Smallholder vegetable growers should seek high value market opportunities

In Africa, most smallholder farmers produce vegetables during the rains, when every other farmer does the same. The result is oversupply in the wet season and scarcity in the dry season, leading to low income for farmers and high prices for consumers. To encourage farmers to change their mindset and behaviour, the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) funded project “Improving income and nutrition in Eastern and Southern Africa by enhancing vegetable-based farming and food systems in peri-urban corridors” (VINESA) recently held a training course for young farmers in Tanzania.

The training was organised by HORTITengeru and The World Vegetable Centre (AVRDC) Eastern and Southern Africa to equip farmers with knowledge and skills on value chain thinking. Twenty female and male farmers aged 18 – 35 from Maweni Village, Arusha participated.

Value chain thinking places the needs of consumers and customers first, and aims to build lasting relationships among chain actors to meet those needs. Farmers must base their decisions on customer behaviour and consumer requirements because consumers are willing to pay higher prices for vegetables that meet their preferences.

"There is an urgent need for chain actors to understand the needs of consumers and customers," said Research Associate Radegunda Kessy, one of the trainers. "They must learn which actions cause waste and which
add value to appropriately allocate available resources.”

“Chain players must stop competing on price and start to set quality standards for a specific crop in a specific market outlet,” said Agatha Aloyce, VINESA’s Tanzania Country Coordinator. “This is a value that should be shared equitably among actors along the chain.”

Participants were encouraged to produce what they can sell rather than selling what they have produced—a strategy that shifts emphasis from trying to push vegetables produced through the chain to pulling these vegetables from the demand of consumers at the end of the chain.

The participants visited three vegetable outlets during a study tour to identify market opportunities around Usa River, a town near VINESA’s Best Practice Hub in Arusha: a pre- and primary school, a hotel, and a shop selling vegetables. Using a set of questions to guide their discussion, the trainees were able to identify vegetable types being sold, evaluate demand and deficit, and note possible areas for collaboration.

“Farmers should know that different grades of vegetables will fetch different prices at the market place,” said Aurelia J. Kitumbo, the headmistress of Young Roses Pre- and Primary School. Neema Kaaya, a vegetable seller in Usa River, and Ms. Lily, a hotel owner, observed that “it is wrong for farmers to assume they will get similar prices for their produce as those being offered by traders for premium produce.”

Both women expressed interest in buying vegetables from the trainees once they graduate from the Best Practice Hub—provided these vegetables meet required standards for type, quality and quantity. The trainees already have secured a contract to supply vegetables for pupils at the Young Roses Pre- and Primary School.

Maximum returns to households often depend on gender relations in value chains. Florence Ghamunga, VINESA’s Gender Expert, emphasised the need to address gender diversity to strengthen equity among individuals, families, households, and societies. More equitable access to resources (land, money, transport); greater roles in decision making; a fairer division of labour; and more sustainable partnerships make stronger chains that support more stakeholders.

After their field activities and discussion of the feedback they received during the study tour, participants exercised value chain thinking and ranked the preferences of different consumers/customers for selected crops in the three market outlets surveyed. Participants also identified suitable postharvest opportunities and areas of collaboration among chain players to more effectively meet consumer/customer preferences.

On the last day of training, participants met with ACIAR’s Regional Manager for Africa, Liz Ogutu. Ms. Ogutu gave an overview of other ACIAR-funded projects in Tanzania and sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting possible areas of cooperation with VINESA. She described the role of VINESA in improving community nutrition in Tanzania by encouraging vegetable consumption as the most affordable source of protein, vitamins and micronutrients. Partnerships between ACIAR projects would improve community living standards and promote achievement of respective project objectives.

John Macharia, VINESA Project Manager said that “participation by key players along the value chain is a must if farmers are to improve performance of the chain in a sustainable way.” He also reminded participants that value chain thinking needs time, collaboration, trust and commitment.

In his closing remarks to wrap up the course, Cornel Massawe Officer in Charge, HORTI – Tengeru, reminded participants to “not despair, or think that value chain thinking is too difficult.” With the knowledge gained from the course, the participants are now well-prepared to rise to the challenge.

For more information contact
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