

## Women at the market: Innovative pro-poor green gram market dynamics

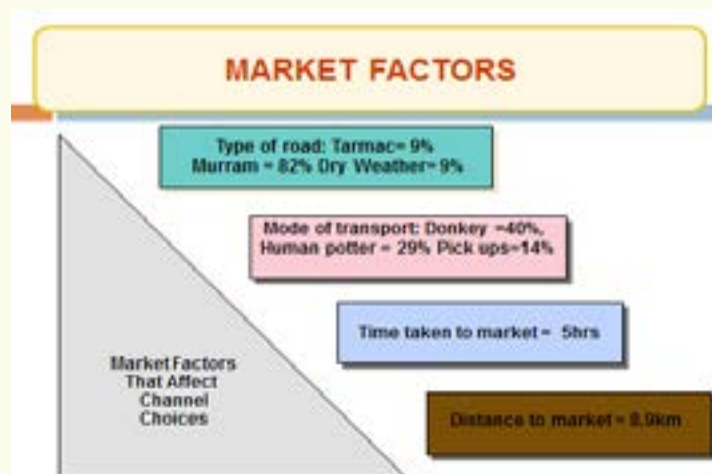
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### Background

Mbeere Sub-County is a low semi-arid zone of Kenya that is covered by three agro-ecological zones; the marginal cotton zone (LM4); the lower midland livestock-millet zone (LMS); and the lowland livestock millet zone (L5). Green grams, cow peas and sorghum play the dual role of food and cash crops. Maize does not perform well. There is potential for increased production of these crops especially using drought tolerant seeds developed by the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI) and other partners.

The women of Mbeere South Sub-County market farm produce mainly as individuals (87.3%) and to a lesser extent in collective efforts (5.7%). The rest (7%) do not realize marketable surplus for sale. The average marketed volumes for cowpeas are between 20-50 kgs while those of green gram acts lie between 1.5 to 2 bags of 90 kilograms. To sell green grams in Mbeere South Sub-County women take an average of 5 hours to access the nearest market. The average distance to the market is 8.9 km and the main mode of transportation used in the area is donkeys (40%), followed by women potters at 29%. Infrastructure is poor with 8.3% of the population with access to tarmac roads; the rest use either all-weather or dry-weather roads to access the market. These are the underlying factors for choice of marketing channel (Figure 1).

As much as many women are aware of alternative market outlets to their local market, accessibility is low due to constraints of transport costs. Marketing individually leads to low bargaining power. Most women do not store their produce and like many other farmers they sell their produce at harvest time when prices are at the lowest. The calculated gross margin analyses when sales are made immediately after harvest indicate that profits are minimal. This keeps farmers looped in a vicious poverty cycle.



## **New Innovation**

The Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI) project entitled “Making agri-food systems work for the rural poor in Eastern and Southern Africa” funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) has been under implementation in Mbeere South sub-county for the last three years. The main objective of the project was to stimulate the adaptation of pro-poor agri-food systems innovations as a contribution to improving food security and sustainable natural resource management. In addition, the project sought to re-orient marketing activities to enable smallholder resource-poor farmers, particularly women, to successfully link to potential markets and to access market opportunities. For such women, farming needed to go beyond productivity, to incorporate profitability and competitiveness.

This was achieved by facilitating 25 independent farmer groups to form a farmer association: the Kiambere Produce and Marketing Community Based Organization (CBO). The CBO has a membership of 513 farmers: 114 men and 399 women. The core mandate of the CBO is to store the harvested produce, establish a value addition mechanism, secure a larger market share and increase the bargaining power of the farmers. Women feel that the producer group will help to reduce the cost of accessing inputs, the time taken in accessing the markets and enable farmers to fetch higher prices for their goods. This is expected to result in increased overall household welfare.

## **Building partnerships**

The KARI project facilitated the Kiambere Produce and Marketing Community Based Organization (CBO) to have a policy dialogue with the County officials. The meeting brought together the county officials; officials from KARI, farmer group representatives and representatives of Non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The aim of the meeting was to discuss the way forward in achieving commercialization of green grams through value addition (polishing and packaging) and the role of each partner. The county government committed to provide an enabling infrastructure including a central store and a value addition plant where the farmers would sort, polish and package green grams.

## **Limitations**

Prices of agricultural products are particularly volatile increasing the risk of transaction for the women. Risks increase as produce and market value increases. Farmers are not fully aware of this risk exposure and therefore lack the ability to deal with this financial risk. A long hunger gap (up to six months), in Mbeere, in the absence of alternative income sources, causes sales of food crops to take place immediately after harvest when prices are low.

## **What next in terms of development?**

Group formation and group dynamics if not well handled can be detrimental to the functioning of a group. The Kiambere Produce and Marketing Community Based Organization (CBO) requires time and support to develop strong group management systems as it is in its formative stages. The group is still building trust, assessing new production technologies and exploring market opportunities and determining related risks.

As a group it is easier to achieve marketable volumes and have a higher bargaining power. Availability of market incentives such as access to credit, abolishing or waiver of market levies, encourage farmers to participate in the market.

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