWAS Action Framework to Support Local Food Reserves”.
- The compliance of the stakeholders concerned with the principle of information sharing, dialogue and coordination of actions, as set out in the “Food Crisis Prevention and Management Charter for the Sahel and West Africa (PREGEC)”.

### 4.2. Monitoring and evaluation system

The Charter monitoring and evaluation system will be underpinned by the following factors (see also the right-hand section of *figure 1* below:

- The preparation by each signatory FO of self-evaluation reports for inclusion in the annual report presented at the annual general meeting.
- The preparation and provision to different stakeholders (see below) of various documents concerning the governance (articles of association, annual report, chairman’s report), financial management (audits, financial report) and, if applicable, commercial operations (certificates of completion/performance for contracts with institutional buyers).
- Peer reviews. Every three years, each Charter signatory will be visited by a delegation of three FOs engaged in local food reserves, whose role will be to assess the extent to which each FO applied the Charter, and make recommendations.
- These peer reviews will be organised by a “Charter Monitoring Committee” made up of two group supply FOs, two FOs engaged in managing livestock feed banks and two group marketing FOs.
- The Charter Monitoring Committee will be set up by the regional professional organisations’ (RPO) consultation framework<sup>8</sup>, to which it will report annually on its activities.
- In addition to leading the Charter Monitoring Committee, the inter-RPO consultation framework will be tasked with i) disseminating information about the Charter’s application status; ii) conducting appropriate advocacy initiatives to lobby public institutions for the consolidation of local food reserves; iii) organising an external evaluation of the Charter every five years; iv) proposing amendments based on the results of the evaluations or on members’ proposals.

8. This consultation framework involves the ROPPA, the RBM and the APSS.



**Figure n°1**  
 Charter monitoring and evaluation system and incentives for its application

### 4.3. Incentives for FOs to sign and apply the Charter

Group marketing FOs will find it to their advantage to apply the Charter because of the technical, economic and financial benefits it brings them. The following provisions also provide an incentive to apply the Charter in their dealings with institutional buyers (RFSR, national food security reserves, etc.):

- Each signatory FO is to forward all of the administrative documents required to respond to institutional calls for tenders to the RFSR (UTGR/RAAF) Management Technical Unit.
- The UTGR will examine these documents and, if they meet the requirements, will issue a certificate of compliance valid for a period of six months or one year.
- Once the FO has received the certificate of compliance, it will be eligible to use the streamlined processes when it responds to public-sector calls for tenders (RFSR and national food security reserves).

The group supply FOs and those managing livestock feed banks will also be motivated to apply the Charter because of the social, economic and financial benefits they will reap by doing so. Moreover, when coordinating with stakeholders engaged in preventing food and pastoral crises, or welfare stakeholders, the following provisions will act as an additional incentive to implement the Charter:


- Each signatory FO may send all of the documents and information necessary for coordination with the other stakeholders to the national institution in charge of preventing and managing food crises.
- The national institution will issue a certificate confirming that the FO is authorised to share the information it holds about its inventory status (volume, composition, quality, etc.) after the harvest and during the lean season, and about the households eligible for welfare support (within the FO's scope of operation).
- For the FO, the certificate will facilitate operational coordination with the public and non-governmental stakeholders in charge of crisis prevention and social welfare.











**S**INCE 2012, West Africa has implemented a regional strategy of food security reserves underpinned by three complementary lines of defence: local food reserves managed by groups or cooperative organisations, national food security reserves managed by the States and, lastly, the Regional Food Security Reserve (RFSR). This last line of defence is implemented by ECOWAS through the Regional Agency for Agriculture and Food (RAAF).

Local food reserves play a key role in preventing and managing cyclical and economic crises, supplying the market and replenishing national and regional food security reserves. Given the risks and vulnerabilities they face, the farmers' organisations operating local food reserves are urged to more effectively play their role as the first line of defence against food and nutrition insecurity. With support from ECOWAS, these organisations and their regional networks initiated the production of regional reference guidelines that leverage best practices in the field, and the design and deployment of training courses for the managers of local food reserves.

The regional reference guidelines are set out in three complementary documents:

- The **“Handbook of Local Food Reserves in West Africa”**, which is the benchmark guide to the institutional, technical and financial management of local food reserves, based on best practices developed by the farmers' organisations;
- The **“Multi-stakeholder Support Framework for Local Grain Storage in West Africa”**, which outlines the support mechanisms used by the national and regional public authorities and the international partners;
- This **“Charter on the Operation of Local Food Reserves”**. When the FOs operating local food reserves adopt and abide by the charter, it paves the way to two outcomes: contracts with the national and regional institutions in charge of managing local food reserves, and better coordination with food crisis prevention stakeholders.

All ECOWAS publications on local food reserves are available on the RAAF website: [www.araa.org](http://www.araa.org)