

The Role of Agricultural Marketing on Empowering Rural Farmers In Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents a more qualitative study on the role of agricultural marketing on improving the livelihoods of rural farmers in Masvingo province. The study focuses on four issues (1) major crops grown (2) current markets for produce (3) institutions that support farmers (4) challenges faced by farmers in production, pricing, promotion and transporting produce to profitable markets. Data was gathered from 361 respondents being farmers specialising in the production of maize, groundnuts, small grain crops and vegetables, extension officers, bursars of boarding schools, churches and hospitals as well as supermarkets owners using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The findings indicate that maize, rapoko, millet, groundnuts and vegetables are widely grown; GMB, Urban dealers, boarding schools, hospitals, churches and Supermarkets are the leading markets currently absorbing produce; inputs supply, transport, Lack of market information affect farmers in pricing agricultural produce. The paper concludes that rural farmers lack market information as they still rely on the traditional selling approach. The paper recommends government to improve the state of the roads; establish training centers to equip farmers with marketing skills. Moreover, there is need for the rural farmers to establish their own marketing board which will be responsible for identifying markets and delivery of produce direct to the target markets.

Key words: Agricultural Marketing, Rural Farmers, Empowerment

1. Introduction

Food security and provision remains the biggest challenge to many countries across the globe and Zimbabwe is no exception. Zimbabwe's economy is agrarian and out of 13 million people, about 70% of the population lives in rural areas. There is also a claim that more than 60% of the national agricultural productivity comes from the rural farmers, yet these farmers continue to live in abject poverty. In line with this Rohrbach and Okwach, 1997; Selvaraju et al, 2004) noted that small-scale resource constrained farming systems are characterized by low productivity and widespread persistent poverty. Zimbabwe's farming system is bimodal consisting of the minority large scale commercial farmers and more than 2 million small scale farmers from the communal resettlements and small scale commercial producers. The large scale commercial farmers sell produce to the profitable markets unlike the small scale rural farmers who simply produce and then struggle to find markets for their agricultural produce. Farming system in the rural areas is characterised by use of organic fertilizers and retained seeds which will generate poor quality crops compared to those from the commercial farms hence produce from the small scale rural farmers are usually sold at below the market price.

1.1 Institutions that render assistance to farmers in Zimbabwe

When Zimbabwe attained independence in 1980, the government made efforts to increase agricultural production and many institutions were created to support the agricultural system. The institutions which were created and empowered to support agriculture include the Grain Marketing Board (GMB), Agricultural Technical and Extension Services (Agritex), Farm mechanization department among others. With increased support from these institutions, agricultural productivity increased. However, despite the existence of above institutions, farmers in the rural areas remain marginalized in terms of marketing agricultural commodities. The fact that prices of agricultural products are normally determined by the market forces of demand and supply puts the rural farmer at a disadvantage as the farmers lack market information or have sketchy information about the markets, Kanyenze, (2011). Of the current markets that are buying produce from the rural farmers, only GMB is buying at lucrative prices but delay in payment has made many farmers resort to private traders who buy at throw - away price leaving the rural farmers unable to meet the basic cost of living.

Moreover, the works of Shumba (1993) suggests that rural farmers are characterized by small scale farm sizes, poor investments in farming inputs (hybrid seeds and organic fertilisers) and are labour – intensive with mixed

cropping (maize, groundnuts, peas, rapoko) for example, all under one acreage. These farmers do not afford inorganic fertilisers, hence over reliance on organic fertilisers mainly in the form of cattle manure which in most cases is applied in small quantities while its quality is poor or difficult to ascertain.

The rural farmers even fail to produce enough food to meet their household needs. Where these farmers produce surplus food there is the challenge of market information as a result traders from towns and cities exploit the rural farmers by buying produce at give-away prices to resell at competitive prices enriching themselves in the process at the expense of the farmers who continue to be impoverished. Additionally, the farmers face a multiplicity of challenges that threaten their livelihoods chief among them climate variability and change, infertile marginal soils, (Altier; and Koohfkan, 2008). Small-scale farmers just like other people also need income for various purposes including paying school fees for their children, buying inputs in the form of seed, fertilizer and for purchasing and or even hiring other farm implements among many other purposes. Whilst some of these farmers are able to produce surplus food in their farms, most of them are not fully equipped with how to get the most out of this surplus as they do not have marketing skills or even the market information. Product decisions, pricing strategies, promotional mix decisions as well as distribution strategies remain mystery on the part of the rural farmers especially those in Masvingo. This is because in some cases some rural farmers have never been to the major cities and towns hence they remain disconnected to markets that have the potential to absorb their products at lucrative prices. The rural farmers mainly rely on local customers found at growth points and the many intermediaries who come to buy produce at very low prices to resell at competitive prices.

Worse still the majority if not all of these farmers are not even able to create budgets or to do cost benefit analysis to check for viability of their farm enterprises and as such are usually operating at a loss most of the time. Another challenge facing these communal farmers is that they do not keep their farming records like size of farm, inputs used, fertilizers applied, labour requirements for all farm operations, the amount of harvest they get for each crop and income they get from selling each crop. The above mentioned information is important if rural farmers are to account for what they spent against what they generate. In fact, among other challenges, farmers in the rural communities remain marginalized in terms of poor roads network, lack of modern communication facilities, difficult access to major hospitals, clinics and schools, absence of electricity as well as over reliance on primitive methods of farming. Tomatoes and vegetables are common among the majority of small scale farmers and these are grown in a fragmented system as each family struggles to produce enough to sustain family basic necessities. These products from the rural areas finally find their destination in the country's major cities and towns' market centres such as the big Mbare Musika in Harare, Kudzanai Msika in Gweru, Mucheke in Masvingo, among other urban markets. The Mbare Musika has become the commercial hub or nerve centre for all the country's national consummate as all cereal types and horticultural products from all over the country's districts will finally find their destination there. The marketing system in Zimbabwe is characterized by many intermediaries or agents who flock to the rural areas to buy produce from the farmers at a very low price to resell at competitive prices leaving the farmers unable to meet the day to day cost of life. The colonial regime had created market centers for produce mainly from the commercial farmers such as Farm and City where agricultural produce are sold at competitive prices. This paper therefore argues that the current marketing system of agricultural commodities is marginalizing rural farmers as they continue to live in abject poverty despite of efforts and resources invested in agricultural business. Additionally, this paper outlines the challenges rural farmers face in marketing agricultural products to profitable markets.

The Agricultural Marketing Concept

There are many definitions for the term 'agricultural marketing'. The National Commission on Agriculture in India defines agricultural marketing as a process which starts with a decision to produce a saleable farm commodity and it involves all aspects of market structure of system both functional and institutional based on technical and economic considerations and includes pre and post - harvest operations, assembling, grading, storage, transportation and distribution. On the other hand, the Indian Council of Agricultural Research defines agricultural marketing as involving three most important functions namely (1) assembling (2) processing and lastly (3) distribution. An analysis of the above two definitions reveal that there are important activities which farmers are expected to perform before and after harvesting until the product finally reaches the customer site. According to the above definitions, successful marketing of agricultural products depends on the functions that farmers play in assembling, storing, transporting and distributing produce from the farms to the target customers. These researchers believe that rural farmers in Zimbabwe particularly those in Masvingo still lag behind in terms of agricultural marketing as they still rely on the primitive methods of assembling, traditional methods of storage systems, for example, farmers in rural Masvingo use what is known as 'Chitata' and 'Dura' in storing groundnuts and cereals. These storage systems do not have proper ventilation hence crops such as groundnuts

and maize can be affected by moisture hence the quality is compromised and the result is that such crops will not fetch high price at the market. In this paper, researchers are keen to define the term ‘agricultural marketing’ as a system of production whereby farmers incorporate the marketing concept in product decisions, pricing policies, promotional strategies and distributions decisions in order to meet the needs, demands, and preferences of the target customers. The definition of ‘agricultural marketing’ by the Indian Council on agriculture also exposes rural farmers in Zimbabwe particularly those in Masvingo as these farmers simply produce, harvest and sell produce with little or no value addition. For example, farmers in Masvingo produce oil crops like groundnuts, and sunflower which will be processed into cooking oil and sold at lucrative prices, but these farmers lack milling machines for these crops hence they only sell the raw crops which do not fetch attractive prices thus farmers remain poor despite efforts invested in agricultural business. Given the meaning for agricultural marketing, the marketing system prevailing among the rural farmers in Masvingo Province is the traditional ‘selling approach’ where farmers simply produce crops and look for customers from whom to dispose of such produce thus farmers are not generating much profits hence they remain poor.

Empowering rural farmers through Agricultural Marketing

In the past research and agricultural development organisations and agencies were preoccupied with developing strategies of increasing food productivity by small holder farmers, however, today there seems to be a shift of focus in which researchers and agencies seek to understand ways and means of improving the livelihoods of farmers especially those in rural communities through identifying profitable markets for their produce. Smith (2001) identified rural development as a complicated process involving a network of actors and stakeholders who pool resources together in achieving set objectives. In other words Smith views rural development to be a product of stakeholder co-operation in which various parties should come together in bringing about rural development. In Zimbabwe stakeholders who can participate in developing rural areas include the government, rural farmers, transport agencies, development agencies such as district development Fund (DDF), Rural District Councils (RDCs) and buyers of agricultural produce which can be the local supermarkets, wholesalers, national buyers of grain such as the Grain Marketing Board (GMB). While it is the primary duty of the government to develop rural areas, the prevailing political and economic situation has crippled the government’s capacity to improve infrastructure in the rural communities. On the other hand the private sector is unable to assist government through corporate social responsibility programs as most companies across industries are facing liquidity challenges and are operating below 50% capacity utilization.

Also the works of Smith (2001) supported by Douthwaite et al, (2003), call for stakeholder co-operation in order to achieve development in rural communities, in Zimbabwe there is a challenge of capacity since the above actors are suffering from resource constraints as a result of the whole economy which is shattered at the moment where infrastructural development is not only a problem in the rural areas but even in the major towns and cities, where roads are in a state of disrepair with numerous pot holes and driving in these roads have become a nightmare for motorists. In this paper, a call is made to the rural farmers themselves to form partnerships and start to identify the critical resources that they need to develop infrastructure in their communities. Furthermore, we also argue that rural farmers can take advantage of the presence of many non - governmental organisations (NGOs) operating in their communities and seek assistance in terms of improving the state of roads and bridges so that access to market centres is improved.

Challenges faced by rural farmers in marketing agricultural produce

Storage methods

A research carried out in India revealed absence or improper warehouses as a serious challenge faced by many farmers whose produce will go bad and finally lead to losses on the part of the farmer. This challenge is not peculiar to the Indian farmers only as farmers in rural Masvingo also experience the same as they store produce in the traditional warehouses with poor storage facilities where produce quickly get rotten and become unfit for human consumption. The worst affected farmers include growers of maize, groundnuts, vegetables and tomatoes hence produce is quickly sold soon after harvest to ward off the danger of perishability. In this paper we argue that rural farmers should form co-operatives of at least 10 members and mobilise financial resources towards building modern storage facilities where produce could be kept for long periods thus products can be sold at profitable prices when there will be few competitors. Farmers in Masvingo province face difficulties in storing produce after harvest. Crops such as maize are stored in primitive granaries called ‘Tsapi’ or ‘Huze’ where the commodity is vulnerable to rodents also known as ‘zviphukuto’ in vernacular language and this considerably affects the quality of the maize. The absence of modern storage facilities will result in the commodity fetching low grades and the final price of the product will be very low. Absence of proper storage facilities also means

that the farmer cannot store the commodity to resell in the off season at competitive prices hence farmers are forced to sell produce at disposal price as a means to avoid loss of value through perishability.

Transportation

While Masvingo province is considered to be the oldest province in the history of human settlement in Zimbabwe, it is one of the least developed provinces especially in terms of road networks. Except for the highway, most roads are not tarred and this creates challenges to farmers in the rural communities as very few transporters ply the dusty and bumpy roads. The few transporters that sacrifice to ply these routes charge prices that are beyond the reach of many farmers thus farmers are forced to sell produce to the local buyers who buy at below market price. Agricultural products are naturally perishable making it imperative for the distribution channels to be fast, reliable and efficient if the produce is to reach the consumers in the proper quality. While buying institutions like the Grain marketing Board has established collection centres to places nearer to the farmers, the institution requires each individual farmer to have at least 5 tons of crops such as maize and those with small quantities will not qualify to sell to them. While farmers have the option of combining produce, there are challenges relating to grading where different farmers in the same group have produce fetching different grades and this will create problems on payment hence farmers are not willing to form such co-operative arrangements.

Access to market information

Rural farmers in Zimbabwe particularly those in Masvingo have acute problems in receiving agricultural information. In Zimbabwe the usual sources of agricultural information include the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation's Murimi waNahsi (Umlimi waNamhla), which features mainly in the Zimbabwe Television around 7pm on every Thursday and sometimes through the national radio station (Radio Zimbabwe), farm magazines and publicity news. Because the rural farmers live in remote parts of the country where there is no electricity, they have limited access to the national programs on agricultural information. In a related research carried out in Nigeria on rural farmers' problems Accessing agricultural Information in Nsuka, the researchers found out that rural farmers are generally illiterate and live in remote areas with limited access to sources of information, Aina, (2007). The above situation is also applicable to Zimbabwe where majority of the rural farmers especially in Masvingo have little education and live in remote areas of the country where they are disconnected from major sources of agricultural information such as libraries. In Zimbabwe rural farmers rely on traditional media such as the radio. Munyua, (2000) identified print media, videos, pictures, slides, television, films, dance, folklore, group discussions, meetings and demonstrations as credible means of transmitting agricultural information. However, in this paper researchers argue that meetings especially those organized by extension officers, newspapers, radio, folklore, village social gatherings and agricultural shows can benefit rural farmers in Masvingo as the rest of the media cited by Munyua can only benefit large scale commercial farmers.

Quality of produce

Quality is also a major factor of concern especially to the rural farmers. Quality of produce determines the demand how much the farmer can charge for the produce. Agricultural products normally go through a grading system and the grade of the commodity will affect demand and competitiveness on the market. Commodities such as maize, rapoko, potatoes, and apples for example are highly perishable and require proper storage facilities which most rural farmers do not readily have. The quality of produce from the rural farmers is low compared to the quality of produce from the large scale commercial farmers as majority of the rural farmers rely on retained seeds which do not yield large grains in the case of cereal products. Moreover, poor quality of produce can also occur as a result of little education on the part of many farmers who may not understand instructions especially on chemical application hence product quality will be poor from over - chemical application or under - chemical application. Moreover, researchers also argue that farmers in Masvingo need to improve on storage facilities if they can produce quality products as majority of the farmers are still relying on the outdated storage methods, hence the need for these farmers to form co-operatives so that they can pool resources to build modern storage facilities for the crops.

Packaging of agricultural products

Packaging is among the factors that threaten the success of rural farmers in marketing agricultural produce. Packaging plays a crucial role especially to the rural farmer who desperately needs protection of agricultural produce. Packaging does not only play the role of protecting the contents but today packaging is used for improving product quality through product safety from the effects of the environment as well as acting as a silent sales person, Van Der Walt, (1996). While packaging plays an important role in the marketing of the agricultural produce such as cereal crops, oil crops, small grains crops, maize, and groundnuts, among others, most farmers in Masvingo do not afford the cost of buying the 50kg bags for carrying maize, groundnuts and small grains.

These farmers end up using whatever bags they come across just to cover and facilitate carriage and this affects the quality of the crops resulting in the loss on the part of the farmer as crops will be sold at a reduced price. Fresh farm vegetables like tomatoes require clean plastic bags if they are to attract the attention of the customer. Farmers in the rural areas do not afford the cost of the new plastic bags to carry tomatoes hence they sell tomatoes using dirty carrying bags which will not attract customers hence farmers lose as tomatoes are highly perishable.

Research Methodology

In achieving the research purpose, an interpretivist approach was adopted. This approach was considered appropriate since the current study seeks to generate detailed insights into the role of agricultural marketing in improving the livelihoods of rural farmers in Masvingo. In selecting interpretivist approach, consideration was given to Saunders et al (2007) who suggests that because business and management involve people as well as things, interpretivist arguments promote the idea that subjective thought and ideas are valid as they see the world through the eyes of the people being studied allowing them multiple perspectives of reality than the “one reality” of “positivism”. Masvingo province consists of 7 districts namely Masvingo, Zaka, Gutu, Bikita, Chiredzi, Chivi and Mwenezi. Out of these districts, Bikita, Gutu and Zaka districts were chosen as the districts are agriculturally rewarding compared to other districts in the province. The population of interest includes rural farmers, extension officers, supermarkets, boarding schools and hospitals. Data was collected using interviews on supermarkets owners, bursars of boarding schools, hospitals and churches, extension officers while focus group discussions were held with the farmers. Stratified sampling was used as respondents fall in different backgrounds. Research used a sample size of 361 which was obtained through Morgan and Krejcie (1970) at 5% significance level. A total of 249 respondents participated in the interviews and focus group discussions representing 69.09% response rate.

Findings

Demographic characteristics of the target Sample

Respondents consist of agricultural extension officers, supermarkets owners, bursars of boarding schools, churches and hospitals and farmers of cereal crops (maize, sorghum, rapoko and millet), oil crops (groundnuts and beans) and market gardening drawn from the three districts. Cereal and oil crops were chosen as they are widely grown in Masvingo. Level of education among farmers was used as the basis for stratification as it affected the quality of information sharing between researcher and the respondents. 32.72% of farmers have above ordinary level education while 67.28% of them have below ordinary level education. This shows that agricultural business in Masvingo province is dominated by farmers whose level of education is low implying that these farmers lack budgetary and marketing skills. Bursars from boarding schools, churches and hospitals have accounting diplomas and had a better understanding of the field under investigation.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of Respondents

Demographic profile of Supermarkets Owners

Length of Service as a business person	Frequency	Percent
1 – 5 years	2	28.57%
6 – 10 years	3	42.86%
11 – 15 years	1	14.29%
16 years +	1	14.29%
Total	7	100%
Level of education		
Primary (Grade 1 – 7)	2	28.57%
Secondary education (O’ and A’ Levels)	3	42.86%
Diploma	2	28.57%
Degree e.g (Degree in Retail Management)	0	0
Total	7	100%

Demographic Profile of Farmers

Level of Education	Frequency	Percentage
Primary	132	60%
Ordinary Level	50	22.73%
Diploma	20	9.09%
Degree e.g Bachelor of Science in Agronomy	2	0.91%
Total	220	100%
Farming experience		
Less than 1 year	20	9.09%
1 to 5 years	80	36.36%
6 – 10 years	70	31.81%
11 years +	50	22.72%
Totals	220	100%
Gender		
Female farmers	37	16.82
Male farmers	183	83.18
Total	202	100%

Agricultural extension officers

Position of Respondents	Frequency	Percentage
District Extension Officer	3	20%
Senior Ward Extension officers	4	26.67%
Ward extension officers	8	53.33%
Total	15	100%
Level of Education		
Certificate in Agriculture	4	26.67%
Diploma in Agriculture	9	60%
Degree e.g BSC in Agronomy	2	13.33%
Total	15	100%
Length of Service		
Less than 1 year	2	13.33%
1 – 5 years	6	40%
6 and Above	7	46.67%
Total	15	100%

Demographic profile of Bursars of boarding schools and Hospitals

Level of Education	Frequency	Percentage
Certificate of Accounting	0	0
Diploma in Accounting	5	71%
Degree in Accountancy	2	29%
Total	7	100%
Length of service		
Less than 1 year	1	14.28%
1 - 5 years	2	29%
6 – 10 years	3	42.86%
11 years plus	1	14.28
Total	7	100%

Statistics from the provincial agricultural extension office show that the province has many farmers in the area of maize, groundnuts, small grains, and horticulture (vegetables). The districts in Masvingo have an average of 407 extension officers who are posted to the various stations throughout the districts. Purposive and convenience sampling methods were therefore employed as the farmers and extension officers are sparsely spread. Stratified sampling was also used as the population consists of respondents who are in different farming backgrounds. Production capacity, crop type and level of education were used as the bases for stratification in which farmers with below basic education (Below grade 7) were put into the 1st stratum, those above basic education (Ordinary level) were put into the 2nd stratum while the 3rd stratum consists of those with Advanced Level to degree level. In each stratum convenience sampling was then employed. Data collection was mainly done through interviews and focus group discussions with farmers, extension officers, bursars from the boarding schools and hospitals and supermarkets owners at the growth points of the selected districts. Farmers were accessed at the farmers' training workshops held at Nyika (Bikita), Mupandawana (Gutu) and Jerera (Zaka) growth points in the three districts. Agricultural extension officers facilitated focus group discussions with farmers. Thus a more qualitative approach was adopted. The population of interest was as follows:

Extension officers for the 3 districts	= 363
Number of vegetable farmers for the 3 districts	= 3 600
Number of maize farmers for the 3 districts	= 1 884
Number of groundnuts farmers for the 3 districts	= 180
Number of small grain farmers for the 3 districts	= 120
Number of bursars of boarding schools and Hospitals	= 16
Number of store owners at the growth points of the 3 districts	= 15

The total estimated population of research participants in the 3 districts is therefore estimated to be = 6 178. Using Krejcie and Morgan model at the 95% significance level, researchers drew a sample size 361 of which 201 respondents participated in the interviews and 48 focus group discussions representing 69.09% response rate.

Findings

The following findings were obtained from the interviews and focus group discussions.

Common crops grown in the province

Maize, groundnuts, round nuts and market gardening were mentioned as the major agricultural products mainly grown by rural farmers in Masvingo province and majority of the respondents stated maize as the widely grown crop in the province. Maize was stated as the chief product grown in the province as it does not require much chemical application, a source of staple food, as well as easy of administration. Beans was found to be widely grown in Gutu and Bikita districts on a small scale while farmers in Zaka were quoted as saying, "*We have gone for three consecutive years without notable acreage of beans. It is useless for a farmer to continue growing a crop that yields less profits for the farmer. We approached our station extension officer and told him that we are stopping from beans production opting for vegetables which quickly gives returns to the farmer and we were given the green light*". Farmers stated that beans production in the district disappeared some three years ago owing to pricing challenges and delay in accessing inputs. Extension officers cited maize, sorghum, millet, groundnuts and cotton as profitable agricultural products which farmers in the districts can grow since the soils are best suited to these crops given the erratic rainfall patterns associated with the province which lies in region 3 that receives below normal rainfall.

Current target markets for rural farmers in Masvingo province

Results from focus group discussions revealed that urban traders, the Grain Marketing Board (GMB), local village customers, boarding schools, hospitals and some churches are the leading markets for rural farmers in Masvingo province. Nearly all the farmers who attended the focus group discussions concurred that urban traders are the leading buyers of produce in their districts and the farmers expressed concern on these traders as they buy at throw-away prices leaving the farmers impoverished and that the farmers will not be able to meet the daily farm operations cost. Local village customers were mentioned as buying at competitive prices but the problem is that they buy in small quantities hence the farmers will sometimes resort to barter exchange in which they exchange a bucket of maize for either a 2kg packet of sugar, 2 bars of soaps and sometimes with clothes. Farmers also concurred that the Grain Marketing Board (GMB) buys at competitive rates but the national grain buyer delays in making payment to the farmers who will sometimes resort to selling to the urban traders who buy at cash basis but at a low price. Boarding schools, hospitals and supermarkets were mentioned as profitable markets, however, these institutions buy at a supplementary basis as they also produce some of the products like vegetables and maize hence they buy on an occasional basis. Extension officers cited supermarkets and foreign

markets as the potential lucrative buyers capable of transforming the livelihoods of rural farmers if a proper marketing system is created for these farmers.

Institutions currently assisting rural farmers in growing and marketing of agricultural products

Respondents were asked to state the institutions that help rural farmers in growing and marketing of agricultural produce. It was established that the Grain Marketing Board (GMB) help farmers with inputs however, it was pointed out that inputs support from GMB is normally delayed as distribution follows a political system in which councilors and local authorities aligned to certain political parties normally interfere with the distribution hence underserving people will benefit at the expense of deserving beneficiaries. Most farmers singled out Agritex as playing an important role in educating farmers; however, challenges such as bad roads, lack of bridges were cited as constraints affecting Agritex in carrying out education and training programs with farmers. Murimi Wanhasi, and the Farm mechanization department were also mentioned as providing assistance to the farmers but it was mentioned that there are few if any farmers in the province who had benefited from the Farm Mechanisation. Majority of the farmers are not aware of the existence of the farm mechanization department while Murimi wa nhasi is only known to those farmers with access to television sets but majority of them expressed ignorance of the role of Murimi wa nhasi as an agricultural information dissemination program. One farmer said, *"I think lack of electricity is a major barrier that is preventing farmers from benefiting from Murimi wa Nhasi because the program is flighted on the Zimbabwe television every Thursday at 1900 hours and many farmers without television will miss the information.* Majority of the extension officers have confidence in Murimi waNhasi but the officers feel that the program should be run during the afternoon on weekend days like Saturday or Sunday so that majority of farmers with can benefit from the program.

Challenges faced by farmers in growing and marketing of agricultural produce

Research revealed a multiplicity of challenges that farmers encounter in the agricultural business. Chief among the challenges are the following:

Challenges faced by farmers relating to production

Farmers cited late distribution of inputs from the grain marketing Board (GMB) and other farmer support groups, poor rainfall distribution, changes in climatic conditions, shortage of arable land as the chief constraints that affects productivity. The farmers stated that the challenges affect both the quantity and quality of produce thus products will not sell at competitive prices. The Grain Marketing Board (GMB) was cited as an example of a market that uses a grading system when buying produce hence poor quality produce will be sold at below the market value. Moreover, majority of the extension officers mentioned lack of knowledge by farmers, poor farming practices as the chief constraints that affect production. It was also revealed that farmers in the province still rely on the traditional old fashioned methods of farming where farmers grow the same type of crops without rotation leading to poor yields which will be sold at low prices hence the farmer's income streams remain weak. Moreover, extension officers said that majority of famers in the province are still guided by the 'subsistence farming mindset' in which farmers just grow crops without targeting specific markets for the produce and the end result is that such farmers would not know where to dispose of such produce hence greedy urban traders come and buy products at below market value for reselling at lucrative prices, thus farmers remain impoverished. One extension officer was quoted as saying, *" Ignorance as a result of illiteracy is the disease affecting many farmers in this province as farmers just grow whatever crops they can and think of selling whenever they have a surplus. Furthermore, some farmers rely on 'retained seeds' whose yields are poor compared with yields from the new maize seeds. Hence produce from retained seeds is low in value and will fetch low price on the marketplace".*

Challenges relating Distribution

Poor road networks, where majority of the roads in the communal areas are dusty, bumpy, poor bridges and being in a state of disrepair was stated as the greatest challenge affecting transportation of produce to the desired markets. The extension officers said that the poor state of roads linking to the highway roads are chasing away potential transporters hence the few transporters that sacrifice to ply the routes charge exorbitant prices hence some farmers will not afford the cost and some products will lose value and end up being sold to the local village buyers at low prices. Moreover, the extension officers stated that most farmers in the district are too fragmented, unorganized and detached making it difficult for transporters to collect produce from these farmers. One farmer had this to say, *"The spirit of individualism is reigning over*

co-operation among the farmers hence each individual farmer will not afford the cost of transport to the nearest market and this becomes a severe challenge as produce like vegetables are perishable and the result will be to sell them at give - away prices.

Challenges relating to pricing

Both farmers and extension officers cited lack of market information as the chief challenge facing rural farmers leading to a situation where products are sold at throw- away prices. The reason advanced for this challenge is that farmers in rural areas especially in Masvingo suffer from lack of electricity and remain disconnected from programs that provide information support to farmers. From the discussion, Murimi waNhasi was mentioned as a programme for farmers but rural farmers do not benefit much as majority of the farmers do not have television while those with television sets have to rely on solar power as most parts of the province are not yet electrified. Rural farmers are ignorant of the technical grading system used by the national markets such as the Grain Marketing Board (GMB) with a 3 tier grading system as follows:

- Grade A - (1st class fetching high price),
- Grade B - (2nd class fetching price below the super grade)
- Grade C - (3rd class fetching average price).

Farmers being ignorant of the grading system at GMB, think that they are being cheated by the national grain institution and thus they divert and sell to private traders who use a visual assessment on grading but buy at low prices causing these farmers unable to meet the costs of their day to day amenities. One respondent had this to say, *“The Grain Marketing Board is using sample inspection where the inspector takes a bucket full of maize from a truckload and gives the same grade to the whole consignment and this is unfair to us farmers when a low grade is given”*. While GMB expanded its depots nationwide with presence in every district and every farmer is within a radius of 45 kilometres to the nearest outlet, the extension officers cited the centralized cheque processing system used by GMB as a challenge to rural farmers in which the cheques take up to a month before maturing and thus farmers lose patience and prefer to sell to the private traders who pay instant cash but buy at low prices to resell at lucrative prices. Another challenge faced by farmers in rural areas is that these farmers fail to meet the minimum quantity required from each individual farmer to sell to the national institution thus causing farmers to sell to the local traders who buy in small quantities. Moreover, respondents cited lack of bank accounts by most farmers as a serious challenge as the farmers will resort to changing their cheques from the local stores where they are punished severely by being required to buy at least 30% of the value of the cheque and this is a bitter pill to swallow to most farmers as store prices in communal areas are exorbitant. Focus group discussion with farmers also revealed that poor quality of produce will result in poor grade for the produce hence the product will fetch low price on the market. Competition was also cited by farmers during the focus group discussions in which they stated that farmers in the same district or location normally grow the same type of crops or vegetables and this creates merciless competition forcing some farmers to sell produce at give-away prices as supply will be out-stripping demand. This situation was said to be worsened by lack of storage facilities hence farmers cannot keep produce for long after harvesting hence products will be sold at give – away prices. To crown it all, rural farmers lack information about all the factors that affect the price at which they sell their produce.

Challenges relating to promoting agricultural products

Farmers were asked on how they promote their produce. Extension officers singled out promotion as the biggest challenge facing rural farmers as they still rely on word of mouth communication about availability of produce and this method was only said to be useful to the local village customers. The word of mouth communication was also experienced through observation by the researchers in which farmers make use of social gatherings and events such as funerals, church meetings, political gatherings and ‘beer parties’ where the headman or the deputy will make announcements about availability of produce such as tomatoes, beans and maize. This method was also seen to be effective on local customers with other markets like boarding schools, hospitals, supermarkets may miss the information about where, when and where they can easily buy agricultural produce. Furthermore, extension officers stated that farmers lack knowledge about modern methods of promoting products and also that the farmers do not afford the cost of communication tools like radio, newspaper, television and transport advertising. One respondent said, *“ To tell the truth farmers know nothing about the means of creating awareness for their produce. Farmers only know the traditional word of mouth advertising which works well with village customers within a radius of 15 kilometres. We extension officers have to do more on educating these farmers on how best they can advertise their products to increase sales”*

Conclusions and Recommendations

Farmers in the rural areas are not adopting the concept of agricultural marketing as witnessed from the pre and post - harvest activities which are not aligned with demands, needs and preferences of the customers. It can also be concluded that the current marketing system for crops grown in Masvingo province is flawed as rural farmers are relying on the traditional selling approach in which production, handling and distribution of produce are not dictated by the customers. Furthermore, researchers can also conclude that the presence of many intermediaries is causing farmers to sell agricultural produce at throw – away prices. Absence of co-operative arrangements make farmers unable to meet the minimum quantity of produce required for each individual farmer to sell to the Grain marketing board. Farmers in the rural areas lack the marketing concept as they are not targeting specific markets such as hospitals, churches, boarding schools, supermarkets thus they are not producing for these markets but only sell to some of these markets when they have surplus. In this paper researchers recommend universities and colleges in Zimbabwe to play a corporate social responsibility role of teaching rural farmers basic marketing skills so that farmers will be able to identify profitable markets for their produce. Extension officers to intensify farmer training efforts in post - harvest knowledge to add value to the produce which will fetch high prices for the farmers and this will improve their livelihoods. There is need for government intervention to improve the state of roads in rural areas, establish an agricultural bank specifically targeting the needs of the rural farmers so that the farmer can increase production through mechanized farming system. In this paper researchers also recommend farmers to form voluntary co-operative arrangements so as increase production capacity as well as meeting the cost of marketing to the local and international markets. Such co-operative arrangements will enhance knowledge sharing, resource sharing and in the process boost production capacity. Rural farmers should establish their own marketing board charged with the responsibility for identifying products needed by the markets, pricing strategies targeted at different markets, promotional programs as well as securing profitable markets for agricultural commodities. Thus the works of Gordon (2001) suggests that today's business challenges can no longer be afforded by the efforts a company acting alone but through linkages and collaboration. Additionally, rural farmers need to make use of banner advertising, local district press, identify social gatherings in the community and make use of teachers in the local schools to assist in the marketing products. The Grain Marketing Board should decentralize cheque processing system to provincial and district levels so that rural farmers can receive cash at the earliest moment. Rural farmers should also be given resources to process their produce into finished products so that they can sell a value added product at a competitive price while assistance on modern storage systems will improve the quality of produce.

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