

Highlights

CIAT in Africa

Consumer preferences for beans in Malawi and its influence on price

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The common bean *Phaseolus vulgaris* is one of the most important food legumes grown by smallholder farmers in Malawi where it is commonly eaten as an accompaniment to maize, the main staple food. Farmers usually grow a wide range of bean varieties (both bush and climbing types) that vary tremendously in grain size, colour, and shape. Over the years, there has been much investment in bean research for development.

Farmers' landrace varieties were crossed with new bean varieties from South America to produce improved bean varieties (with better yields, resistance to drought and pests and diseases) adapted to local conditions. Such efforts have resulted in the release of several improved bean varieties in Malawi, (nine by Bunda College of Agriculture and eight by Chitedze Agricultural Research Station) for the benefit of smallholder farmers. Bean varieties have different characteristics (colour, shape, size) that determine their attractiveness to consumers. Farmers sell part of their produce in local markets, but very little is known about consumer preferences. A study

was undertaken to assess some of the social factors that determine choice of beans on the market, and how that relates to the price of beans.



Bean prices vary within and across markets as well as across the bean types based on consumer preference.

Methodology

The study was conducted in 2004 after the bean harvest. A two-stage cluster sampling approach was applied. All major bean markets, located mainly in the southern and central regions of the country were targeted for the study. Bean traders (wholesale and retail merchants) were randomly selected from these markets for targeted questions and discussions. A total of 74 bean traders were interviewed using a structured questionnaire to:

- o discover the factors that influence the choice of bean in the market, the price of beans and the sales volumes
- o encourage information sharing between traders and producers

Results

Popular bean types

Traders used different names for the same variety depending on the location, for instance *Napilira* (red mottled in colour) was also called *Kachiyata* (or *Chiata*), where as the common red kidney bean was referred to as *Phalombe* or *Chimbamba* or *Thyolo*, depending on which market they were sold in. Most traders deal with

beans that have been sorted by variety. The market places were dominated by just three bean varieties, which were traded by more than 50% of the merchants: *Phalombe* (77%), *Nanyati* (72%) and *Napilira* (65%).

Preferred bean types

The majority of the traders (64%) mentioned *Phalombe* as the bean type that is in high demand by purchasers followed by *Nanyati* (34%) and *Napilira* (20%). At least half of the traders at all the markets in the country (with the exception of Area 23 market in Lilongwe) reported that *Phalombe* was in highest demand. *Nanyati* was the most popular bean type, reported by 80% of the traders in Area 23 market in Lilongwe.

Basis for choice of bean types

Forty percent of traders consistently mentioned three factors (grain colour, cooking time and taste) which they thought influenced demand for beans on the market. Although the traders who were questioned had difficulty describing the type of taste consumers preferred they were quick to report that consumers preferred beans with 'good' taste. Further probing revealed that most consumers liked *Phalombe* because of its dark red colour. When cooked, this bean variety provides a deep red bean sauce which makes a good contrast with the white maize-based dish (*Nzima*), a staple food commonly consumed in Malawi. Although traders reported that bean varieties with short cooking time sold faster, there was no consensus on which specific variety had shorter cooking times.

Other traders (24%) indicated that sometimes consumers cannot find the variety they want (e.g. *Phalombe*) and are compelled to buy those varieties that are available.

Bean prices

Bean prices varied within and across markets as well as across the bean types based on preference. In general, the wholesale prices ranged from US\$0.30/kg to US\$0.80/kg across the varieties. *Khaki* beans had the highest average wholesale price of US\$0.50/kg, followed by *Phalombe* at US\$0.46/kg. *Napilira* had the cheapest average selling price of US\$0.36/kg. The study revealed that price of beans mainly depended on its availability. However, some variety characteristics (such as cooking time, grain colour and taste) also had some influence on the price of the bean varieties.

Estimates of monthly bean sales volumes obtained from wholesalers confirmed what had been reported by market traders, (i.e. the volume of bean sales was directly related to availability of bean types and not to consumer preferences for different varieties). *Napilira*, which was the third most preferred type, had the highest average sales volume, at about 8,800 kg per month. Traders attributed this mainly to its high yielding ability, which made the variety the most abundant on the market at the time of harvest. Over half of the merchants (68%) reported that they did not pass information on to farmers about consumer bean preferences. Some traders thought producers were already aware of the information, while others expressed the fear that passing such information on to producers would result in higher farm-gate prices being demanded for the most popular bean varieties.

Lesson learned

The choice of beans in the market is strongly influenced by grain colour, which is usually associated with consumers' prior knowledge of factors such as familiarity with, cooking time, and taste of, the variety. *Phalombe* was the most popular variety, but was relatively scarce and highly priced. The price of beans in the market was mainly influenced by supply and demand principles, although social factors such as cooking time and grain colour were also associated with price. The relatively new variety, *Napilira* was the most abundant and cheapest on the market at harvest time. There was evidence from the study that traders did not share market information about the most popular bean types with the producers for fear that they would demand higher prices for their commodity. This results in a shortage of popular bean types, resulting in high prices for such bean types. Bridging the information gap between traders and farmers is crucial to ensure proper linkage between production and markets, and to give consumers and producers the choice of bean varieties they want - at the right price.



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