



Agricultural Information Gathering and Use among Smallholders' Sugarcane Farmers during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Tanzania: A Case of Kilosa District

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Aims: The agricultural sector is considered the backbone of Tanzania's economy. Information accessibility to farmers depends on the situation and the available sources. This article aims at attempting to understand the agricultural information gathering and use among smallholders' sugarcane farmers during the covid-19 pandemic in Tanzania: a case of Kilosa district.

Research Methods: In this study, we conducted field surveys among farmers, and of the out in Ruaha, Kidodi, and Kidogobasi villages in Kilosa district, in Morogoro region, Tanzania. A total number of 4776 key informants were engaged in the study to examine information accessibility to farmers depending on the situation and the available sources.

Results: The study found out that agricultural information smallholder farmers needed for sugarcane farming was information on markets 84%, sugarcane payment per ton 74%, and information on the harvest and fertilizers application 72%. We observed that the main source of agricultural information was fellow farmers and agricultural information officers and Radio. We discovered that, before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority (89.7%) accessed agricultural information from their fellow farmers, (71.3%) of respondents said that agricultural extension officer was their preferred source. It was revealed that the majority (83.0%) of the smallholder sugarcane farmers revealed that a limited number of agricultural extension officers was

the main challenge, (72.4%) of the respondents said that a limited number of seminar-workshop and agricultural training incomplete statement. The findings adds up on the insights on the utilization of agricultural information during pandemic.

Conclusion: It can be concluded that agricultural information accessibility is important to smallholder farmers' sugarcane production; furthermore, agricultural extension officers are a significant role in farmers' productivity even amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Sugarcane production; smallholder farmers; information accessibility; COVID-19 Pandemic; Tanzania.

1. INTRODUCTION

The agricultural sector is considered the backbone of Tanzania's economy, it contributes about 28% of the country's GDP and about 24% of the total exports products are agricultural products [1]. It employs about 70% of the whole Tanzania population, some Tanzanians are involved directly in farm production while others work as agents for agricultural products, exportation, and industrial production [2].

Contributions of the agricultural sector are not limited to economic growth, it has been the key factor in poverty reduction in rural areas, improving living standards of the people, and strengthening food supply and food security in the country. Tanzanians produce a variety of crops such as rice, banana, coffee, sugarcane, cotton, maize, beans and potatoes, sorghum, millet, sunflower, tea.

Sugarcane is the major source of sugar used in Tanzania, Due to the skyrocketing interest in agricultural commercialization by African governments from large-scale to smallholder farmers, the increasing interest in cash crop production, government supportive priorities, and rising industrial demand for sugar [3-5]. Due to its application in industrial products Tanzanian government has been implementing different strategies to improve sugarcane farming at both larger scale and small-scale farming through different programs like Big Results Now (BRN). The smallholder farmers have been the great source of sugarcane to sugar-producing industries in Tanzania, the efforts have been made to increase sugarcane production as it is the main source of sugar produced in different industries such Kilombero, Kagera sugar, and Mtibwa sugar of Tanzania [6]. Its annual sugar production is 300,000 tonnes that do not meet the requirement, which is approximately 520,000 tonnes [7]. Kilombero Sugar Company is the largest sugar company in Tanzania which gets its raw materials from smallholder farmers cultivating around the company which is estimated to be 7500 [7].

Productivity among smallholder farmers is determined by several factors, amount of rainfall, quality of seeds, soil factors, government support and policy, and information accessibility [8-11]. One of the major needs of the smallholder farmers is agricultural information, the timely access to information, quality, authenticity, the relevance of the information helps the farmers to make an informed decision and improve the quality and quantity of their production [12]. Argues that smallholder farmers can make a significant contribution to production if equipped with all their needs including the right information at the right time such as agricultural practices for production, pest control, seed varieties, manure, and fertilizer. Information has been a key to decision making among farmers, as farmers inquire about crops varieties, market trends, government priorities, with different information is likely to have different impacts on farmers as their agricultural information needs vary [13].

Information accessibility to farmers depends on the situation and the available sources, several studies conducted before the outbreak of COVID-19 found that the major sources of agricultural information to farmers were Interpersonal communication and social gatherings, radio, Television, [14]. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the ways of sharing information among farmers around the globe, with limited social gatherings and emphasis on social distancing, wearing masks, and lockdown in most countries [15].

Accessibility and use of the right agricultural information at the right time guarantee primary success to smallholder farmers as information plays a key role in decision-making, farmers enquire for different information that helps them to increase agricultural productivity [16] Smallholder sugarcane farmers build their output on the agricultural information they gather and use for maximum sugarcane production [3].



Fig. 1. Map showing the location of Kilombero sugar company the main buyer of sugarcane produced by smallholder farmers

Considering their preferred means to obtain information, that is interpersonal communication with the extension officers and social gathering with their fellow farmers [17]. This has drastically changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Different studies have been conducted to assess information gathering and use among farmers in COVID-19 such as Application of Agricultural Drones and to Understand Food Supply Chain During Post COVID-19 by Dutta and Mitra, Smallholder farmer perceptions about the impact of COVID-19 on agriculture and livelihoods in Senegal by (Middendorf et al., 2021), the Main issues of the Contract Farming Structure in Sugar Cane Farming. Perspectives of Smallholder Farmers in Kilombero Region in Tanzania by [18].

However little is known about Agricultural Information Gathering and Use among farmers. Therefore, this study assessed the Agricultural Information Gathering and Use among Smallholders' Sugarcane Farmers during COVID-19 Pandemic in Tanzania.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Approach

A research approach is a plan of action that gives direction to conduct research

systematically and efficiently [19]. The study adopted a quantitative approach because of its appropriateness to the topic of the study. The quantitative approach helped the study to collect numerical data from the smallholder farmers.

2.2 Description of the Study Area

This study was conducted in Ruaha, Kidodi, and Kidogobasi villages in Kilosa district, which is located Morogoro region in east-central Tanzania. It's about 148 km from Morogoro town and 300 km west of Dar es Salaam. Kilosa extends between Latitude 5°55' and 7°53' South and Longitudes 36°30' and 37°30' east. According to the latest Population and Housing Census 2012, Kilosa district had thirty-five wards (35 wards) with a total population of 438,175 and comprise 218,378 Males and 219,797 Females and have two administrative constituencies, Kilosa Constituency and Mikumi constituency [2]. The major economic activity conducted by farmers in the Kilosa district is Sugarcane production and their main buyer is Kilombero Sugar Company Limited.

2.3 Study Population

The study population for this study was smallholders farmers engaging in sugarcane

production. Moreover, about 7476 farmers have been registered in different associations like Kitete AMCOS 627, Harambee AMCOS 80, RCGA AMCOS 4311, Msindazi AMCOS 690, Msowelo AMCOS 309, Muungano AMCOS 356, Hope MCOS 64, Kidodi AMCOS 193, Bonye AMCOS 557 AND Miwa AMCOS 289 that made a total of 7476 of the targeted population to conduct research.

2.4 Sampling Technique

The study used a multistage sampling technique, which purposively select three wards from the Mikumi constituency the selected wards are the ones with the most smallholder farmers producing sugarcane for that reason the respective wards were chosen out of 15 wards. In addition, the study used simple random sampling to get three villages from selected wards, and then simple random sampling was used to select respondents from the three-selected ward.

2.5 Data Collection Instrument

The study adopted a questionnaire survey to collect the data for this study, according to [20] describes questionnaires in research as instruments for gathering data beyond the physical reach of the observer. Also, the questionnaire was used because most of the farmers were able to read and write, Kothari argues that the questionnaire gives room for the respondent to think and give the best response according to their understanding.

2.6 Data Analysis

The study used a statistical package for social science (SPSS) to generate frequency tables, percentage tables, and figures, charts.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Demographic Information

The study involved 81 respondents, the majorities 69.00% were male, and the least 31.00% were female, respondents. Moreover, most of the respondents 25.30% were between 20-25 years of age, followed by 19.50% aging

between 41-45 years. The results show the majority of respondents 71.30% were married followed by 27.60% of the respondents who were still single. Most of the respondents 36.80% had attained secondary school education, followed by 34.50% who went to primary school. Furthermore, the findings indicate that 75.50% of smallholder farmers' cultivated area ranged from 1-to 10 acres (Table 1).

3.2 Agricultural Information is Needed for the Production of Sugarcane

The respondents were asked about the agricultural information they need from sugarcane farming, the majority of the respondents 84% need information on markets, 74.00% sugarcane payment per ton, 72.40% information on the harvest. In addition, 72.00% inquired about fertilizers application (Table 2).

3.3 Accessibility of Agriculture Information by Smallholders Sugarcane Farmers

The respondents were asked about the access they had to the agricultural information, the majority of the respondents (66.70%) stated that were able to access the information they needed at the right time (Table 3).

3.4 The Farmers' Response to Limited Access to Agricultural Information

The respondents revealed that the majority (42.70%) of them went to seek advice from extension officers, (41.30%) of respondents got information by seeking advice from farmers experienced in sugar cane production (Table 4).

3.5 Benefits of Timely Accessing Agriculture Information

The respondents were asked about the benefits they got from accessing and using agricultural information, the majority (90.8%) of the respondents said that it help to increase production, (75.9%) of the respondents were able to get improved varieties during the sewing season, hence good yield during the harvesting season (Table 5).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	60	69.00
Female	27	31.00
Age		
20-25	22	25.30
26-30	14	16.10
31-35	9	10.30
36-40	15	17.20
41-45	17	19.50
46-50	5	5.70
51 and above	5	5.70
Marital status		
Married	62	71.30
Not married	24	27.60
Widow	1	1.10
Divorce	0	0.00
Education level		
Not go to school	5	5.70
Primary	30	34.50
Secondary	32	36.80
College	6	6.90
Degree	14	16.10
Farm Size		
1-10	63	75.50
11-20	20	20.40
21-30	2	5.70
31-40	2	2.20

Table 2. Agriculture information needed in the production of sugarcane

Agriculture information needed	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Farm preparation	34	39.10
Sugarcane payment per tones	65	74.00
Improved varieties	42	48.30
Harvesting information	63	72.40
Herbicides.	19	21.80
Pesticides.	40	46.00
Application of fertilizers	63	72.00
Marketing information	72	82.80
Transport information	46	52.90
Expansion of the markets	3	3.40
The weather station at KSCL	1	1.10
Management of farm	1	1.10
Planting and using hybrid sugar cane seed	4	4.60
Distance from the farm to KSCL industry	2	2.30
Transparency of information about sucrose extracted from out-growers farmers	1	1.10

*Source: field 2021***Table 3. Accessibility of agriculture information by smallholder's sugarcane farmers**

Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Getting agriculture information at the right time	29	33.30
Accessing agriculture information at a late time	58	66.70

Source: field 2021

3.6 Perceived Impact of Inadequate Agriculture Information on Sugarcane Production

The respondents were asked if the inadequacy of agricultural information had affected the production, the table below is showing 88.50% of the respondents agreed that limited accessibility of agricultural information impacted their productivity.

3.7 The Sources of Agriculture Information Used by Small-scale Sugarcane Producers before and in the COVID-19 Pandemics

Sources used by smallholder farmers in accessing agriculture information before COVID-19 pandemics.

Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority (89.70%) accessed agricultural

information from their fellow farmers, (71.30%) of respondents said that agricultural extension officer was their preferred source.

3.8 Perceived Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Agriculture Information Accessibility

The respondents were asked if the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic affected their agricultural information accessibility, 85.50% of the respondents agreed that limited accessibility of agricultural information affected their productivity.

3.9 The Extent of Using the Source of Agriculture Information

Respondents showed that after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority 79.00% in Table 9 below accessed agricultural information from their fellow farmers, (71.30%) of respondents said that agricultural extension officer was their preferred source.

Table 4. The farmers' response to limited access to agricultural information

Categories	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Seek advice for extension officers	32	42.70
Reduce production of sugar cane	3	4.00
Involves in production of other crops	2	2.70
Seek advice to farmers experienced in sugar cane production	31	41.30
Attending in sugarcane production exhibition	1	1.30
Seek advice from agriculture inputs suppliers	10	13.30
Cultivating sugarcane farms affected with diseases	1	1.30
Reading agriculture books to solve challenges of producing sugarcane	2	2.70
Getting advice from researchers	3	4.00
Getting advice from association leaders	6	8.00
Using my own experience	3	4.00
Using herbicide application	3	4.00
Reading newspapers	1	1.30

Source: field 2021

Table 5. Benefits of timely accessing agriculture information

Categories	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Increase in sugarcane production	79	90.80
The rate of using improved varieties increases	66	75.90
Help in pest control management	47	54.00
Increase income.	53	60.90
Help in weeds control practices	25	28.70
Planting sugar cane at a light time	1	1.10
Sugarcane disease protection	2	2.30
To be competent in sugarcane production	1	1.10
Fire break preparation	1	1.10

Source: field 2021

Table 6. Perceived impact of inadequate agriculture information on sugarcane production

Categories		Frequency(F)	Percentage (%)
After your sugarcane production	Yes	77	88.50
No effect your sugarcane production	No	10	11.50
Total		87	100.00

Source: field 2021

Table 7. Sources used by smallholder farmers in accessing agriculture information before the COVID-19 pandemics

Categories	Frequency(F)	Percentage (%)
Radio.	41	47.10
Television.	40	46.00
Researchers	33	37.90
Mobile phone	28	32.20
Agricultural input suppliers	55	63.20
Agricultural extension	62	71.30
Fellow farmers	78	89.70
Magazines.	10	11.50
Posters.	16	18.40
Personal email	5	5.70
Neighbors.	48	55.20
Local government officials.	11	12.60
Reading different agriculture books	1	1.10
My husband	2	2.30
Website	1	1.10

Source: field 2021

3.10 Methods used in Disseminating Agriculture Information to Small-scale Sugarcane Producers

3.10.1 Methods used by Farmers in the gathering of agriculture information

The respondents were asked about the methods they used to gather agricultural information, the majority (81.60%) of the respondents attended agricultural exhibitions, (75.50%) of the farmers went to agricultural group meetings to get the information they needed.

3.11 Challenges Facing Small-scale Sugarcane Producers in Accessing Agricultural Information Challenges Facing during Accessing Agricultural Information

The respondents were asked about the challenges they faced in gathering and using agricultural information, the majority (83.00%) of the respondents revealed that a limited number of agricultural extension officers was the main challenge, (72.40%) of the respondents said that a limited number of seminar-workshop and agricultural training was challenging indeed.

3.12 Preferred Sources of Agricultural Information by Smallholder Sugarcane Farmers

The respondents were asked about their preferred sources of agricultural information for easy and timely accessibility, the majority (89.70%) of the respondents sought agricultural information from their fellow experienced farmers, (55.20%) of respondents indicated that agricultural extension officers used as measures to improve sugarcane production.

3.13 Suggestions to the Agricultural Information Providers for the Improvement of Agriculture Information Accessibility to the Smallholder Sugarcane Farmers in the COVID-19 Pandemic

The respondents were asked about their suggestions, which could bring easy accessibility of agricultural information in the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority (75.00%) of the respondents said that increasing more Radio programs on agriculture is due to COVID-19. 63.20% of the respondents argue that the

dissemination of agricultural information through mobile phones due to social distancing will be of good help. 57.70% said that recruiting more agricultural extension officers could improve information accessibility.

The study found that recruitment of extension officers, ant corruption association leaders, and Provision of Seminars, Workshops, and Training Programs was the main suggestion provided by smallholder farmers in sugarcane production to the government to ensure they provide these services to them to shift up the production of sugarcane to small scale farmers.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 The farmers' Agricultural Information Needed for Sugarcane Production

The study found out that agricultural information smallholder farmers needed for sugarcane farming was information on markets 84.00%, sugarcane payment per ton 74.00%, and information on the harvest and fertilizers application 72.00%. The study was conducted by [21] who found out farmers were much interested in pests and diseases management, fertilizers management, crops varieties, and marketing information. Adio et al. [22] observed that

farmers mostly prefer to get agricultural information on improved varieties, use of fertilizer, crop management, and use of pest management, the study conducted by [23] uncovered that most of the smallholder farmers searched for information on pest management and crops varieties [24]. Analyzed Farmers' Information Needs and found out that most farmers need information for crops production.

4.2 The Sources of Agricultural Information Used by Smallholder Farmers for Sugarcane Production

The study found out that the main source of agricultural information was fellow farmers and agricultural information officers and Radio. This study agrees with the study conducted by [7] in Tanzania found out that radio and extension officers were major sources of agricultural information among smallholder farmers. The study conducted on the influence of agricultural information sources on production by [25] identified the following, fellow farmers, radio, and extension officers' main sources of agricultural information to farmers. The study conducted by [26] identified the mobile phone as the major source of agricultural information accessibility to smallholder farmers [27]. Argue that most farmers use extension officers as their trustworthy source of agricultural information.

Table 8. Perceived impact of COVID-19 pandemic on agriculture information accessibility

Categories		Frequency	Percentage (%)
The outbreak of COVID-19 affected agricultural information accessibility	Yes	77	88.50
	No	10	11.50
Total		87	100.00

Source: field 2021

Table 9. The extent of using the source of agriculture information

Categories	Frequency(F)	Percentage (%)
Radio.	65	74.00
Television.	40	46.00
Researchers	30	34.00
Mobile phone	62	71.30
Agricultural input suppliers	48	55.10
Agricultural extension	62	71.30
Fellow farmers	69	79.00
Magazines.	10	11.50
Posters.	16	18.40
Personal email	7	8.00
Neighbors.	48	55.20
Local government officials.	9	10.30

Source: field 2021

4.3 The Ways Used to Disseminate Agriculture Information to Smallholder Farmers for Sugarcane Production before and after the COVID-19 Pandemic

The study found out that, before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority (89.70%) accessed agricultural information from their fellow farmers, (71.30%) of respondents said that agricultural extension officer was their preferred source. This study agrees with [28,29] who uncovered those smallholder farmers mainly depended on informal channels such as their fellow farmers to obtain information, [30] found that mobile phone was the major way of disseminating agricultural information to farmers. The study found out that after the outbreak of COVID-19 the radio (70.00%) became the major source of information and agricultural extension officer (67.00%) [31] found out that COVID-19 changed and communication tradition and most farmers obtained the agricultural information through Phone calls, Television, and Radio, [32] found out that most of the information providers

supply their information through the digital means as the impact of COVID-19 outbreak.

4.4 The Challenges Facing Smallholder Sugarcane Farmers in Gathering and Using Agricultural Information

The study found out that the majority (83.00%) of the smallholder sugarcane farmers revealed that a limited number of agricultural extension officers was the main challenge, (72.40%) of the respondents said that a limited number of seminar-workshop and agricultural training [33]. in Nigeria revealed that most farmers could not access the agricultural information because of Limited agricultural extension services; Agricultural information on media is aired at odd hours, limited agricultural training, limited information services [28] found out poor ICT facilities are the main challenge to access to agricultural information [33] found out that most agricultural information is electronic media and farmers have limited knowledge on using ICT facilities [34] found out that lack of awareness was the major challenge to their information persuasion.

Table 10. Methods used in disseminating agriculture information to small-scale sugarcane producers

Categories	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Contacting agricultural Information personnel	18	20.70
Farm and home visits	30	34.50
Result demonstration	66	75.90
Field trips	39	44.80
Radio program	16	18.40
Agriculture exhibition	71	81.60
Guest speakers.	5	5.70
Group meeting.	17	19.50
Group meeting.	66	75.50
Audio- visual materials	5	5.70
Through agriculture meeting	1	1.10
Conducting different seminars	2	2.30

Source: field 2021

Table 11. Challenges facing during accessing agricultural information

Categories	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Farmers' Associations lack Good Leadership	55	63.20
Unknown sources of information.	22	25.30
Lack of Library and Information Centre	54	62.10
Lack of Agricultural Demonstrations	22	25.30
Lack of Agricultural Extension Officers	70	83.00
Language barrier in accessing information	34	39.10
A limited number of Seminars, Workshops and Training Programmers	63	72.40
Poor network infrastructure	1	1.10

Source: field 2021

Table 12. Proposed measure for accessing agriculture information to improve sugarcane production

Categories	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Using agriculture officers	48	55.20
Knowledgeable farmers.	78	89.70
Search (www).	25	28.70
Commercial and agriculture agencies	14	16.10
Mass media.	44	50.60
Local government.	17	19.50
Telecentres.	2	2.30
Research institutions.	28	32.20
Self-experiences	1	1.10

Source: field 2021

Table 13. Suggestion to the government on the improvement of agriculture information to smallholder sugarcane producers

Categories	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Recruitment of extension officers	50	57.50
Increasing more Radio programs on agriculture due to COVID-19	66	75.00
Dissemination of agricultural information through mobile phone due to social distancing.	55	63.20
Association leaders should be ant corruption	19	22.10
Transparence of market information concerning sucrose and tons of sugar cane	9	10.50
Introducing of Library and Information Centre.	4	4.70
Provision of Seminars, Workshops and Training Programmers	40	45.90
Government conduct sugar cane exhibition for small farmers	4	4.70
Group's formation to ensure easily information dissemination	2	2.30

Source: field 2021

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results, agricultural information accessibility is essential to smallholder farmers' sugarcane production; also agricultural extension officers still play an important role in farmers' productivity even amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, smallholder farmers still use experienced farmers to access agricultural information; moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused the shift of agricultural information inquiring from the agricultural extension officers as the main source to Radio where more farmers listen to Radio to obtain agricultural information. The study recommends that the information providers should use Radio for dissemination of agricultural information to smallholder farmers, as the results of COVID-19 pandemic with limited interpersonal communication as the results of COVID-19 prevention protocols and also the

government need to recruit more agricultural extension officer since they are the reliable source of agricultural information to smallholder farmer. This recommendation contradicts the preceding recommendation on maintenance of social distance through radio communication since extension officers will have face-to-face communication as they offer advisory services.

DISCLAIMER

The products used for this research are commonly and predominantly used products in our area of research and country. There is no conflict of interest between the authors and producers of the products because we do not intend to use these products as an avenue for any litigation but the advancement of knowledge. Also, the research was not funded by the producing company rather it was funded by the personal efforts of the authors.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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