

Kenya | Sokopepe, where producers meet buyers

For many years, farmers in Kenya have struggled to find markets for their agricultural and livestock products. Often, they resort to using brokers in an effort to find ready markets, especially those who grow perishable commodities. The brokers generally buy at lower prices and farmers hardly receive timely and reliable up-to-date market pricing information, therefore always ending up not getting the best deal. To help farmers address these challenges, the Arid Lands Information Network (ALIN) developed Sokopepe, an agricultural commodity trading platform that links small scale producers to end retailers or bulk purchasers.

Sokopepe (Swahili for 'virtual market') is aimed at harnessing the power of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to enable farmers to efficiently reach markets and obtain fair prices for their produce. At the same time, it increases the efficiency in the agriculture value chain by providing farmers with a platform to share information and execute electronic transactions.

How it works

The Sokopepe platform is accessible online (www.sokopepe.co.ke) and by mobile phone. A mobile short code is used to get information about prices of commodities in distant markets as well as farming tips. This information empowers farmers to determine the price of their commodities and how best to farm for quality.

The majority of the farmers do not own an internet-linked mobile phone, but most transactions on the platform can be completed using a basic mobile telephone through SMS, making it also accessible to farmers in remote locations. This has made it possible for people who did not have direct access to online agricultural information before, particularly women and youth, to use the system. In other words, it has brought previously excluded members of the community to the mainstream, enabling them to participate in the agriculture value chain at various levels.

Knowing the best price

Mr. Muthee Mwangi, a tomato farmer from Githima (Ol-moran Division, Laikipia West County) was introduced to Sokopepe through a series of ALIN capacity building workshops for farmers on ways to improve the marketing of their farm produce. He now uses Sokopepe to inquire about commodity prices and receives instant feedback on his phone. He therefore no longer has to rely on brokers to access the market. At one point, Mwangi and his farmers' group sold 14 tons of tomatoes through Sokopepe.

"I have made several connections with buyers from different parts of the country and I am presented with several options which enable me to choose the buyer with the best offer," said Mwangi.

"We have suffered for a long time from lack of timely information about the price of the commodities that we grow. With Sokopepe, we now always know the best price in the big towns and are able to negotiate better with buyers. I am also happy because I receive farming tips on pests and diseases control and I am able to buy the right drugs for my crops and animals just through my phone," says Ms Veronica Kemunto, a farmer based in Ng'arua Division in Laikipia West County.

Distinct differences

Sokopepe differs from existing agricultural marketing platforms in some distinct ways. In addition to providing real time prices of commodities, it avails tips on farming and livestock keeping and has an integrated mobile money transfer service to facilitate secure users' transactions. Developed with the support of the Ford Foundation, Sokopepe contains geo-coded locations for produce storage facilities such as cereal banks, stockists of farm inputs and providers of allied professional services including extension and veterinary services.

With mobile penetration in Kenya headed to surpass the 80% mark, it means that virtually every one can use the service. All one needs to remember is the short code!

"Our intention is to use technology to put farmers, pastoralists and entrepreneurs in the driving seat while making decision about where to sell their commodities and where to purchase their inputs," said ALIN's Regional Director, James Nguo.

ALIN has piloted Sokopepe in Laikipia West County. A cooperative named the Laikipia Pro-



duce and Marketing Cooperative Society has been formed with support from ALIN to help farmers increase their produce and take control of the market. Recently, Sokopepe was launched and spread out to all ALIN Maarifa centres¹ and nationwide.

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¹ A Maarifa centre is a place where communities access information resources. The centre is equipped with computers and internet access. It is an information hub where local knowledge is documented by communities with the support of field officers and shared widely.