Markets for All: The Cost of a Banana

In Zimbabwe, smallholder farmers continue to face many challenges that inhibit their agricultural productivity. Apart from the impact of climate change and related extreme weather phenomena like cyclones, flooding, drought, and pests and diseases, smallholder farmers’ access to farm inputs like improved seeds and fertilizer has declined markedly, especially during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, as a result of the restrictions on movement.

A study commissioned by the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN) and OXFAM Southern Africa (SAF) showed that only 20 percent of smallholder farmers in Southern Africa have access to formal markets. The majority of smallholder farmers sell their produce in local markets due to financial and infrastructural challenges.

Molline Dhilwayo, a female smallholder farmer in Zimbabwe, has been involved in banana farming for the past ten years. In her village, Honde Valley, she is among hundreds of other farmers reaping a bountiful harvest of bananas during this time of the year - September. As a result, the local informal markets in Honde Valley are swamped with bananas of all bunches and sizes, and often farmers struggle to find a willing buyer. Every harvest season, Molline and a few other smallholder farmers make their way to Mbare, in Harare, in the hope of securing better prices for their bananas at the country’s biggest market.

Molline is among the few farmers in her community who brave the over-300 kilometre journey to the capital city every season, in the hope that her produce will fetch a good price. Due to inadequate storage and poor post-harvest management, Molline must transport her bananas while still unripe, to avoid damage. Once in Harare, Molline spends more than a week waiting for her bananas to ripen before she can sell them at the Mbare Musika market. During this time in Harare, Molline will be staying and sleeping in open air structures within the market where she can closely watch her bananas.

At Mbare Musika, Molline joins other smallholder farmers who would have travelled from distant villages in search of bigger and more lucrative markets for their fruits and vegetables. Women and youth smallholder farmers make up the majority of traders at this market. Without appropriate facilities for accommodation, they spend their nights in the open air market.
“There is no safe place for us to sleep here. Therefore, as women, we stay together at night for our own safety. We hope to sell off the last of our bananas before we can head back home with money to pay school fees and buy food for our children,” said Molline to the researcher from FANRPAN.

Accounting for 17 percent of the country’s Gross Domestic Product, agriculture is the backbone of Zimbabwe’s economy. However, the smallholder farmers who sustain the sector and the economy receive little to no income value, relatively speaking, despite being the ones who feed the nation. Women like Molline and her trader friends rely on agriculture for their livelihoods and for the wellbeing of their households. The money they earn from their produce is used for school fees, medical assistance, food, water and other needs. Therefore, adequate access to sustainable and profitable markets is a prerequisite for their financial stability, their development and their way out of poverty.

Agricultural sector players in Southern Africa must streamline markets and value chains to ensure they are more inclusive for smallholder farmers, especially for the youth and women. A safe physical market environment with adequate gender-inclusive amenities is also a necessity for their wellbeing, and subsequently for food and nutrition security.

The Markets Campaign

Following the successful implementation of the supermarkets and agriculture markets research projects, FANRPAN, in collaboration with Oxfam SAF and the Southern Africa People Solidarity Network (SAPSN), are implementing a Markets Campaign project in Southern Africa. The campaign focuses on access to markets and supermarkets by smallholder farmers, and takes into account their vulnerability to shocks such as climate change-related events and, of late, the COVID-19 pandemic.

The campaign seeks to increase stakeholders’ awareness of barriers and constraints that smallholder farmers face in accessing markets, and to provide evidence-based solutions to create an enabling environment for farmers. This campaign strategy also builds on the provisions for market access by smallholder farmers, as provided by the global, continental and regional policy frameworks.

The campaign seeks to strengthen and coordinate smallholder farmers, especially women and youths, to have increased access to sustainable and profitable agriculture markets, supported by an enabling policy environment. The emphasis is on collective action at regional and national levels, building on ongoing programmatic work and campaigns in the focus countries (Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe).

For more details and on how to participate in this campaign, please visit the FANRPAN website: https://fanrpan.org/oxfam/.