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Title:

THE ROLE OF AGROECOLOGICAL FARMERS' MARKETS IN ENHANCING ACCESS TO HEALTHY AND AFFORDABLE FOOD AMONG URBAN AND PERI-URBAN POPULATIONS IN EAST AND SOUTH AFRICA: A CASE OF THE SLOW FOOD EARTH MARKETS/AGROECOLOGICAL MARKETS IN KENYA, UGANDA AND MALAWI

Abstract:

This abstract presents comprehensive practical findings of the role of agroecological farmers' markets in promoting access to healthy and affordable food among urban and peri-urban populations in East and Southern Africa, with a specific focus on the Slow Food Earth Markets. The core challenge is that, while there has been a sustained push for adoption of agroecological practices by the small-scale farmers who produce diverse foods, there is low demand due to limited consumer awareness on the value of agroecological products for improved nutrition, health and food security. The markets for agroecological food producers have remained fragmented with most farmers selling their products as individuals with no form of organisation. Slow Food Earth Markets are agroecological markets organized by farmers that sell diverse agroecological products (raw or processed) in a specific territory. This abstract therefore explores the benefits of adoption of agroecology and improving market accessibility for both producers and consumers within these markets.

Slow Food Earth Markets promote agroecological farming practices and local sustainable food production. They also contribute to the conservation of cultural and biological diversity through the preservation of native crop varieties, traditional farming practices, and the overall resilience of local ecosystems. The agroecological products are an important source of income for the producer and quality food for the consumers making them markets essential in sustaining production, accessibility and affordability. The markets provide a platform for small-scale farmers to directly sell their products, eliminating intermediaries and ensuring fair prices. Additionally, there are positive impacts on consumer health through increased access to fresh, nutritious, and affordable food. Earth Markets also play a great role in strengthening local economies, creating job opportunities for smallholder farmers, and fostering community resilience.

Furthermore, the Earth Markets were vital in adapting to the challenges posed by the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. They ensured the continuity of food supply while prioritising the safety and well-being of producers and consumers. Consumers were able to access food items within their locality due to the markets' strong territorial presence and linkages.

Recognizing the importance of gender equity, gender issues are addressed within Earth Markets, highlighting the importance of empowering women farmers/entrepreneurs and their crucial role in shaping the market dynamics. Women are the main players in these markets both as producers, traders and consumers with men playing a secondary role. Earth Markets also play a significant role in promoting knowledge sharing, culinary traditions, making informed food choices and sustainable food consumption practices among consumers and the wider community.

Finally, the Earth Markets are used as a strong advocacy tool as they contribute to local policy change of fostering indigenous food systems. The Earth Markets recognize the need for policy support and multi-stakeholder collaborations to create an enabling environment for smallholder farmers and Agroecological Entrepreneurs.