

Full Length Research Paper

The role of informal commodity traders' association in the marketing of farm products in selected rural markets in Ghana

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This article is aimed at examining how the activities of women trader's association in rural market of Ghana affect the marketing of agriculture products of smallholder farmers. Hundred market women trades' association operators from ten rural markets were interviewed. A case study analysis technique was used for data analysis. The results showed that women trader's associations are a useful phenomenon in the marketing of agriculture products in the rural markets as they contribute significantly to the 4Ps of marketing. However, since most of the associations are informal and unregistered by law, governance is usually problematic, making market control difficult sometimes. The paper therefore recommended that local government authorities should ensure that members are registered, while associations establish a former structure that can make them more recognized and effective.

Key words: Informal trader's associations, marketing mix, rural market, informal trade associations.

INTRODUCTION

Most studies of trader's association in the academic literature have focused on formal traders' associations. While traders' associations (formal or informal) have some common characteristics in terms of formation, nature and function, informal trader's associations have additional characteristics that make them distinct from the formal associations. This current study focuses on informal trader's association operating in the rural markets and comprises women because of its unique features. Trader's associations are a multimember

organization that represents business interests in a specific context (Rajwani et al., 2015). Membership of trader's associations is voluntary and members contribute dues and fees to manage the costs of association. This is because the primary source of traders' associations is membership fees. While membership of trader's association is often narrow to allow coordination among diverse interests (Staber and Aldrich, 1983), formation of associations is easy and membership grows faster when the interest they serve is broad. Once formed, traders'

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associations are enduring, and become the platform through which members identify and solve fresh problems (Barnett, 2013). Taking part in a traders' association provides members access to knowledge and expertise (Lawton et al., 2013) that may help them develop individual and group-level capabilities (Minto, 2016; Kahl, 2014). Traders' associations help construct shared understanding of the purpose and function of the area of business they represent. By constructing shared meaning, the associations influence how members understand their market activities, shaping their strategies and even the nature of market competition (Lawton et al., 2018). Trader's associations create norms, standards, and collective identity (Spillman, 2012). Several associations work to provide marketing information, such as information on procurement areas and transport infrastructure, on potential buyers and on prices and availability of markets. Research interest in trader's associations has gained momentum in the last two decades, leading to many writings on the subject.

Lawton et al. (2018) explored the organizational characteristics of trader's associations and considered how trade association generate meaning and influence. In their study, they considered traders' associations as meta-organizations made up of multiple individuals and organizations working toward a shared goal. Trader's associations coordinate production beyond the boundaries of the individual members by a "networks of groups or individuals not bound by authority based on employment relationships, but characterized by system-level goals" (Gulati et al., 2012). Here, trader's associations are formal entities whose members act as agents and suppliers rather than buyers (Gulati et al., 2012). Kahl (2017) examined the role that traders' associations play in influencing the cognitive interpretations that develop within markets. He observed that traders' associations can enable cognition by providing a space for discourse and influence its outcome by playing an active role in the unfolding discourse (Kennedy, 2008). This suggests that traders' associations serve as a mouth-piece of its members and they provide the market information to their members to create member awareness of ongoing market conditions.

One study that focused on informal market association is by Danso-Wiredu and Sam (2019) who conducted a research to investigate the role non-state organizations play at the local level in ensuring sustainable governance, focusing on Ghana. It stressed on how women possess power in the informal governance systems in Ghanaian markets. The researchers used commodity-trading-associations to explain the unique governance structures instituted at the Ghanaian market which they base tenets on informal level of governance. Some argued that governance system of traders' associations is more effective and well understood at the local level. This means that although local traders'

associations in the rural market may be informal, they are better organized and possess power in their governance systems. Another study that had earlier focused on informal traders' associations is by Baah-Enumh and Adom-Asamoah (2012) to examine the role of market women in the informal urban economy and the factors that threaten the effective performance of their roles. The study revealed that the market traders' associations contribute towards revenue generation through payment of levies and rents. They also create jobs, provide incomes for households, ensured food security and sufficiency, and provide a platform for generational development of entrepreneurial skills and competence. It is suggestive from the studies that informal trade association plays a key role in the product development, pricing, distribution and promotion of farm produce. Shepherd et al. (2009) averred that associations in agricultural commodity supply chains is a global phenomenon; and that farmers, traders, processors, importers, exporters, and sometimes input distributors, storage companies, and transporters represent the associations or similar organizations. These play an important role in promoting the particular interests of their members and may conduct a broad range of other activities, such as product promotion, quality development, training, and information provision. These activities are market-oriented activities, which suggest that traders' associations, formal or informal perform marketing functions in their lines of operation. It is therefore a scientific gap in the existing literature that focus on trade associations, the informal trade associations for ignoring the role of the associations in performing marketing functions. Although there is considerable literature on the formal trade associations, there are few studies on informal traders' associations; and some authors have noted the important roles that traders' associations might play in facilitating agricultural marketing services, in the rural markets. Thus, the current study focuses on the informal traders' association, and their role in the marketing: production, promotion, placement and pricing of farm produce in the rural markets of Ghana.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Informal traders' associations

From the concept of informal business (Ligthelm, 2008), informal traders' association may refer to individual or small group of people unregistered and operating as market vendors, in the rural markets where they work as intermediaries between farmers and buyers of farm products, for the towns and cities in the country. From the perspective of Von Broembsen (2012), informal traders' associations are unregistered and having unregulated economic activities that contribute to the

GDP. In the rural markets, informal traders' associations involve in the production and distribution of legal farm products in which there is non-compliance with regulations in areas such as tax, conditions of employment and the claiming of benefits (Gosavi and Samudre, 2016). For this paper, women trade association includes small, unregistered members whose trading location is mobile, and who often pay taxes to local government authority for their activities. They offer for sale farmers products, and we can describe them as marketers of farm produce in the rural market.

For most part, the informal traders' association seeks to meet household needs by supplementing the family income in families where the husband may be a subsistence farmer and does not end enough to take care for the family. Most times, informal traders' associations become the main option to earn a livelihood for women (Britwum, 2013) who have little or no education to engage in gainful formal employment. Like many traders' associations, membership of women traders' association in the rural market provide market and product knowledge for their members. Also, the governance structure of the associations is in the form of market queenship, and they elect executives from among the membership to manage and organize the association even in their informal state. Membership of informal traders' associations is open to all active traders in the commodity market. Membership criteria appear neither unrealistic nor exclusionary, except that most of these associations operating in the rural markets are females. This does not mean, in any way that, they exclude people from becoming members of the association because of their gender. Although the associations themselves do not appear to restrict membership in any significant way, membership has always been women; and the entitlement to join is desire, ability and trading space in the market.

According to Malick and Krishman (2014), rural markets offer a great scope for a concentrated marketing effort because of the growing need for rural incomes. Such incomes increase faster with better production and higher prices for agricultural commodities. Rural marketing is a developing concept, and the marketers have realized the opportunity of growth in the market (Conner et al., 2011). This requires that the marketing mix has its rightful place in the rural market to contribute to product development, pricing, distribution and even promotion of farm products (Donnell et al., 2011). The assumption behind the research reported in this paper is that associations of traders have the potential to facilitate the marketing mix in the rural agriculture product market to achieve greater efficiency in the marketing chain. Traders' associations often work as "middlemen", with little recognition of the vital marketing mix role they play in facilitating farm products marketing and distribution. Associations can, in theory, increase the possibility of

their recognized role and take into account policy formulation and can help improve offer for sale of agriculture farm produce under which trading takes place. At the level of the traders' association, we conceptualize that the associations could provide functional support to the marketing activities of the rural markets and assist with marketing of farm products (Mawazo et al., 2015). Encouraging members to work together could also lead to a reduction in marketing transaction costs. We believed that the traders' associations could act as effective liaison between the farmers, who operate on subsistence level (Mkenda and Campenhout, 2011; Eskola, 2005) and the market.

Trade association in the rural market is informal and women dominated. Many of the trade activities take place under the influence of members of these traders' associations. Smallholder farmers in rural areas depend on available thin local rural markets and traders travelling to village markets to buy farm produces (Torero, 2011; Birthal and Joshi, 2007). In this respect, traders' associations in the rural market contribute to offer for sale agricultural products in the rural markets (Shepherd, 2007). Marketing hinges on the marketing mix, including product, place, promotion and price. Therefore, this current study focuses on the trade associations' role in integrating the 4P of the rural market. Studies on trade associations have focused on formal trade association; the few that have done on informal trade association have concerned themselves with trade associations and poverty alleviation, trade association and income generation, trade associations' structure and function. Attempt to study traders' associations in relation to their role in implementing the 4P is under researched and therefore need scientific research attention, which is the focus of this article.

Rural marketing mix

Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large (AMA, 2017). As a management process, the key components include product, price, promotion and place – referred to as the marketing mix or the 4Ps (Kotler, 2003). We define marketing mix as a set of interrelated activities and factors that provide customer value, and archive the organization's goal (Pruskus, 2015; Sereikienė-Abromaitytė, 2013). The key components of the marketing mix, also known as the 4Ps, including product, place, promotion and price are discussed subsequently.

Product

A product as defined by Armstrong and Kotler (2005) is

“anything offered a market for attention, acquisition, use, or consumption that might satisfy a want or need”. Ferrell (2005) opines that the product is the core of the marketing mix strategy where traders’ associations can offer unique attributes that differentiates their product from their competitors. According to Borden (1964) product comprises quality, design, features, brand name and sizes. A rural customer seeks the product features, its quality, service associated with it and its cost, before buying any product. Based on value proposition, any member of a trader’s association before offering any product needs to think of the product offerings in the form of actual product, augmented product and core product (Kashyap, 2012). Actual product refers to any product with minimum features to perform its function as perceived by farmers. A product with all the features required to satisfy the reasonable benefits of the consumer (in contrast to as perceived by the farmer) make up the core product. An augmented product includes features beyond the immediate expected use of the customer. It includes services that trader’s associations offer the buyer after sales, such as provision of transport and replacement of some of the products found damaged in transit from the farms to the market.

The product is more than a simple set of tangible features; it is a complex bundle of benefits that satisfy the buyer’s needs (Ivy, 2008). In the rural markets, farm products are goods produced by the farmer to the trader through the trader’s association. Although products can be tangible and intangible products (Suherly et al., 2016), farm products are only tangible. According to The Chartered Institute of Marketing (2009), a product must provide value for the customer so the farmer through the trader’s association should give their buyers what they want, not just what is available to offer. Traders buy consumer farm products, with careful planning, and by comparing brands based on price, quality and style (Kotler and Armstrong, 2012). Traders’ associations have a duty to adopt product strategy to all the goods they offer to the target market to satisfy their needs. This will include examining the physical conditions of the products, provide efficient services and product information to the buyer; and where possible for acquisition or consumption that might satisfy a want or a need (Muchiri, 2016).

Place

Place, also called the distribution channel, refers to the process and methods by which products or services reach the market. According to The Chartered Institute of Marketing (2009), place is where the customers buy a product, and the means of distributing the seller’s product to that place, must be convenient for the customer. Place is the means that help traders to find and keep purchase those products from the farmers through the traders’

associations at the time of need (Gituma, 2017). In this way, the distribution becomes a functioning complex system where farm products find themselves at certain location and at a certain time (Išoraitė, 2016). Since products from the farms come to the market for sale; they must be ready to the buyers at a suitable place where transaction can take place. So, it is demanding on the trader’s associations to ensure that the product is ready at the markets. This will include a chain of marketing activities like distributors, wholesalers and retailers who shape the distributing network of the market. In this way, the association should choose whether they sell products from the farmer to the buyer or they should buy it from the farmer and resell to the eventual buyer from the towns and cities. Sometimes they may even sell products through other channels of another trader’s association (Thabit and Raewf, 2018). Placement helps to ensure that a trader’s association has provided the buyers with quality customer service that has an influence on the level of buyer satisfaction (Muchiri, 2016).

Promotion

According to Lovelock et al. (1999) promotion is a “decision of how best to relate the product to the target market and how to persuade them to buy it”. Promotion involves creating awareness and persuading customers to buy the product on offer (Kalotra, 2013). In the rural market setting, the primary activities linked to promotion are sales promotions, direct marketing and personal selling. These can influence customer’s way of thinking, their emotions, their experiences and their purchasing decisions. Trader’s associations communicate the product to the market in such a way that it offers consistent messages about the products and influences the potential customers to buy the product (Munusamy and Hoo, 2008). From the rural context, promotion involves making it possible for the customer to see, touch and feel the product before actual purchase.

Also, in the rural markets, customers like buying from known retailers like trader’s associations who maintain close business relations with them. Some other members of trader’s association use the art form like folk tales to promote their products (Sainy, 2014). While marketing mix elements are necessary for diffusion of products in the rural context, to make it more effective, however, there is the need to design the linkages between the different marketing mix elements. Promotion involves all activities the trader’s associations undertake to communicate and promote products to the target market (Gituma, 2017). By rural marketing, promotion must have direct attention, be appealing, tell a consistent message and above all else, give the customer a reason to choose the farmer’s product instead of others.’ For effective promotion, trader’s associations use strategies that

include personal selling, sales promotion, and direct marketing to attract the potential buyers. These elements have an influence on the relationship of the customer and the association essential towards improving the sales of a product or service (Muchiri, 2016). Promotion of the farm product is a tool that enables members of the association disseminate information, encourage the purchase and affects the purchase decision process (Išoraitė, 2016).

Price

Price refers to how much the seller charges for a product or service. Determining price for farm products is involving and even tricky as production costs, margin and even commission are difficult to determine. Many informal trader's associations feel they must have the prevailing market price, which may be lowest price around. Therefore, they begin their business by impressing on bargain pricing. The pricing approach often reflect the appropriate positioning of the product in the market and result in a price that covers cost to the farmer and the distribution costs and commission for the seller. Therefore, the choice of a pricing strategy determined by the product, customer demand, the competitive environment, and the other products for offer. Price refers to the value the seller charge for a product. It depends on costs of production, ability of the market to pay, supply – demand relationship and a host of other direct and indirect factors. There can be several types of pricing strategies, each tied in with an overall business plan of the traders' association. Pricing can also be a demarcation to differentiate and enhance the image of a product. Price element comprises determine the price discount, the commission to channel members and credit sales to regular and dependable customers (Suherly et al., 2016) According to The Chartered Institute of Marketing (2009), a product is only worth what customers are willing and able to pay for it. In this way, although farm products in the rural markets at competitive prices, they are not be the cheapest. The informal trader's association should be able to adding extra services or details that will offer customers better value for money.

A cursory review of the literature on the informal traders' association and the marketing mix of the rural market show that, traders' associations have a significant role to play in the in the sale of farm products in the rural market. Since marketing hinges on the marketing mix, or the 4Ps this research adheres to the questions:

1. How is the governance structure of informal commodity traders' associations in the rural market?
2. How effective is the application of the marketing mix by the informal commodity traders' association in the sale of smallholder farm products in the rural market of Ghana?
3. How do the smallholder famer and the buyer from the

towns and cities turn to benefit respectively, from the activities of the informal traders' association in the rural market?

METHODOLOGY

Case study design was used for the study because it can describe, compare, test and understand unique aspects of the research problem. A case study is an appropriate research design as the study wanted to gain concrete, contextual, in-depth knowledge about a specific real-world subject. It allowed to explore the key characteristics, meanings, and implications of the case. The study covered 50 informants from five rural market in Central and Ashanti regions; twenty smallholder farmers and 20 buyers from the cities were also interviewed to confirm some of the information from the traders' association. 'Also, executives of traders association in the five markets visited were met in a focus group discussion to ascertain information on the governance structure of the association. The five markets are known to have informal traders' associations' activities in the rural market space. The authors used data from both secondary and primary sources. The primary data was collected through interviews using both structured and unstructured questionnaires; observation of real-world situation complemented that in the market. Simple random sampling technique was used to select the traders for interviews.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Informal commodity trader's association governance structure

The results from the qualitative data suggest that even though the association is informal, there is still an established governance structure which is functional and recognized by members, farmers and buyers in the rural markets. All five markets have executive committee, with market queen as the ultimate head. Though not officially registered by appropriate government agencies, there are lists of association members in good standing who pay dues on monthly bases (dues range from GH¢10 to GH¢20). Members are basically women, and election of executives is by voting of members in good standing, with executive term of office being three years, but without a tenure. It is common to fine one person who has been queen mother for over twenty years. To join the association a new member may require to have her name in the membership book by paying a minimum of GH¢100. A serious member could be allowed to make part payment and start business while making arrangement to pay any arrears over time. Operating on the rural market as a commodity trader's association is an offence subject to intimidation and verbal attacked from members, as well as preventing farmers to sell through an unregister person or buyers not to buy from such. To regulate the association's operations, recalcitrant members are sanctioned to be of good behavior. Members support themselves in raising capital and

perform a lot of welfare activities for themselves.

Application of the marketing mix

The findings also indicate that the marketing mix is effectively applied by the informal commodity traders' associations in all rural market, which contribute significantly to the marketing of smallholder farm produce. Respondents emphasized the direct positive relationship between application of the marketing mix and the sale of smallholder farm produce in the rural markets in Ghana as the reports for the 4Ps indicate.

Product mix

The respondents emphasized the application of product mix in the marketing of smallholder farmer produce by the informal commodity trader's associations in the rural markets regarding product uniqueness, product range, product freshness/good looking etc. The following quotes demonstrate application of the product mix:

"We usually ensure quality products sold to our customers are in good conditions. But since there is a wide range of products with different levels of quality, customers are allowed to choose. And what one customer may refuse to choose another will choose, so at the end of the day whatever is available from the farm end up sold." (An association member at Fante Nyankomase market)

"Even though as trader's association we are ready to sell whatever is available, we do not force products on customers against their will because what one customer may not like, another likes it; so, at the end of the day whatever is available from the farm end up sold." (An association member at New Adubiase market)

"For package products in bags, boxes or bags, we ensure no bad ones are added; so, customers are assured of good deal even when they cannot fully inspect the package products." (An association executive at Assin Andoe market)

From the quotes it is proposed in support of the quantitative findings that regarding the product mix, informal trader's association apply marketing mix in the marketing of smallholder farmer produce in the rural markets. Thus, once a trader's association operates in rural market product mix is assured and complaints about product availability and quality is not a challenge.

Price mix

The results from the respondents interviewed suggest

that they play a significance role in the product pricing in the rural markets. Informant indicated that market product pricing is a key function of the informal commodity trader's association, and that once in the rural market, smallholder farmer and buyer alike must abide by the pricing policy adopted in the market. Interviewees stressed the important relationship between the operation of the associations and product pricing, as the following quotes demonstrate:

"Pricing in this market is often determined by the association in consultation with the farmers so that we can have value for money for the smallholder farmer." (An association executive member at Assin Andoe market)

"Though buyers may be many, we still do not take advantage to charge exorbitant prices. Prices are usually moderate and negotiable, irrespective of the number of buyers and sellers in the market." (An association member at Abura Abaka market)

"Farmers are often appreciative of the price we get for them, and at the same time buyers also get satisfied with the prices they finally buy the product." (An association member at Assin Ahwiam market)

"Our role as a third party in the transaction process put some level of confidence in both the smallholder farmer and the buyer that there shall always be value for money." (An association executive at New Edubiase market)

"Long-time customers and customers who buy in large quantities are usually given discounts."

From the quotes it is proposed in the qualitative findings that, as far as the pricing mix is concerned, informal commodity trader's association applies market mix in the rural market of Ghana. Thus, once a trader's association exists in a rural market, the association plays a role in the pricing of smallholder farm produce to the benefit of buyers and producers.

Place mix

The results from the respondents interviewed suggest that they better appreciate place mix as an important marketing approach to the marketing of farm produce in the rural market. Informant indicated that placement is a key characteristic of the marketing mix in the marketing of farm produce in the rural market. Interviewees stressed the important link between place mix and marketing of farm produce in the rural markets, as the following quotes demonstrate:\

“For most of the products like maize, cassava, cocoyam, tomatoes and garden eggs, we package them in baskets, bags and boxes to make sales easier and convenient for the buyers. This ensures shopping efficiency,” (An association Secretary at Assin Nyankomase market).

“It is in few cases that buyers would like to visit the farms to buy. For 95% of the cases, we encourage or help the farmers to move the products to the market to make it easier for the buyers who often do not have much time to wait.” (An association member at Assin Anwhiam market)

“If you fail to move the farm produce from the farms to the markets, your colleagues would move theirs, and you might lose customers.” (An association Treasurer at Abura Abaka market)

For customers who buy in large quantities, they are treated as wholesale customers; so, goods may be taken only to the road side where they bear the transportation cost to the market. This is to ensure that the smallholder farmer who can have large quantities of farm produce is not unnecessarily burdened with extra transportation costs.” (A market queen at New Edubiase market)

“Movement of goods from the farms to the roadside is often human-intensive; but transportation from the roadside to the markets to sell to buyers is usually not difficult.” (An association member at Assin Andoe market)

The rural markets are position on major highways, thereby making transportation of farm produce to the city markets quite easy and efficient. The position of our markets makes them so assessable to buyers from all over the country.” (An association member at Abura Abaka market)

From the quotes it is proposed in support of the qualitative findings that, place mix is a function of the overall marketing mix of the marketing of smallholder farm produce by informal commodity trader's association in the rural markets of Ghana. Thus, once rural market is operated by informal trader's association place mix is adopted to provide shopping convenience, efficiency and cost effectiveness to buyers.

Promotion mix

The respondents interviewed emphasized the application of promotion mix in the sale of smallholder farmer produce by the informal commodity trader's associations in the rural markets. Respondents from all five markets indicated that the traders' association contributes greatly to the promotion of farm produce from the farms to the market that provide maximum customer satisfaction.

Respondents from three of the markets indicated apart from the association checking the status of the products before selling to customers, they also allow customers the opportunity to do their own check to confirm the quality of what they buy can assume customer satisfaction by looking at their sales. Further, if they can sell more and if they can reach their targets, they assume that their customers are satisfied. Respondents from two markets emphasized that they use direct selling approach where they sell the products to the buyers from the cities without any middle person. This way they learn whether their customers are satisfied or not. Respondents from these markets also mentioned that sometimes they call their customers on phone to inform them of the products available for the next market day in order to see their readiness to buy these products. A respondent from one market indicated that, if the customers confirm their desire to buy the available products then they know the products can sell well and there would be no complaints from their customers. Where customers indicate their dislike for a product, they might have to do personal selling to other buyers, satisfy their suppliers who are the smallholder farmers. Here, are some of the statements by several respondents:

“We ourselves inspect the goods from the farms before the women from the cities come, but when they come, they would also want to recheck, which is allowed. This makes them convinced that what we are selling to them is exactly what they want.” (An association market queen at New Edubiase market)

“Because I do not want to lose any customers to other association members, I sell direct to them so that I can ensure I give the right product and right service.” (An association member at Assin Nyankomase)

“We sometimes sell to potential buyers, especially when we see new buyers in the market.”

“In other not to keep products that our customer may not want, we sometimes call them ahead of market days to describe the available goods for the next market. Where they are not interested, we could find alternative buyers or sell to local buyers for personal use.” (An association member at Assin Andoe Market).

The aforementioned research finding indicates that the employees of the participating companies are committed to the promotion of the smallholder farmer produce in the rural markets. Further, the members within each of the rural markets work as teams and relate to their customers both at the market and outside the market. This suggests the extent of members' commitment to promote farm products within the rural markets in Ghana.

Benefits of marketing mix to the smallholder farmer

The qualitative findings suggest that the application of the marketing mix by informal commodity traders' association provide direct benefit to both the smallholder farmer and the buyer from the town/city. Respondents stressed the connection between the derived benefits and the application of the marketing mix. Interviewees from all the five markets gave a high recommendation to the good job that the informal commodity traders' association is doing in the marketing of smallholder farmers' products in the markets. Respondents from two other markets mentioned that the traders' association helps farmers to get ready/new markets for their products. A respondent from one of the markets emphasized how the traders' association has helped raised the image of the smallholder farmer and improve the standard of rural markets as a whole. Respondents from three of the markets indicated that the presence of the traders' association is a blessing to the smallholder farmer, as the following quotes demonstrate:

"The informal traders' association are doing a great job in the market for uplifting the smallholder farmer's image because they get us value for money for our products in all forms." (A smallholder farmer at Abura Abaka market).

"I won't hesitate to recommend the informal traders' association to the local authorities to recognize them as important agent for the development of the rural markets and the smallholder farmer in particular when it comes to pricing, promotion and product package and distribution" (A smallholder farmer at Breman Anwhiam market)

I can describe the usefulness of the traders' association in two-fold – get better prices for us, and always ready to get buyers for our products in our interests." (A smallholder farmer at New Edubiase market)

The association provides ready market for our products. Even when the quality of the product is below standard, they can still have market for it to get you some reasonable amount. Without them, some of our products could not be sold; and even if they would, we might have a very low price." (A smallholder farmer at Assin Nyankomase market)

Overall assessment of the responses from the interviewees suggests that: first, the role of informal commodity traders' association in the marketing of farmer produce in the rural market is acknowledged by the smallholder farmer. Market orientation is synonymous with listing on the stock market. This suggests that listing improves the market orientation of a firm. Second, the association provides the right marketing channel for the market, which leads to smooth and quick sales of farmers

produce in the markets. Thus, recognize that the more the association is encouraged to operate in the rural markets, the more likely it is to improve the marketing of farm produce of the smallholder farmer. Lastly, the traders' association is seen to play a critical role as agent of developing rural markets in the country by their effective adoption of the marketing mix. This means the more emphasis placed on traders' association as agents of marketing, the greater the adoption of the marketing mix and the better the economic and social life of smallholder farmer.

Benefits of marketing mix to the buyer of farm produce from the rural market

The results from the respondents interviewed suggest that informal traders' association apply the marketing mix, which go a long way to benefit the buyers. Informant indicated that the presence of the informal traders provides avenue for quality products or products for value, makes products availability and accessibility more easier and convenient, ensures balanced prices which satisfies both parties in the transaction and make known to them, sometimes ahead of time products that they may not know by themselves. Interviewees stressed the important link between application of the marketing mix and the enhancement in shopping efficiency in the rural markets. Respondents from four of the markets indicated that the traders' association contribute greatly to the promotion of farm produce from the farms to the market that provide maximum customer satisfaction. Respondents from three of the markets indicated that the association has a better knowledge of the products which contribute to easy access to quality product most of the time. Respondents from two of the market however, think that the work of the association denies them of abnormal profit since they are expert in farm products pricing because of their good knowledge of the products and the market. Respondents from these markets would prefer dealing directly with the farmers, the association is so strong in the markets that we are unable to do so. Here are some of the statement by the interviewees:

"The activities of traders' association help us get quality product ready in the market, which make our work easy. The products are always ready waiting for us." (A buyer from Mankessim to Breman Anwhiam market)

"What impresses me of the traders' association is that most of them are farmers themselves or wives of farmers who have good knowledge about the products. In this way we always get what we want by dealing with the association." (A buyer from Takoradi to Assin Nyankomase market)

"Even though we always negotiate for acceptable prices,

the association never allow us access to the farmers. In fact, we prefer dealing with the farmers who have lower bargaining power but the association will never allow." (A buyer from Accra to the Breman Anwhiam market)

I think dealing with the traders' association makes marketing sense because they make the goods available at the right place at the right time and quantity, which to me is necessary for a business woman like myself." (A buyer from Cape Coast to the Abura Abaka market)

"Often times, I get to the market with full knowledge of the product in store for me. Even if they are packaged, I don't worry to re-examined because I know the association would always give what you have agreed to purchase." (A buyer from Obuasi to New Edubiase market)

"By all standards, the informal traders' association in the rural market is a wonderful phenomenon which I think the local authorities must show interest because without them I would only imagine how marketing of farm products in the rural market would be." (A buyer from Accra to Assin Andoe market)

From the aforementioned quotes it is proposed that, informal traders' association play a significant role in the application of the marketing mix to promote sale of farm products in the rural market of Ghana, which ensures shopping efficiency and value for money for buyers. Thus, the more informal traders' activities are promoted in the rural markets the greater the marketing benefits derived by the buyers.

Conclusion

The research findings in relation to the 4Ps also indicate that the trader's associations are in the centre of ensuring product promotion, distribution, pricing and quality in the rural market for farm products. Since these associations were also identified as spontaneously involved in the marketing activities, it can be argued that the development of these markets, the promotion of the economic wellbeing of the farmers and the smooth and efficient shopping by the buyers are the results of the extent of the work of the traders' association. The findings of the case study research indicate that the marketing mix is very applicable in the rural market for the sale of smallholder farm product, and that informal commodity traders' association play a significant role in this business in Ghana. These traders' associations place emphasis on their customers and their suppliers, collect necessary information regarding products and customers and the factors that affect their customers, use the information to inform product quality, selection and packaging, product distribution, product pricing and

promotion. The associations' involvement with these marketing activities indicates that these associations have adopted the marketing mix in the marketing of farm produce in the rural markets. At the same time, the involvements of these associations have been shown to demonstrate their strong role in the marketing of farm products. Thus, it can be said that there is a relationship between the application of the marketing mix in the rural markets and the activities of the informal commodity trade associations.

Despite the fact that the trader's associations are not formally registered with an authorized authority, membership depends on registration with association executive; and must pay monthly dues to be of 'good standing'. The relationship and operation of the association is regulated by the 'Queen-mother system in which executives are elected by members to lead them for a three to four years term of office. The association is financed by monthly dues, and a fixed new entrant's rate of between GH¢100 and GH¢200, depending on the particular market. The relationships between the trader's association and the smallholder farmer on one hand, and the buyer on the other provide mutual benefits for these stakeholders. These outcomes that they acknowledge and enjoy is a result of the applicability of the marketing mix by the traders' association, and therefore confirm the justification of trader's association in the marketing of smallholder farm products in the rural markets of Ghana.

Recommendations, limitations and further research

The District Assemblies which is the Local Government Authority should, however, recognize the important role played by the informal traders' association. They can introduce flexible but improved farm product marketing policy, resulting from an improved engagement with traders' associations and such an engagement is perhaps best done through the executives of the association. Governments and District Assemblies should harness the potential of the associations for purposes of developing the rural markets and provide effective pricing, promotion and placement of farm products in the rural market to enhance the economic life of the smallholder farmer. Local authorities should avoid insisting on formalizing the associations, since many in the rural community associate formalization with undue taxation. Rather the association must be supported in decision making by encouraging committee works and having representation on some of these committees to influence decision making. Beyond their informal existence, most of the traders' associations operating in rural markets are not members of Chambers of Commerce, which means they are not considered as Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), which is the basis business unit in Ghana. Since there are a

number of financial supports from government and other donor agency for MSMEs, it is encouraged that trader's association belong to a local Chamber of Commerce so they can expand their businesses and even pre-finance smallholder farmers in some cases. It is recommended to executives of Chambers of Commerce to as a matter expanding their membership, explore ways to educate informal traders associations of the benefits of joining the chamber. Even though marketing is practiced in the rural markets, to a large extent most of the members of the association hardly possess any formal marketing training. The association can use some of their funds to develop their members in the area of modern marketing practice to enhance their skills in supplier management and customer relationship management. This could promote consistent application of the marketing mix, and upgrade the level of rural marketing of farm products

The study assumed all trade associations have same level of effectiveness and success, there by failing to investigate the causes of failure of associations and reason for success. Further research may consider investigating the strengths and weaknesses of traders' association, marketing effectiveness and respect to authority by members. Also, this qualitative study is limited to five rural markets in Ghana. Though many of the rural markets across the country may possess similar characteristics, it is almost impossible to generalize the results to the thousands of such markets. Further research can survey markets from all regions to examine if there are differences in the associations' governance structure, application of the marketing mix and the role of the association in the marketing of smallholder farm products.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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