

FARMERS ADOPT VIRTUAL MARKETING OF THEIR PRODUCE

SOKOPEPE is putting into Kenyan farmer's hands powerful ICT tools, that enable them to access markets directly, edging out middlemen who time and again rob Kenyan farmers the fruits of their sweat and making the story of small scale farmers acquire the analogy of someone dying of thirst while standing knee deep in a river.

Farmers in Kenya and other parts of Africa have been losing a significant amount of their proceeds to middlemen, generally being unaware of market prices nationally. Many are a time we have seen farmers lose produce they have invested time and money on because of gluts occasioned by poor marketing practices, especially during harvest periods.

Nonetheless, the problem of poor marketing and middlemen is gradually being conquered and it is soon hoped that it will be eradicated by Sokopepe, says Mr. Noah Lusaka, Project Officer Arid Land Information Network (ALIN)-an NGO that has

developed the Sokopepe portal. What is Sokopepe?

Sokopepe (Swahili for virtual market) is a platform for enhancing marketing link between farmers and buyers of various commodities such as maize, beans, peas, poultry, and livestock products among others. Through this technology small scale farmers are linked to retailers or bulk purchasers online and on mobile phones.

One can access Sokopepe through any device linked to the internet. To the URL for Sokopepe is www.sokopepe.co.ke; click on "Register" and follow the prompts to complete registration. For a farmer to register using his

or her mobile phone number they should send their ID number, First Name, Last Name and County to a short code 20245, and then wait for a confirmation message in order to activate the account.

After registration a farmer will be able to access prices of commodities in all major towns in Kenya, as well as accessing information on available farm inputs, service providers, farming and livestock husbandry tips and secure mobile payment solutions. This goes a long way in aiding farmers to get a better bargain for their yields, thus empowering them economically.





Farmers in Sipili, Laikipia County are already reaping benefits of Sokopepe. This region, was selected for piloting the platform by ALIN. The producers are already using this technology to sell their maize, tomatoes, fruits and passion fruits among other produce. Mr. Joseph Kimani Mwati, the Chairman of Sipili Cereal Bank says that farmers from this locale in Laikipia County have been using Sokopepe for about two years and this technology which encompasses use of ICT to disseminate information has helped farmers a lot in securing good prices and consequently eliminating middlemen who exploit farmers.

ALIN has gone a notch higher to ensure that farmers are in possession of facilities to enable them meet the demands of bulk purchasers. For instance they are encouraging farmer groups to form cooperatives which can then organize in order to establish cereal stores in Sappily where they can aggregate their produce.

These stores aid farmers to properly store their produce and wait for a ripe market or marshal cereals for bulk purchasers. "Soon cereal banks and warehouses in most regions will be geo-mapped and those interested in buying cereals from them will be able to access their locations online, hence easing traceability", said Mr. Lusaka. Sentiments of the farmers resonate with Mr. Lusaka. He says that apart



from farmers knowing about market information they get to know loads of helpful tips on farming techniques and also learn ways of improving the quality of their produces.

In the year 2012 Sokopepe aided passion fruits farmers in Sipili export their produce to London. Access to international markets requires adherence to stringent quality measures. This way farmers gain skills to ensure that their produce is of high quality.

Although it is challenging for farmers new to international markets to meet all the quality standards required; Mr. Peter Muturi Luka, the Chairman of Passion Fruit and Tomato Fruit tree Farmer in Sipili says that they are working with ALIN to ensure that farmers are trained on quality measures. He added that through this training there is hope that their exports to London and other markets worldwide will increase.

Over and above this, ALIN has established 7 Community Maarifa Centres in Kenya. These are ICT hubs offering various services including Internet, libraries, ICT trainings and space for community meetings. Over 800 people in Sipili have been trained on the use of ICTs. In Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania more than 7000 people trained on the same. ALIN plans to scale up Sokopepe in other East African countries. With ICT tools on their hands farmers are exposed to citizen journalism and Arid Land Information Network has empowered them to report, lobby and advocate for issues that affect their social - political development. Through citizen journalism in Sipili farmers are able to bring to light issues that require policy review and change to law and policy makers through the blog <http://laikipiaruralvoices.blogspot.com/>.