

## **Farming money in Nakuru County: small farmers and the meaning of the market in the western part of Kenya**

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### **Abstract**

What is the market for small farmers in Kenya? What does farming mean for them? These are the key questions that move the article that investigate the process of market integration of small farming, and the strategies, meaning, and aspirations that farmers associate to their activities. Based on the ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Nakuru County between 2018 and 2020, the article discusses how small farmers relate with their cultivated land and the market in their everyday life, appreciating the material conditions and the hierarchy of values that inform particular choices. In that way, it points out the small farmers household economy is enmeshed within the market and shows the centrality of money and cash flow as interpretative category used by the farmers to justify their farming practices and strategies.

**Keywords:** markets, farming, cash-crops, market integration, Kenya, Eastern Africa

### **Introduction**

In front of us, a man in his late thirties is walking on the street down the hill. He is a *mkulima* [pl. *wakulima*], a small farmer, living in a hamlet about ten kilometres north of Gilgil, a small town located in the centre of the Nakuru County, Kenya. He is walking at a fast pace, despite the huge bag is carrying on his back. There should be about fifty kilos of potatoes he grew at home and he is taking to the city, to sell it along the road, as he uses to do every time, he has some crops ripe. He also carries a couple of buckets, tided to the bag. *“Do you want a bucket? Few shillings! They are good, sir”*. He greets us.

Moving across Nakuru County, on the side of the main roads, in towns or rural villages, it is common to meet people, young and old, selling fresh vegetables and fruits. They are mostly women, and can be alone, but often, cluster together, creating small, makeshift markets. They display the products on rudimental stalls of wood and scrap metals, or, even more commonly, on blankets laying on the ground. They are commonly *wakulima* who produce the food they sell, although some items are bought from neighbours or from the market to complete the display. Despite the number of peddlers, the array of products on sale is limited to few kinds: cabbage, tomatoes, onions, leafy vegetables (e.g. collard green, African nightshade, amaranth), fruit (e.g. mango, papaya, citrus), and starchy foods (e.g. maize, plantain, sweet potato), sometimes even poultries, eggs and freshwater fishes.



Photo 1: Maasai pedlar at Gilgil market (©Michele F: Fontefrancesco, 2019)

This form of small trade is a key aspect of the vibrant Kenyan food retail market; a sector that has yearly grown of over 10% in the past decade (Malinda 2019). Propelled by the rise in food demand by the domestic population and the expanding economic possibilities of the urban, middle class, the sector has developed according to urbanization. In the cities, it develops in a foodscape that juxtaposes supermarkets and malls with open-air food markets and small shops; in the rural areas, open-air markets, which animate the villages, are the main places of exchange. Pedlars are, however, a ubiquitous presence across the country; they can be found mostly around the marketplaces and along the main roads. To reach a good spot where to sell the products, people can walk or travels with *matatu* cabs or *boda*

*boda* motorcycle taxis for hours carrying with them their products and all they need to best display the goods: buckets, pots, or blankets to lay on the ground. They operate from early morning till evening, offering to passers-by the opportunity of a quick and cheap purchase without the confusion of long queues or the rush of open-air markets and supermarkets. Their products meet the immediate needs of the customers, i.e. the one for a quick bite such as corn on the cob and *samosa* (fried pastry stuffed with meat and/or vegetables) or to buy some fresh vegetables before coming home from work. To do so, the hawkers appear to have mastered the art of chasing and enticing *matatu* cab drivers, motorists, and their passengers, for selling their products. All these activities and demonstration of entrepreneurship is driven by one goal: raise money and “*push the week*” for their families. To put it as explained by one of the hawkers we met during the research, a woman in her forties: “*I sell what I grow in my garden. I come here every morning and sell my stuff. I need to raise some money for my family. Here the profit margins are little, but we have customers in droves*”.



Photo 2: Kinare market: an example of wholesale and retail wakulima market. (©Michele F. Fontefrancesco, 2019)

These markets on the side of the road are another face of small farming in Kenya, the subsector that occupies thousands of people working in agriculture (Borrelli and Ndakidemi 2020). In his account of the trading practices of *wakulima* traders in Dar es Salam, Wegerif (2018) provides insight into the complex reality of small farmers of Tanzania that can be extended also to other

countries of Eastern Africa, including Kenya. In his analysis, he points out how *wakulima* in their combination of rural farming and urban trading provides a solid interconnection between the urban centres and the nearby rural settlements. The contribution, however, raises also questions concerning the meanings and values and worldviews that underpin such economic activity and binds together small-scale farming with the market economy. Small farmers and rural peripheries have been often seen as a place of cultural alterity, a human space outside and in opposition to the logic of market economy (Gudeman 2008). Considering the constant advancement of the agricultural frontiers, the limit of this approach appears to be evident (Hakizimana, et al. 2017) and new questions concerning the process of grassroots semantification of the market in the rural communities arise.

In the face of these questions, we aimed to investigate how *wakulima* relates with their cultivated land and the market in their everyday life, appreciating the material conditions and the hierarchy of values that inform particular choices. In that way, we wanted to step away from the markets, tracing back the products and moving up to the places where they are cultivated, among the *wakulima* and in their rural plots. In so doing we conducted fieldwork in the Nakuru County between 2018 and 2020, as a part of the wider research project “Sustainable Agrifood Systems Strategies” financed by the Italian Ministry of University and Research.

### **The field of research**

Nakuru County is a fast-growing region in the central portion of the Rift Valley that is experiencing strong urbanization and industrial development. Despite this trajectory, most of the population still live in the countryside and the economy lays largely on agriculture, in particular horticulture and floriculture, thanks to the presence of fertile soils of volcanic origin, stable rainfall, availability of labour force and the presence of local and national markets able to absorb agricultural commodities (Ogeto, et al. 2013).

The agricultural landscape of the county is characterized by the presence of producers operating on different scales (Foeken 2006). On the side of the Nakuru-Nairobi highway and other main roads of the County, one can see expanses of land covered by wild shrubs and trees where wild animals and small scale shepherds coexist with large plots of land cultivated on an industrial scale. Moving farther into the rural areas, or closer to the cities, smaller agricultural plots become more frequent. Generally just a few acres wide, these plots are worked by the *wakulima* (Borrelli and Ndakidemi 2020) They are mostly women; the very women one can meet selling their crops in the streets of the country.

Since the 1990s, with a rise of the monetary needs of the families, while men started migrating from the countryside to the cities to find more remunerative jobs,

sending remittances home, women have become entrepreneurial actors, recognized by the communities, in charge of the entire management of the family property, providing food, shelter, and education to the other members of the family unit (2002). They have been increasingly involved in activities historically carried out by men, such as cattle breeding and trade, and become social and economic brokers in a composite household's economy based on small-scale agriculture and livestock rearing.

Fieldwork involved market analysis and ethnographic observation to explore the organization and functioning of commercial practice as well as the motivations that led the economic actors to participate in the markets. The research expanded tracing the food supply chain up to reaching the original production farms located in the districts, around the cities of Molo, Nakuru, Gilgil and Naivasha. In particular, it involved 43 in-depth interviews with women farmers, whose age ranges from the mid-twenties to the late fifties, to highlight the motivations that lead the agricultural and market practices in which they are involved.

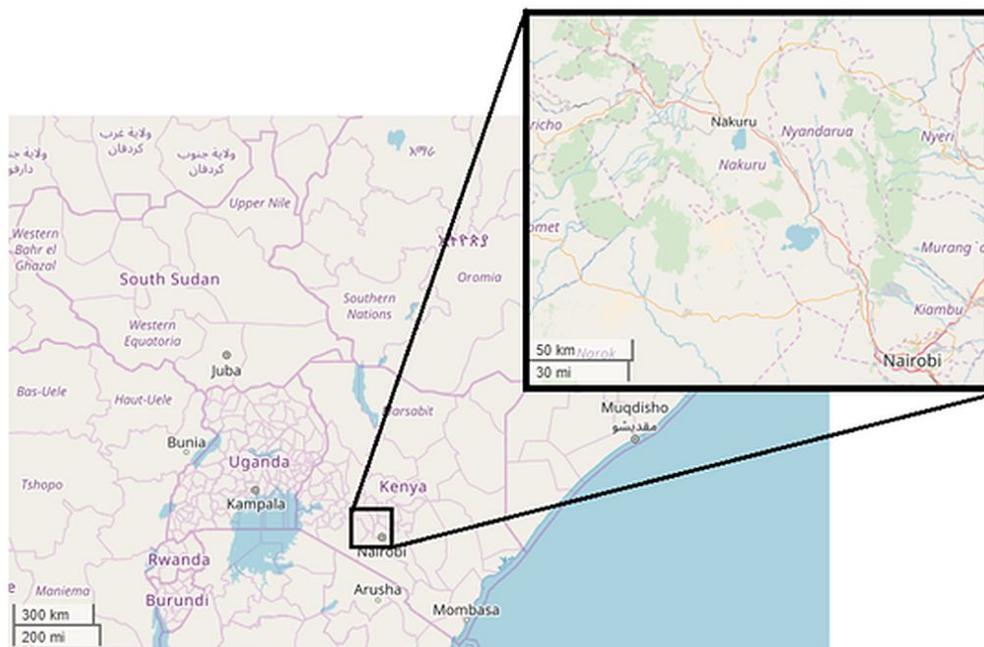


Fig 1. Localization of Nakuru County (@Michele F. Fontefrancesco, 2020 based on openstreetmap cartography)

### **Small farming in Nakuru County**

Among the *wakulima*, livestock and crops are not primarily produced for feeding the families, but rather to be traded to raise money for covering the main family expenses (such as school fees, medical treatments, and fuel), and to expand the household. A language of money permeates the description of everyday life: money that comes with the remittances; money that goes with the school fees; money that is expected to get from selling the crops; money that has to be invested for the cultivation, rent, and acquisition of new land. Far from expressing an alternative set of values and practices, the *wakulima* household economy is based on the market and aimed at coping with the many monetary needs of the families. In this everyday struggle, the plots appeared the main economic asset to cope with the family's needs. The plots are worked accordingly to rain-fed mixed farming that combines agriculture and animal husbandry, using limited agricultural inputs such as chemicals and fertilizers. Local farmers cultivate a limited array of crops, mainly horticultural products, cereals, and fruits predominantly for the local and national markets. Despite during our interviews farmers showed a substantial knowledge concerning over forty crop species they could cultivate, they pointed out they used almost entirely their plots for the production of just eight crops: maize, beans, potatoes, collard greens, peas, black nightshade, cabbage, and spinach. Although Kamau et al. (2012) suggest labour in small scale farming is often allocated to those cultivations directly used also as food by the families, in the Nakuru County it seems that the selection and allocation of work are based on a precise strategy aimed to favour the cash crops. To imagine household farming as a distinct sphere of activity is a misleading temptation for the anthropologists (Hakizimana, et al. 2017). The *wakulima* household's economy does not exist outside the market sphere of exchange but it is enmeshed inside it. Within this specific regime of knowledge and practices, the very meaning of the cultivated plots is framed as part of a monetarized imaginary in which crops are selected and farmed based on the expectation of profit and the supposed demand from urban customers. Cabbages, potatoes, or spinach, thus, are not just food but means through which *wakulima*'s expectations are realized. Expectations are often embedded in the everyday and related to the concrete needs such as payment of school fees, purchase of agricultural inputs, rent of stalls and workstations in the urban markets, payment of rent and other domestic expenses, purchase of foodstuffs, and paying the *chama* (table-banking) fees. Farming, thus, becomes an act of extraction from the field. As we were told: "*In our field, we grow our money*".



Photo 3: Periurban settlement, outskirts of Molo. (©Michele F. Fontefrancesco, 2020)

### **Layers of market integration**

Kenya is a diverse country, with over forty indigenous groups (Sobania 2003). The same is true for and Nakuru County, whose *ethnoscape* historically dominated by Kikuyu, Maasai communities, originating from the region, counts the conspicuous presence of other ethnic groups, such as Kalenjin, Luhya, Luo, Kamba. In such a diverse context, the markets have developed into places where all the people despite their background look for common, fresh ingredients, such as potatoes, onions, tomatoes, cabbage, and carrots. For more specific products, such as fermented vegetable, or camel milk, they rely on other networks, mostly informal: orders are made to relatives or trusted people who live in other provinces, and the items are transported to their home by bus or *matatu* or *boda-boda* taxi while the payment is arranged via the M-Pesa service (money transfer via mobile phone) (Fontefrancesco, et al. 2020).

Analysing small scale farming means to interrogate different layers of market integration since farming is mainly conducted for profit, not for direct subsistence. Seeking to expand the profit, agricultural production is intensified (2017) by restricting the portion of land destined to home-consumption as the largest part is left for cash crops for the market. Within this context, *wakulima* select their crops, intensifying the cultivation of those few ones they expect to have more probability to sell, as they are at the base of the diet of most the Kenyan ethnic groups, and the ones that have a longer shelf life.



Photo 4: Example of *wakulima* vegetable garden near Molo. (©Dauro M. Zocchi, 2020)

Sales are arranged through two concurrent strategies. Most of the *wakulima* sell to middlemen (generally men), locally called *walanguzi*, coming from the urban centres that collect from each family their crops. They guarantee the sale of the harvest, although at the cost of a price often lower than the expectations of the farmers. Fortunately enough, several middlemen can trade in the same village, and the competition among middlemen provides the opportunity to the farmers to get better prices. Alternatively to the middlemen, *wakulima* can decide to sell directly on the market, paddling their crops along the main roads of the country or in the cities.

This choice presents better profit, but it requires larger monetary investments to cover the transportation costs and the time away from the fields and the family. Due to these barriers, the more fragile families, in particular those living farther from the urban areas, cannot pursue this strategy (Omiti, et al. 2009) and find themselves virtually obliged to deal with the middlemen.



Photo 5: Periurban settlement, outskirts of Molo. (©Michele F. Fontefrancesco, 2020)

All the trading is made a few days from the harvest. The limited possibility of storing as well as processing the crops in more durable and value-added products make the crops very fragile commodities, leaving the *wakulima* short of options. Crop perishability is an element that further enmeshes the household economy into the market. While televisions, stereos, and cell-phones are equipment largely common in the *wakulima* houses, fridges are rarely found outside the shops and restaurants, and even there most of the time they are switched off and used as cupboards or rack, due to irregular provision and the high cost of electricity. Considering the local climate, ripe vegetables and fruits can last just a few days without refrigeration, especially during the dry season. Despite it, fruits and vegetables (with the only exception of pulses and cereals use also dried) are generally consumed fresh. Even in the countryside, people buy such foodstuff (e.g. cabbages, tomatoes, bananas, oranges, black nightshade, rice, spinach, amaranth leaves, collard greens, and spider plant leaves) in the market and from the kiosks. They purchase the food they do not grow as well as the very crops they cultivate in their garden, especially during the dry season when the fresh vegetables are very expensive due to the scarce availability.

This choice is motivated on the one hand, as we have seen by the need to sell the crops in bulk when harvested to maximize the family income, but also by the limited possibility of preserving the crops once collected for later consumption. While preservation techniques, such as smoking, fermenting, and drying are limited to particular ethnic groups (Barstow and Zocchi 2018), access to the market provides a viable solution to meet the needs. In fact, on the market one can find fresh vegetables and fruits, even out of season, produced across Kenya and Eastern Africa. In this respect, the market appears to be a fundamental place on which the households, as well as the foodways of the local people, lay.

## **Conclusion**

We opened the paper with the vivid images of *wakulima*-hawkers stopping bystanders to sell their food products and moved back to the fields where the vegetables and fruits are produced. This ethnographic journey was motivated by the attempt to better understand how the connection between the market and small-scale agriculture was created and negotiated.

The lives of the *wakulima* point out clearly how porous the border that divides, not just the rural and the urban, as Wegerif (2018) suggested, but the household economy of the farmers and market is. The *wakulima* household economy is enmeshed within the market, while the farmers advance their life in an everyday dimension made of money, paid services, and market exchanges.

The market is the main mean and opportunity they have to satisfy their expectations and a resource to meet the needs of their household. Our research is an ethnography of economic integration that is expressed by the farming activities of the *wakulima* and their knowledge of the market, and its trends. Integration is expressed by the very standardization and reduction of diversity of crops in the fields, which respond to the need of intensifying production and maximizing profit given the limits imposed by the scarce possibility of storing and preserving the harvest as well as to the low value of the agricultural products. Integration culminates in the very decision of direct trading the crops, at least a part of it, describing an example of grassroots entrepreneurship that testifies the same logic that drives all the other farming activities.

Thus, from a theoretical perspective, this article offers insight into the phenomenon of economic integration that has shaped rural communities' livelihoods in Kenya. However, under a more applied perspective, it recommends looking at the possible price of the integration. While economic integration and the intensification of market participation by *wakulima* can provide opportunities and resources for improving the quality of life of their families, the urge for cash speaks about the rising needs of the families and the concrete difficulties to stay at pace with this rise.

Left alone, the only strategy *wakulima* can follow is the one of agricultural intensification and further market integration, but the signs of failure of this approach are already visible both in terms of overutilization of the land and food security (Borrelli and Ndakidemi 2020). In this respect, the research suggests the need for new individual and collective strategies not for detaching the *wakulima* from the market, but rather to reduce their needs of liquidity for accessing crucial services such as education and health and add value to products at the farm-gate level.

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