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## Filling Institutional Voids: Role of Social Networks in Horticultural Market Access, Evidence from Kenyan Smallholders

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### Abstract

Imperfect market information is a key challenge to market access among small scale farmers in developing countries. Small-scale producers are faced with limited access to formal institutional structures to facilitate functioning markets. This is due to the minimal role played by the public sector in transmitting price information and developing market linkages. Social networks have been found to play a key role in filling formal institutional voids through facilitating adoption of technologies and innovations. However, what role do social networks play in access to market information, particularly for perishable crops? How does the market information from networks translate into market access? To answer these questions, the paper applied social network analysis using mixed methods approach. First, a household survey conducted in 2015 and later an in-depth qualitative study conducted on selected farmers, traders and organisations. First, we mapped egocentric market information networks for small-scale vegetable producers. Second, we assessed frequency and reliability of market information through various network ties. Finally, we assessed challenges and opportunities of different network ties in access to markets. Graphs and measures of network structures were analysed quantitatively using UCINET 6 while challenges and opportunities of the network ties were assessed qualitatively using MAXQDA 12. Preliminary findings show that organisational ties, particularly civil society Organisations offered novel market information; although, their ties to producers were minimal. Information transferred was infrequent and mainly targeted to a section of farmers, specifically group leaders who were core periphery nodes in the network. Spread and dissemination of market information was mainly through farmer groups and association members (bridging ties). Traders as bridging ties played a minimal role in transfer of market information. Bonding ties from family and relatives had higher density in the network but the information shared played a minimal role in market access. Issues of mistrust and jealousy were cited as challenges within bonding ties. Generally, the challenges cited by producers in utilising market information for market access were: ascertaining timeliness of market information; risks and related transaction costs particularly in potentially new markets.

**Keywords:** Horticulture, institutions, market access, social networks