

Full Length Research Paper

Agricultural Marketing's Contribution to Rural Farmers' Empowerment in Zimbabwe's Masvingo Province

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Accepted 4 February, 2025

A more qualitative analysis of how agricultural marketing helps rural farmers in Masvingo province raise their standard of living is presented in this research. Four topics are the subject of the study: (1) key crops farmed; (2) produce markets now in existence; (3) organizations that assist farmers; and (4) difficulties farmers confront in producing, pricing, promoting, and transporting goods to lucrative markets. Using in-depth interviews and focus groups, information was obtained from 361 respondents, including farmers who specialize in the production of vegetables, small grain crops, groundnuts, and maize; extension agents; bursars of boarding schools, churches, and hospitals; and supermarket owners. The results show that vegetables, rapoko, millet, rapoko, and maize are farmed extensively; the main markets now consuming produce are supermarkets, boarding schools, hospitals, churches, and GMB; inputs supply, transportation, Farmers' pricing of agricultural products is impacted by a lack of market knowledge. The study comes to the conclusion that because rural farmers continue to use the conventional selling strategy, they lack market knowledge. The report suggests that the government provide training facilities to give farmers marketing skills and repair the roads. Additionally, it is necessary for rural farmers to set up their own marketing board, which will be in charge of locating markets and delivering produce straight to the intended consumers.

Key words: Agricultural Marketing, Rural Farmers, Empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

The Food provision and security continue to be the largest issues facing many nations worldwide, including Zimbabwe. About 70% of Zimbabwe's 13 million inhabitants reside in rural areas, and the country has an agrarian economy. Additionally, it is asserted that rural farmers account for over 60% of the nation's agricultural output, despite the fact that they nevertheless endure extreme poverty. According to Rohrbach and Okwach (1997) and Selvaraju et al. (2004), low productivity and pervasive, long-term poverty are characteristics of small-scale, resource-constrained farming systems. More than 2 million small-scale farmers from communal resettlements and small-scale commercial producers make up Zimbabwe's bimodal farming system, which also includes a minority of large-scale commercial farmers. In contrast to small-scale rural farmers who only produce and then struggle to find outlets for their agricultural produce, large-scale commercial farmers sell their produce to lucrative marketplaces. Produce from small-scale rural farmers is typically sold for less than the market price since the farming systems in rural regions are characterized by the use of organic fertilizers and retained seeds, which will result in crops of lower quality than those from commercial farms.

1.1 Institutions that render assistance to farmers in Zimbabwe

The government of Zimbabwe worked to boost agricultural output after gaining independence in 1980, and numerous institutions were established to help the agricultural economy. The Grain Marketing Board (GMB), Agricultural Technical and Extension Services (Agritex), and the Farm Mechanization Department are just a few of the organizations that were established and given authority to promote agriculture. Agricultural productivity rose as a result of these institutions' greater assistance. However, farmers in rural areas continue to be disenfranchised when it comes to marketing agricultural commodities, even with the presence of the aforementioned institutions. Rural farmers are at a disadvantage because they lack or have incomplete knowledge of the markets, and the pricing of agricultural products are often set by the forces of supply and demand. Kanyenze (2011). Only GMB, one of the existing markets that purchases produce from rural farmers, does so at profitable pricing; nevertheless, due to payment delays, many farmers have turned to private traders who purchase at throw-away prices, leaving the rural farmers unable to cover their basic expenses. Furthermore, according to Shumba's (1993)

research, rural farmers are labor-intensive and tend to grow a variety of crops on a single acre, such as maize, groundnuts, peas, and rapoko. They also tend to have tiny farms and make inadequate investments in farming inputs like hybrid seeds and organic fertilizers. Because they cannot afford inorganic fertilizers, these farmers rely too much on organic fertilizers, primarily cattle manure, which is typically applied in small amounts and whose quality is often unclear.

Even their household needs are not met by the amount of food that the rural farmers produce. Where these farmers grow excess food Due to the lack of market knowledge, traders from towns and cities take advantage of farmers in rural areas by purchasing produce at discount prices to resell at profit, thus enriching themselves at the expense of farmers who remain in poverty. Infertile marginal soils and climate variability and change are two of the many issues that farmers face and that endanger their livelihoods (Altier and Koohfkan, 2008). Like everyone else, small-scale farmers require revenue for a variety of reasons, such as covering their children's tuition, purchasing inputs like seed and fertilizer, and buying or renting additional agricultural equipment, among many other things. Although some of these farmers are able to produce excess food on their farms, the majority lack the necessary marketing abilities or even market knowledge to fully utilize this surplus. For rural farmers, particularly those in Masvingo, decisions about product selection, pricing, promotional mix, and distribution strategies are still unclear. This is because some rural farmers, in some situations, have never visited the larger cities and towns; as a result, they are unable to access marketplaces that could purchase their goods at profitable prices. Local consumers at growth sites and the numerous middlemen who come to buy produce at extremely low costs to resell at competitive prices are the primary sources of income for rural farmers.

Even worse, most of these farmers, if not all of them, are unable to even make budgets or perform cost-benefit analyses to determine whether their farm businesses are viable, and as a result, they typically run at a loss most of the time. The fact that these communal farmers do not maintain farming records, such as farm size, inputs used, fertilizers applied, labor required for all farm activities, harvest amount for each crop, and revenue from crop sales, is another issue they face. The information listed above is crucial if rural farmers are to reconcile their expenses and income. In reality, among other issues, farmers in rural areas continue to face marginalization due to inadequate road systems, outdated communication systems, challenging access to major medical facilities, clinics, and educational institutions, a shortage of energy, and an excessive dependence on antiquated farming practices. The majority of small-scale farmers grow vegetables

and tomatoes, which are grown in a fragmented system as each family tries to produce enough to meet their basic needs. The country's largest cities and towns, including the large Mbare Musika in Harare, Kudzanai Msika in Gweru, Mucheke in Masvingo, and other urban markets, are where these agricultural items ultimately end up. Since all varieties of cereals and horticultural items from all across the country's districts eventually find their way to the Mbare Musika, it has developed into the commercial hub or nerve center for all of the nation's consumables. Zimbabwe's marketing system is typified by a large number of middlemen or agents that swarm into rural regions to purchase goods from farmers at extremely low prices, then resell it at competitive prices, leaving the farmers unable to cover their daily expenses. Market places like Farm and City, which sell agricultural products at competitive prices, were established by the colonial government primarily for commercial farmers. Therefore, this study makes the case that rural farmers are being marginalized by the current agricultural commodity marketing system since they still live in extreme poverty in spite of their efforts and financial investments in the industry. This study also describes the difficulties rural farmers encounter while trying to sell their produce to lucrative marketplaces.

The Agricultural Marketing Concept

The phrase "agricultural marketing" has numerous definitions. Agricultural marketing, according to the Indian National Commission on Agriculture, is a process that begins with the choice to produce a marketable farm product and encompasses all facets of the system's market structure, both institutional and functional, based on technical and financial factors. This includes pre- and post-harvest operations, as well as assembly, grading, storage, transportation, and distribution. However, according to the Indian Council of Agricultural Research, agricultural marketing consists of three primary tasks: (1) assembly, (2) processing, and (3) distribution. Farmers are expected to carry out significant tasks both before and after harvesting until the product eventually reaches the client location, according to a comparison of the two definitions above. The roles that farmers play in assembling, storing, transporting, and distributing commodities from the farms to the target customers are crucial to the successful marketing of agricultural products, according to the descriptions given above. According to these researchers, Zimbabwean rural farmers, especially those in Masvingo, continue to lag behind in agricultural marketing because they continue to use antiquated methods of assembly and traditional storage systems. For instance, farmers in rural Masvingo store cereals and groundnuts using what are known as "Chitata" and "Dura." Because of the inadequate ventilation in these storage systems, crops like groundnuts

and maize can be impacted by moisture, which lowers the crop's quality and makes it less likely to sell at a high price. Researchers are eager to define "agricultural marketing" in this paper as a production system in which farmers use the marketing concept when making decisions about distribution, pricing, promotions, and products in order to satisfy the target customers' needs, wants, and preferences. The Indian Council of Agriculture's definition of "agricultural marketing" also exposes Zimbabwe's rural farmers, especially those in Masvingo, who merely grow, harvest, and sell produce with little to no value addition. For instance, farmers in Masvingo grow oil crops like sunflower and groundnuts, which are then processed into cooking oil and sold for high prices. However, because they lack the necessary milling equipment, they only sell the raw crops, which do not command high prices, keeping farmers in poverty despite their efforts in the agricultural sector. According to the definition of agricultural marketing, the traditional "selling approach" is the marketing strategy used by rural farmers in Masvingo Province. In this approach, farmers merely grow crops and seek out buyers to sell them to; as a result, they do not make much money and continue to live in poverty.

Empowering rural farmers through Agricultural Marketing

Research and agricultural development organizations and agencies used to be focused on creating plans to help smallholder farmers increase their food production. However, these days, there appears to be a change in emphasis, with organizations and researchers trying to figure out how to improve farmers' livelihoods, particularly those in rural areas, by finding lucrative markets for their produce. According to Smith (2001), rural development is a complex process that involves a network of actors and stakeholders that combine their resources to accomplish predetermined goals. To put it another way, Smith believes that different parties should work together to bring about rural development, which is the result of stakeholder cooperation. The government, rural farmers, transportation agencies, development organizations like the District Development Fund (DDF), Rural District Councils (RDCs), and buyers of agricultural products, such as local supermarkets, wholesalers, and national grain buyers like the Grain Marketing Board (GMB), are all stakeholders in Zimbabwe who can contribute to the development of rural areas. Although the government's primary responsibility is to develop rural areas, the current political and economic climate has severely limited its ability to upgrade infrastructure in these places. However, because the majority of businesses in all

sectors are having liquidity issues and are using less than 50% of their capacity, the private sector is unable to support the government through CSR initiatives. Additionally, Smith (2001) and Douthwaite et al. (2003) advocate for stakeholder cooperation to achieve development in rural communities. However, in Zimbabwe, capacity is a challenge because the aforementioned actors are facing resource constraints due to the current state of the economy, which is shattered. Infrastructural development is a problem not only in rural areas but even in major towns and cities, where roads are in poor condition with many potholes, making driving on these roads a nightmare for drivers. The rural farmers themselves are urged in this paper to establish collaborations and begin identifying the essential resources they require in order to build infrastructure in their communities. Additionally, we contend that rural farmers might benefit from the large number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) present in their communities and ask for help in repairing roads and bridges to increase access to market centers.

Rural farmers' obstacles when it comes to marketing their produce Storage techniques

According to a study done in India, many farmers confront the significant problem of their goods going bad and ultimately causing them to lose money due to inadequate or nonexistent storage. Farmers in rural Masvingo face the same problem as Indian farmers, who store their produce in antiquated warehouses with inadequate storage facilities, causing it to fast deteriorate and become unfit for human consumption. Farmers who grow vegetables, tomatoes, groundnuts, and maize are the most severely impacted; as a result, output is promptly sold after harvest to avoid the perishability risk. In this paper, we make the case that rural farmers should organize into cooperatives with ten or more members and raise funds to construct state-of-the-art storage facilities that will allow them to store goods for extended periods of time. This will allow them to sell their products at a profit when there are few competitors. After harvest, farmers in Masvingo province struggle to store their food. Maize and other crops are kept in rudimentary granaries called "Tsapi" or "Huze," where they are susceptible to rats, or "zvifukuto" in colloquial terms, which has a significant negative impact on the grain's quality. Lack of contemporary storage facilities will cause the commodity to sell for poor grades and have a very low final price. Lack of adequate storage facilities also implies

Farmers are compelled to sell produce at disposal rates in order to prevent value loss due to perishability since they are unable to stockpile the commodity for resale at competitive prices during the off-season.

Transportation

Despite being the oldest province in Zimbabwe's history of human settlement, Masvingo is among the least developed, particularly when it comes to road systems. The majority of roads, with the exception of the highway, are unpaved, which presents difficulties for farmers in rural areas because so few carriers use the dusty, uneven roads. Many farmers are forced to sell their produce to local purchasers who pay less than market rates because the few transporters that make the sacrifice to operate these routes demand prices that are out of their price range. Because agricultural products are inherently perishable, it is essential that distribution methods be quick, dependable, and effective in order for consumers to get produce in the right condition. Although purchasing organizations, such as the Grain Marketing Board, have set up collecting centers closer to the farmers, each farmer must have at least five tons of crops, such as maize, in order to be eligible to sell to them. Although farmers can combine their produce, there are issues with grading, wherein various farmers in the same group have produce that fetches different classes. This would cause issues with payment, which is why farmers are reluctant to establish such cooperative arrangements.

Access to market information

In Zimbabwe, rural farmers, especially those in Masvingo, face significant challenges in obtaining agricultural information. The typical sources of agricultural information in Zimbabwe include farm magazines, publicity news, and the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation's Murimi waNahsi (Umlimi waNamhla), which primarily airs on Zimbabwe Television every Thursday at 7 p.m., with occasional appearances on the country's radio station, Radio Zimbabwe. Rural farmers have limited access to national agricultural information programs since they reside in isolated areas of the nation without electricity. In a similar study on the issues facing rural farmers in Nigeria The researchers discovered that rural farmers in Nsuka are largely illiterate and reside in isolated places with little access to information sources (Aina, 2007). The aforementioned circumstance also applies to Zimbabwe, where the vast majority of rural farmers, particularly those in Masvingo, lack formal education and reside in isolated regions that are cut off from important agricultural knowledge sources like libraries. Rural farmers in Zimbabwe depend on conventional media, like radio. Print media, videos, images, presentations, television, movies, dance, folklore, group debates, gatherings, and demonstrations are all considered legitimate ways to spread agricultural knowledge, according to Munyua (2000). In contrast, Munyua cites other media that only benefit large-scale commercial farmers. In this paper, researchers contend that meetings, particularly those arranged by extension officers, newspapers, radio, folklore, village social gatherings, and agricultural shows, can benefit rural farmers in Masvingo.

Quality of produce

Another important consideration, particularly for farmers in rural areas, is quality. The demand for the produce and the price the farmer can charge for it depend on its quality. Typically, agricultural products are graded, and the commodity's grade influences market competitiveness and demand. For instance, most rural farmers lack the necessary storage facilities for highly perishable commodities like apples, potatoes, rapoko, and maize. Since most rural farmers rely on retained seeds, which do not produce huge grains in the case of cereal items, the quality of produce from these farmers is lower than that of large-scale commercial farmers. Furthermore, many farmers may lack the necessary knowledge to follow guidelines, particularly when it comes to the use of chemicals, which can result in poor-quality produce due to either excessive or insufficient chemical application. Additionally, researchers contend that in order for Masvingo farmers to produce high-quality products, they must upgrade their storage facilities because the majority of them continue to use antiquated storage techniques. As a result, these farmers must organize into cooperatives in order to pool their resources and construct contemporary crop storage facilities.

Packaging of agricultural products

One of the things endangering rural farmers' ability to successfully market their produce is packaging. Particularly for rural farmers who are in dire need of agricultural produce protection, packaging is essential. In addition to safeguarding the contents, packaging is now utilized to improve product quality by preserving it from environmental factors and serving as a silent salesman. (1996) Van Der Walt. Despite the fact that packaging is crucial to the sale of agricultural products such as cereal crops, oil crops, small grain crops, maize, and groundnuts, among others, the majority of Masvingo farmers cannot afford to purchase the 50 kg bags needed to transport these commodities.

These farmers wind up utilizing whatever bags they can find to cover and make transportation easier, which degrades the quality of the products and causes the farmer to lose money because the crops will be sold for less. Clean plastic bags are necessary for fresh farm crops, such as tomatoes, to catch the customer's eye. Since tomatoes are particularly perishable, farmers in rural areas sell them using filthy carrying bags since they cannot afford the new plastic bags. This practice does not draw

customers, and farmers suffer as a result.

Research Methodology

An interpretivist strategy was used to accomplish the goal of the study. Since the goal of the current study is to produce in-depth insights into how agricultural marketing contributes to the improvement of rural farmers' livelihoods in Masvingo, this approach was deemed appropriate. Saunders et al. (2007) were taken into consideration when choosing an interpretivist approach. They contend that since business and management involve both people and things, interpretivist arguments support the idea that subjective thoughts and ideas are valid because they see the world through the eyes of the people being studied, giving them multiple perspectives of reality as opposed to positivism's "one reality." The seven districts that make up Masvingo province are Zaka, Gutu, Bikita, Chiredzi, Chivi, and Mwenezi. Bikita, Gutu, and Zaka districts were selected from among these districts due to their superior agricultural yields in comparison to other districts in the province. Hospitals, boarding schools, supermarkets, extension agents, and rural farmers are all part of the population of interest. In addition to focus groups with farmers, data was gathered through interviews with store owners, bursars of boarding schools, hospitals, and churches, and extension officers. Because respondents come from a variety of backgrounds, stratified sampling was employed. The study employed a sample size of 361 at a 5% significance level, as determined by Morgan and Krejcie (1970). A total of 249 respondents, or 69.09% of the sample, took part in the focus groups and interviews.

Findings

Demographic characteristics of the target Sample

Farmers of cereal crops (maize, sorghum, rapoko, and millet), oil crops (groundnuts and beans), and market gardeners from the three districts make up the respondents, along with agricultural extension officers, supermarket owners, bursars of boarding schools, churches, and hospitals. Due to their widespread cultivation in Masvingo, cereal and oil crops were selected. Farmers' educational attainment served as the foundation for stratification since it had an impact on the caliber of information exchanged between the respondents and the researcher. 67.28% of farmers have below-average education, whilst 32.72% have above-average education. This indicates that low-educated farmers dominate the agricultural sector in Masvingo province, suggesting that these farmers lack marketing and budgeting abilities. Bursars from hospitals, churches, and boarding schools have accounting degrees and are more knowledgeable about the subject matter.

According to data from the provincial agricultural extension office, the province has a large number of farmers engaged in horticulture (vegetables), minor grains, groundnuts, and maize. An average of 407 extension officers are assigned to the several stations spread across Masvingo's districts. Because the farmers and extension agents are dispersed, purposeful and convenient sampling

techniques were used. Because the respondents in the population come from a variety of farming backgrounds, stratified sampling was also employed. Stratification was based on production capacity, crop type, and educational attainment. Farmers with less than a basic education (below grade 7) were placed in the first stratum, those with an ordinary level of education were placed in the second stratum, and those with advanced to degree level education were placed in the third stratum. Convenience sampling was then used in each stratum. Interviews and focus groups with farmers, extension agents, bursars from boarding schools and hospitals, and supermarket owners near the growth points of the chosen districts were the primary methods used to collect data. The training workshops for farmers were held in the growth points of Nyika (Bikita), Mupandawana (Gutu), and Jerera (Zaka) in the three districts. Farmers participated in focus groups led by agricultural extension agents. Thus a more qualitative approach was adopted. The population of interest was as follows:

Extension officers for the 3 districts

Number of vegetable farmers for the 3 districts
 Number of maize farmers for the 3 districts
 Number of groundnuts farmers for the 3 districts
 Number of small grain farmers for the 3 districts
 Number of bursars of boarding schools and Hospitals
 Number of store owners at the growth points of the 3 districts
 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

The majority of respondents identified maize as the most widely planted crop in Masvingo province, with market gardening, groundnuts, round nuts, and maize being the main agricultural items mostly farmed by rural farmers in the province. According to reports, maize is the main crop planted in the area because it is easy to manage, requires little chemical application, and provides a staple diet. While it

was discovered that beans were widely grown on a local scale in the districts of Gutu and Bikita, Zaka farmers were cited as stating, "We have gone for three consecutive years without notable acreage of beans." A farmer has no reason to keep cultivating a crop that brings in less money. We told our station extension officer that we were switching from producing beans to vegetables, which provide farmers with faster returns, and we were granted the all-clear. According to farmers, the district's output of beans stopped about three years ago because of difficulties with prices and delays in obtaining inputs. Given the province's unpredictable rainfall patterns and its location in region 3, which receives below-normal rainfall, extension officers mentioned maize, sorghum, millet, groundnuts, and cotton as lucrative agricultural products that farmers in the districts can grow because the soils are ideal for these crops.

Current target markets for rural farmers in Masvingo province

The main markets for rural farmers in Masvingo province are urban traders, the Grain Marketing Board (GMB), local village consumers, boarding schools, hospitals, and certain churches, according to the results of focus group talks. Urban traders are the main buyers of produce in their districts, according to almost all of the farmers who participated in the focus group discussions. Farmers are worried about these traders because they purchase produce at throwaway prices, which leaves them in poverty and makes it impossible for them to pay for daily farm operations. The farmers occasionally turn to barter exchange, where they trade a bucket of maize for a 2 kg packet of sugar, two bars of soap, or occasionally clothing. Local village customers were said to purchase at competitive prices, but the issue is that they only buy in small quantities. Farmers also agreed that the Grain Marketing Board (GMB) purchases grain at competitive prices, but the national grain buyer takes a long time to pay farmers, therefore farmers occasionally sell to urban dealers who purchase at a cheap price but on a cash basis. Although boarding schools, hospitals, and supermarkets were identified as lucrative marketplaces, these establishments only seldom purchase because they themselves produce some of the goods, such as vegetables and maize. Extension agents mentioned supermarkets and international markets as prospective profitable purchasers who, with the right marketing mechanism, may revolutionize rural farmers' livelihoods.

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

The institutions that support rural farmers in

cultivating and selling agricultural products were asked to be listed by the respondents. Although it was established that the Grain Marketing Board (GMB) assists farmers with inputs, it was noted that GMB support for inputs is typically delayed because distribution is governed by a political system in which local authorities and councilors affiliated with particular political parties typically obstruct the distribution, resulting in underprivileged individuals benefiting at the expense of worthy recipients. The majority of farmers identified Agritex as being crucial to their education; yet, obstacles including poor roads and a dearth of bridges were mentioned as impediments to Agritex's ability to conduct training and education initiatives with farmers. However, it was noted that few, if any, farmers in the province have profited from farm mechanization. Murimi Wanhasi and the Farm Mechanization Department were also recognized as helping the farmers. While Murimi wa nhasi is only known to farmers who have access to televisions, the majority of farmers stated that they are unaware of its function as a program for disseminating agricultural information. The majority of farmers are also unaware of the existence of the farm mechanization department. According to one farmer, "I believe that a significant obstacle keeping farmers from taking advantage of Murimi wa Nhasi is a lack of electricity because the program airs on Zimbabwe television every Thursday at 1900 hours, and many farmers without television will miss the information." Although the majority of extension officers believe in Murimi waNhasi, they believe that in order for the majority of farmers to benefit from the program, it should be conducted in the afternoon on weekends like Saturday or Sunday.

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

The main factors affecting production, according to farmers, are changes in the climate, a lack of arable land, poor rainfall distribution, and late input distribution from the GMB and other farmer assistance groups. According to the farmers, the difficulties have an impact on both the quantity and quality of produce, which means that goods won't sell for competitive pricing. Poor quality produce will be sold for less than its market value

since the Grain Marketing Board (GMB) is one market that uses a grading system when purchasing produce. Furthermore, the majority of extension staff stated that the main factors limiting production are farmers' ignorance and subpar farming methods. Additionally, it was discovered that the province's farmers continue to use antiquated, conventional agricultural practices, where they cultivate the same crops year after year without switching up their crop rotation, resulting in subpar yields that are sold for low rates and weakening the farmers' revenue streams. Furthermore, according to extension officers, the majority of farmers in the province continue to follow the "subsistence farming mindset," which involves growing crops without focusing on particular markets for the produce. As a result, these farmers are unable to dispose of their produce, so avaricious urban traders come and buy goods at below-market value with the intention of reselling them at high prices, leaving farmers in poverty. "Ignorance due to 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," one extension official was reported as saying. Additionally, some farmers use "retained seeds," which produce lower yields than the new maize seeds. As a result, product grown from retained seeds has little value and will sell for little money.

Challenges relating Distribution

The biggest issue affecting the delivery of produce to the intended markets was identified as poor road networks, with the majority of the roads in the communal areas being dusty, uneven, without bridges, and in bad condition. The poor condition of the roads connecting to the highways, according to the extension officers, is driving away potential transporters. As a result, the few transporters who make the sacrifice to operate the routes charge exorbitant prices, which some farmers cannot afford. Additionally, some products lose value and are ultimately sold to local village buyers at low prices. Furthermore, the majority of farmers in the district are too dispersed, disorganized, and aloof, according to the extension staff, which makes it challenging for transporters to pick up food from them. As one farmer put it, "The spirit of individualism is reigning over co-operation among the farmers." As a result, each farmer will not be able to afford the cost of transportation to the closest market, which presents a serious problem because produce, such as vegetables, is perishable and will have to be sold at give-away prices.

Challenges relating to pricing

The main issue facing rural farmers, according to both farmers and extension agents, is a lack of market knowledge, which results in products being sold at throwaway rates. The argument put forth for this difficulty is that farmers in rural regions, particularly in Masvingo, struggle with a shortage of energy and are still cut off from programs that offer them information and assistance. Murimi waNhasi was brought up during the conversation as a program for farmers, but rural farmers do not gain much from it because most of them do not own televisions, and those who do must rely on solar power because most of the province is still without electricity. 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).

Because they are unaware of the GMB grading system, farmers believe the national grain institution is defrauding them. As a result, they divert and sell to private traders who grade their products visually but purchase at low prices, making it difficult for these farmers to pay for their daily necessities. "It is unfair to us farmers when a low grade is given because the Grain Marketing Board uses sample inspection, where the inspector takes a bucket full of maize from a truckload and gives the same grade to the entire consignment," one responder stated. The centralized check processing system used by GMB is a challenge for rural farmers, as the checks take up to a month to mature. As a result, farmers lose patience and prefer to sell to private traders who pay instant cash but buy at low prices to resell at lucrative prices. This is true even though GMB has expanded its depots nationwide, with a presence in every district and every farmer within 45 kilometers of the nearest outlet. Another issue that rural farmers confront is that they are unable to meet the minimum quantity that each farmer must sell to the national institution, which forces them to sell to local dealers who purchase in little amounts. Additionally, respondents noted that the majority of farmers do not have bank accounts, which presents a significant obstacle because they will

have to exchange their checks at local stores, where they will be penalized by having to pay at least 30% of the check's value. This is a painful experience for most farmers because store prices in communal areas are extremely high. Focus groups with farmers also showed that low-quality produce will result in low-grade production, which will lower the product's market value. During focus group discussions, farmers also mentioned competition, stating that farmers in the same district or area typically grow the same crops or vegetables. This leads to fierce competition, which forces some farmers to sell their produce at a discount because supply will exceed demand. Lack of storage facilities reportedly makes this scenario worse; as a result, farmers are unable to preserve produce for long after harvest, forcing them to sell their goods at discount prices. Finally, rural farmers are not well-informed about all the variables influencing the price at which they sell their produce.

Challenges relating to promoting agricultural products

We asked farmers how they market their produce. Since farmers in rural areas still rely on word-of-mouth to inform clients about the availability of produce, extension officers identified advertising as the largest obstacle facing these farmers. The researchers also observed that farmers use social events and gatherings, such as funerals, church meetings, political gatherings, and "beer parties," where the headman or deputy will announce the availability of produce, such as tomatoes, beans, and maize, to spread word of mouth communication. This approach was also found to work well for local consumers who might not be aware of the location, time, and ease of purchasing agricultural products in other markets, such as boarding schools, hospitals, and supermarkets. Extension officials also claimed that farmers are ignorant of contemporary product promotion strategies and cannot pay the price of communication instruments like television, radio, newspapers, and transportation advertising. To be honest, farmers have no idea how to raise awareness of their produce, according to one reply. Farmers are only familiar with conventional word-of-mouth marketing, which is effective with village clients within a 15-kilometer radius. We extension agents need to do more to teach these farmers how to market their goods more effectively in order to boost sales.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As seen by pre- and post-harvest operations that are out of step with consumer expectations, wants, and preferences, farmers in rural areas are not embracing the idea of agricultural marketing. Due to rural farmers' reliance on the conventional selling technique, which does not allow customers to determine the

production, handling, and distribution of food, it may also be said that the current marketing system for crops cultivated in Masvingo province is defective. Researchers can also draw the conclusion that farmers are selling agricultural products at throwaway prices as a result of the abundance of middlemen. Farmers are unable to meet the minimum amount of food that each farmer must sell to the Grain Marketing Board if cooperative arrangements are not in place. Rural farmers don't have a marketing concept since they don't target certain customers like hospitals, churches, boarding schools, or supermarkets. As a result, they don't produce for these markets and only sell to a few of them when they have extra. In order to help rural farmers find lucrative markets for their produce, experts in this study suggest that Zimbabwean universities and colleges fulfill their corporate social responsibility by teaching them the fundamentals of marketing. Extension agents should step up their efforts to teach farmers post-harvest skills so they can add value to their produce, which will increase its market value and help farmers make more money. Government action is required to enhance rural roads and create an agricultural bank that caters to the needs of rural farmers in order to enable them to use mechanized farming systems to boost output. In order to boost output capacity and cover the costs of marketing to both domestic and foreign markets, experts advise farmers in this paper to establish voluntary cooperative partnerships. These cooperative agreements will improve resource and information sharing, which will increase production capacity. Rural farmers ought to set up their own marketing board, tasked with determining what items the markets require, developing pricing plans for various markets, running advertising campaigns, and finding lucrative markets for agricultural products. According to Gordon (2001), a company's efforts alone are no longer sufficient to meet today's business difficulties; instead, partnerships and collaboration are required. Furthermore, rural farmers must employ local district newspapers, banner advertising, determine neighborhood social events, and recruit instructors from nearby schools to help with product marketing. For rural farmers to get payment as soon as possible, the Grain Marketing Board should decentralize the check processing system to the provincial and district levels. In order to sell a value-added product at a competitive price, rural farmers need also be provided with the resources to turn their harvest into completed goods. Additionally, support for contemporary storage techniques will enhance the quality of the produce.

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