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“Development on the margin”

Mobile Phones are Just More than Phones in the Hands of Farmers

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Abstract

One of the major constraints for improved commercialisation is the existence of an efficient marketing system. Small-scale farmers access to market information and overall to better markets remain still very low. In this regard, a pilot project in improving access to market information through mobile phones was implemented in the central rift valley area, which is one of the areas with better infrastructure in terms of roads and telecommunication. This paper documents the experience gained and assesses the impact of access to mobile telephone on access to markets thereby farmers' income.

The study was conducted in the central rift valley areas namely in Adama, Dugda, and Adami Tulu woredas (districts), which are known for the production of diversified crops including cereals, pulses, vegetables and fruits. Farmers that were organised into FRG (farmer research group) were provided with a mobile phone one for each FRG to improve their access to market information thereby markets not only in the nearby town but also in distant markets .

Farmers access to online market information: new channels for marketing such as direct negotiation with traders avoiding brokers, access to further market places, exchange of information between farmer groups and the impact brought have been analyzed. The following encouraging results have been observed: reduced costs of marketing by avoiding guess work, farmers were able to fetch better market opportunities, bargaining power has been improved, farmers started group marketing, and changes on decision pattern and marketing have been observed. Furthermore, the majority of farmers' production pattern has changed. They started to produce which they learnt have steady and high market demand which is an indication that farmers have started to follow market oriented agricultural production. Mobile phones can be an important low cost intervention in areas with limited infrastructure in terms of communication.

Keywords: Commercialisation, farmers, market information, mobile phones