

## **Can African values like Ubuntu expand the meaning and understanding of communities of practice? Lessons from mass food markets in Zimbabwe**

*Charles Dhewa and Sarah Cummings*

African mass food markets, also known as territorial markets, are the major sources of food for the majority of people in African capital cities. These markets use indigenous knowledge to meet preferences of the majority of farmers, traders and consumers in terms of food sources and income. They represent local people's shared identity and values built organically through trust and relationships. Based on information gathered from key informant farmers and traders in three mass markets of Zimbabwe, this paper shows the extent to which territorial markets use African values such as Ubuntu, relationality, trust and the public good nature of knowledge to add more nuances and flavour to the notion of communities of practice often used to express knowledge management in professional contexts. The lens of communities of practices makes visible the apparently invisible knowledge brokering role of African mass markets, highlighting implications for policy and research

**Keywords:** communities of practice; knowledge brokering; formal sector; informal sector; mass food markets; indigenous commerce; home-grown solutions; Zimbabwe

### **1. Introduction**

Informal markets are markets from which the majority of Africans, especially low-income consumers, get their food. Depending on context, these markets have a variety of designated titles, sizes and characteristics. However, they are different from supermarkets and distribution centres that are often considered formal markets. Every African country has booming informal agricultural markets where ordinary people access their food. Given the fact that they are different to the supermarkets in developed countries, their contribution has been often ignored and criticized. For example, Tollens (1997) argued that African markets are characterized by inadequate marketing infrastructure leading to congestion and the overflow of traders onto streets and pavements, inefficient storage, handling and packaging of produce resulting in excessive waste (through spoilage), poor produce quality and high distribution costs.

This negative perspective of African markets may have its roots in the colonial period. In Nairobi, for example, African businesses were not permitted in the bazaar or the central business district which were restricted to Asian and European merchants (Kinyanjui, 2014). Informal mass markets in Africa have often been ignored by researchers and policymakers, not only in terms of their role in food security but also their role in knowledge brokering. Henson and Jaffee (2023) consider that informal markets in developing countries have received minimal attention and even been disrupted by government agencies because they are seen as a legacy of the past and not fitting in with the vision of a modern food system, demonstrating that this is more than an Africa-wide problem. They argue that ignoring informal food markets has stalled efforts to improve food hygiene practices which could make food safer for consumers.

Given that knowledge brokering allows isolated or unconnected actors to share information and resources and to interact economically, politically and socially (Stovel and Shaw, 2012), farmers and traders in African mass markets appear to be playing a prominent role in knowledge brokering. In general, the knowledge brokering role of farmers and traders in African mass food markets has largely been unexplored while most of the literature focuses on knowledge brokering in international development focuses on professional knowledge brokers (see, for example, Kiwanuka et al, 2020). In the literature, communities of practice are seen as the location of knowledge brokering and social learning between practitioners. In these informal communities, knowledge brokering and social learning takes place to improve practices within a particular domain, often within and between firms in developed countries. The conceptual lens of communities of practice has also been used previously to better understand the role of knowledge in markets (Morgan, 2011) while Ikioda (2012, 2013, 2014) has considered informal mass markets in Nigeria as examples of communities of practice.

In this paper, we use the heuristic of the community of practice to consider knowledge brokering in African mass markets with two research questions: To what extent can the community of practice lens add to the understanding of knowledge brokering in African mass markets and to what extent does the African perspective of knowledge and values like Ubuntu add more contextual meaning to the concept of communities of practice? First, we consider African mass food markets as communities of practice. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with farmers and traders of tomatoes and potatoes in Mbare (Harare), Sakubva (Mutare) and Bulawayo Up-market Traders Association (Bulawayo) markets in Zimbabwe. We demonstrate that the concept of communities of practices makes visible the apparently invisible knowledge brokering role of African mass markets, highlighting implications for policy and research. As this paper will also illustrate, these markets also broaden and enrich the definition and meaning of communities of practice beyond formal environments through use of diverse African, such as Ubuntu.

## 2. Mass food markets as communities of practice

Originally defined by Wenger and colleagues (2002), communities of practice primarily refer to groups of professionals who through their interest in specific issues can unite, learn together and develop innovative know-how to advance practice as a result of their on-going interaction. Through the socialization that takes place in communities of practice, participants develop and sustain mutual engagement on a common enterprise, creating a shared repertoire of documents, stories and other artefacts to advance and improve professional practice (Wenger et al., 2002).

A community of practice comprises three central components as delineated by Wenger (1998): the domain, the community, and the professional practice. It transcends superficial associations, embodying an identity rooted in a shared domain of interest. Membership entails dedication to this domain and a collective competence distinguishing members from others. The domain might not garner universal recognition as expertise, exemplified by youth gangs developing survival strategies. Despite external skepticism, they value their collective competence, nurturing mutual learning. Engaging in joint activities, discussions, aiding peers, and sharing insights, members cultivate relationships for mutual growth. A community of practice isn't formed solely by job titles—it necessitates interaction and shared learning. Practitioners, not just enthusiasts, forge a collective practice over time, amalgamating resources, experiences, tools, and solutions. It is the interplay of these elements that forges a community of practice according to Wenger (1998). While communities of practice have proliferated in the professional world, including the international development sector as seen through examples like Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev), various aspects of a community of practice can be discerned in informal settings like African mass food markets as we will show below.

Assessment and evaluation of communities of practice remains a challenge. For example, evaluations of communities of practice typically consider the internal functioning of the community of practice, related to its facilitation, and the impact that communities of practice have on organizations (Ropes, 2011). Although questions are valuable for communities of practice within and even between organizations, they become less relevant to global communities of KM4Dev with thousands of members which are able to measure their impact informally in terms of the professional life of individuals over decades (Pryor, 2022) and on regional knowledge systems at a continental level (Meade, 2022), acting as a pool of knowledge even when organizations have closed their doors (Chavez-Tafur et al, 2021).

### **African mass food markets as communities of practice**

Studying mass food markets in Nigeria, (Ikioda, 2014) concluded that these markets mimic communities of practice and they are also unique. Ikioda observed that market associations, based on unwritten rules, ensure that traders regularly interact through face-to-face monthly meetings to share ideas about what works, report and sanction deviant traders, and collectively discuss ways to regulate pricing and promote unity. Indirectly these associations also work to standardize the practices of multiple traders in the market by helping to promote competitive advantage and curtail unchecked domineering practices. In addition, the market associations have, over the years, developed various standards for regulating pricing, settling disputes, outlawing underselling, regulating methods and means of attracting customers. At the same time, marketplaces provide employment and economic integration for large segments of the West African population (Ikioda, 2014).

Despite the potential for marketplaces to become the location of conflict, tacit enforcement of rules and regulations, established by a variety of trader groups and associations, have facilitated effective means of collaboration and cooperation among traders (Ikioda, 2014). They also have the ability to function effectively without any written procedures, rules or constitutions, based on tacit enforcement of practices and reputation (Goyal & Westerman, 2018). In addition, the market associations have over the years developed various standards for regulating pricing, settling disputes, outlawing underselling, regulating methods and means of attracting customers. These well-established procedures have been documented in similar studies in other markets in Lagos, Nigeria, as a means by which market trader associations have been able to enforce tacit regulations, despite limited formal institutions (Olukoju, 2005). The way actors in these markets work and collaborate demonstrate how they fit the definition of a community of practice, although African mass markets do not function through publications or face-to-face meetings which are common practices in a professional setting. Like communities of practice in formal professional settings, these communities in African mass food markets have become vessels of local competence, enabling groups of practitioners (farmers, traders, transporters and others) to harness, debate and resolve information and skills, and as well manage the collective knowledge relevant to their goals.

Other studies of African marketplaces note that despite the tendency to have imperfect information and a widespread tacit enforcement of rules, deep rooted relationships that breed friendship, trust and other associational character in marketplaces are fairly common. Studies in Ghanaian markets have shown that far from being dominated by individualistic and personal networks, traders have learnt to display various ways of engaging in coordinated effort (Hendriks, 2017; Hendriks, Verbuyst & Kaag, 2022). These include developing and promoting genuine friendships and alliances, caring for children of neighbouring traders, looking after each other's stalls and sharing food (Clark, 1994). Using examples from South

Africa, Vermaak (2017) characterized informal markets as spaces of socialization for migrants seeking a better life in cities, raising the need for government to formulate appropriate development policies. Vermaak added that '... informal traders are able to adapt to difficult circumstances by using informal networks, and also that they can remain victims trapped in poverty if they accept their powerless situations' (Vermaak, 2017: 53)

African markets are almost always regulated by informal mechanisms that can be meaningful for local urban development policy and these markets demonstrate the way people can adapt to being excluded from the opportunities of the formal sector. The hostility of formal businesses and the government towards informal trading is also a major reason for the formation of informal networks (Lindell, 1988). Such hostilities have created a situation where market traders regulate and organize themselves, internally, through a complex set of informal social norms (Kinyanjui, 2017). Dhewa (2016) observed that informal agriculture markets are a bigger part of many African countries' informal economy which cannot continue to be considered a temporary phenomenon in many countries including Zimbabwe. In fact, these markets are hybrid spaces where both formality and informality co-exist. While the majority of communities of practice in the development sector are initiated by international organizations, donors, academics groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), communities of practice in African mass food markets are as self-organized as the markets.

### **African values and Ubuntu**

The fact that mass markets have continued to cater for the majority of the African urban population in several ways suggests they thrive on a wide range of valuable characteristics tied to African values like Ubuntu (Ramose, 2003), trust and relationships (Chilisa, 2012). Ubuntu may be seen as the basis of African philosophy - a kind of philosophical affinity and kinship among and between the indigenous people of Africa. Ubuntu represents the very essence of being human, according to Archbishop and anti-apartheid activist, Desmond Tutu:

A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he [or] she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than they are (1999: 33).

Among the Bantu people of Southern African, Ubuntu philosophy is understood in relation to the connections that human beings have with the living and the non-living, with land, with the earth, with animals, and with other beings. There is an emphasis on an I/We relationship as opposed to the Western I/You relationship with its emphasis on the individual (Chilisa, 2012). Kinyanjui argues that *utu-ubuntu* business practices in Nairobi, Kenya, show an

African logic of solidarity and community, demonstrating 'resilience, self-reliance, solidarity, entrepreneurship, economic justice, communal responsibility and inclusiveness' (2017).

### **3. Methodology and data collection**

The qualitative methodology was used in gathering data for this paper and this included observing the mass markets in action in Zimbabwe as well as interviewing key informants like farmers and traders to get their personal experiences. Empirical research was conducted over 12 months (January – December 2022) covering a full cycle of most agricultural commodities traded in mass markets. Key informants were selected based on their wealth of knowledge, period they have been trading particular commodities. Fifteen (15) farmers and 15 traders from three markets and three farming communities were selected as key informants for interviewing. This representative sample was used to explore the behaviour, perspectives and experiences of farmers and traders in selected markets and communities. Some farmers and traders volunteered to be tape-recorded and the researcher went on to record some of the conversations using mobile phones and later transcribed the response. Photographs were taken with permission from the market committee and key informants.

Tomatoes and potatoes were the main crops around which the investigation was woven. While secondary data were collected from the literature review, primary data was gathered from farmers and traders in three informal agriculture markets namely: Mbare (Harare), Sakubva (Mutare) and Bulawayo Up-market Traders Association (BUTA) (Bulawayo). Information was also collected from farmers in farming communities close to the markets: Mutoko where farmers grow and bring tomatoes and potatoes to Harare; Mutasa where farmers grow and from where they bring agricultural commodities to Sakubva Market in Mutare as well as Esigodini where some horticulture crops that go to Bulawayo market are produced.

Farmers and traders answered the researchers' questions based on how they produce tomatoes and potatoes as well as the challenges they face and how they surmount those challenges. Since the researcher has been working with these markets for more than a decade and was investigating a public issue in the public domain, there was no need for any ethical clearance. The respondents trusted the researcher enough to explain issues beyond the questions posed. However, to keep the respondents anonymous, the researcher allocated each respondent an anonymous identification code/numbers before interviews. The interviews were informal and relaxed. Every respondent was approached differently with the researcher focusing on depth. The respondents were proxies for a much larger informal agriculture trade phenomenon and the researcher's angle into knowledge exchange was finding out if farmers change their

production methods as a result of interacting with traders within the market as a community of practice. In other words, did farmers go through real change observable in practice and demonstrated by their growing or producing more or differently? Changes in activities could be an indicator of learning, knowledge acquisition or exchange. The same applied to traders where the focus was on the extent to which they use the market as a community of practice which enabled them to acquire knowledge from farmers and other actors in the market. Conclusions were drawn from listening, writing notes, observing and interpretation.

#### **4. Findings**

Consistent with Ubuntu and relationality, approaches used in gathering data in African mass markets demonstrated the first author's desire to influence change as opposed to conducting research for its own sake. Whereas in formal companies all information can be centralized at the information desk or marketing department, in self-organized African mass food markets, each key informant like a farmer or trader is an information desk or marketing department for each commodity. As the following findings reveal, farmers and traders are more like individual institutions with knowledge connected to other knowledge nodes within other traders and farmers. The knowledge is exchanged as a public good, the same way seed varieties are exchanged. Key informants are entry points to other knowledge sources through references to other knowledgeable traders and farmers. An individual key informant farmer or trader can have more than 50% of what the researcher wants to know about a class of commodities. An individual trader or farmer can represent experiences of more than 100 peers who specialize in the same commodity. This is an additional dimension to the conventional community or practice in professional settings.

Responses from the farmers and traders were consolidated and clustered under three headings in line with the concept of communities of practice and these headings are: domain, community and practice. Insights that demonstrate the role of African values like Ubuntu and relationality in African mass markets as communities of practice were weaved into the responses as shown in the following interpretations.

##### **Domain**

The mass market and competencies exchanged in that market constitute a domain of interest for farmers and traders in African food markets, as demonstrated by findings informing this paper. Farmers and traders shared their perspectives which show the extent to which the mass food market exemplifies a domain in the sense of a community of practice.

***As a domain, the mass market demonstrates the power of food***

Working in the market and meeting diverse farmers has opened the eyes of farmers and traders to the fact that food is one of the main resources that is common to everybody because it links directly to health. Most farmers now see the connection between tomatoes, potatoes and health. For instance, there has been an increase in the demand for organically produced tomatoes and potatoes. Traders have realized that trading and farming are part of a bigger and complex food system.

**Community: an interlinked group of farmers and traders**

What makes the mass market a community includes the fact that members share knowledge with each other on a daily basis in the belief that when everyone has knowledge, the reputation and image of the market as reliable source of food increases.

***The market as a price setter: setting prices as a community***

By belonging to the same community as traders, farmers have become aware of how the market as a domain sets prices, not individual traders. This has addressed the mistaken view among some farmers and ordinary consumers that traders are middlemen who set prices to the disadvantage of farmers. The farmers have become aware that big urban mass markets like Mbare in Harare and Sakubva in Mutare provide pricing guidelines depending on the quantities and quality of commodities in the market per particular day. The prices are agreed upon as a community early in the morning when the market opens, with present farmers and traders are able to assess what is in the market that day.

***Relationships drive the market***

Farmers who have been growing tomatoes for more than 10 years have developed a strong relationship with traders, most of whom came to collect the commodity from his communal farm. Sometimes, the farmers deliver to traders without payment up-front and the traders send money to the farmers after selling. Such trustful relationships enable farmers to concentrate on what they are good at, which is farming, while traders concentrate on what they are good at -selling, trading and deal making.

While outsiders may see mass food markets as chaotic places characterized by disorder, there is order in the seeming chaos, according to the farmers interviewed. Traders in the market are able to balance the demands of both wholesalers and retailers by collecting an assortment of produce from different farmers and buying in large quantities and selling to consumers in small units. By so doing, traders add value to produce sold to consumers. Consumers are able to choose from a wide range of produce in various sizes and standards. The farmers are also realizing that consumers are now more discerning so much that standards and grading are becoming very important in the market. Since they are at the centre of market transactions

where they listen to demands from farmers and final consumers, traders have some influence on the rules of the marketing game.

### ***The market and personal transformation***

What farmers and traders do and how they understand the mass market keeps coming back to personal initiative and personal stories. The market offers a rich conversation with traders sharing many characteristics of curiosity and uncertainty transforming into trust and confidence among peers. Each trader would never have found these tools and processes had s/he not consciously stepped into mass markets. Visits to the market are absorbing and inspiring. Farmers and traders thrive on testing, failing early and often, iterating and learning from users. For farmers and traders, experimentation and learning are part of heading in the right direction. If farmers and traders were to wait until they had gathered all the correct information in order to act, there would not be an active market.

### **Practice: producing and selling vegetables**

Practicing the production and selling of vegetables is what really makes African mass food markets communities of practice as shown by responses from farmers and traders, summarized under the following themes:

### ***The market as a source of new knowledge about tomato production and marketing***

Knowledge on producing for different customer categories was also obtained from the market by talking to customers and observing their buying patterns. Based on feedback from the market, indicating the importance of target marketing, farmers would go back to the farm and adjust planting spaces in order to get different tuber sizes for different categories of consumers. For instance, the farmers learnt that increasing spacing from 20cm to 25cm gives bigger tubers for most potato varieties, while decreasing spacing to 18cm gives small to medium tubers. Bigger tubers are required by fast food chains while vendors and low-income households prefer small to medium potato tubers that can be easily boiled into soup.

According to respondents, farmers who do not visit mass markets may not know tomato varieties preferred by different consumers as well as new varieties coming into the market. For instance, visiting Mbare market enabled farmers to see that a variety called *Rodate* was preferred by most households because of its high soup yield. Whereas as on the farm, farmers are interested in achieving more yields per hectare or number of fruits per plant, consumers are more interested in amount and quality of soup. The market also taught farmers to stagger production instead of wasting inputs producing commodities that will not be consumed but thrown away due to market saturation.

### ***Customer preferences drive the market***

By observing buying patterns, farmers who went to sell potatoes and tomatoes in Bulawayo market learnt about the extent to which the market performance is influenced by customer preferences. For instance, vendors who buy tomatoes in bulk for re-selling want to buy in wooden boxes (7-8kg) because they can estimate the number of fruits in each box since they sell by number of fruits. On the other hand, wholesalers prefer to buy tomatoes using plastic crates that weigh 18-20 kilograms and which are very easy to pack in trucks when transporting to distant areas. Another lesson is that vendors always aim for 100% profit. If a vendor buys a box of tomatoes for ZWD6/box, s/he aims to earn ZWD12. Traders have taught farmers the value of paying attention to detail because that is where profit or loss resides. For instance, counting the number of fruits on a tomato plant makes it possible for a farmer to know which variety translates to more profit. That is how the farmers have become aware that, when properly grown, three plants of *Rodate* variety can fill a wooden box of tomatoes whereas other varieties cannot do the same.

### ***The market as a vantage point with its own language***

The market has given many farmers an observation platform where they can see how some regions produce better quality and quantity potatoes or tomatoes than them due to climatic conditions and seasonality. For instance, the farmers also realized that tomatoes from other areas have a longer shelf- life which means they can be in the market for much longer while others with a short shelf life move out of the market quickly, denying farmers some reliable income. When farmers continuously produce tomatoes or potatoes with a long shelf life, they are able to bargain for better prices due to consistency in supply, among other advantages to consumers or buyers who will not spend resources looking for the commodity.

The fast way in which new potato and tomato varieties replace old varieties is said to happen fluidly. The seed is bred in India and Brazil with germination testing happening in Europe before big companies like Syngenta channel the seed to their local distributors from which farmers obtain the seed for planting. On the other hand, farmers learn by doing because the government extension service is not equipped with sufficient horticulture extension skills. Drip irrigation kits imported from China find their way into farming communities through distributors. To the extent that potato seed, tomato seed and drip kits are modified to suit local soils and water quality, these technologies become fluid since local farmers and artisans are able to improvise and adapt to their local context.

### ***How the market has modified farmer behaviour***

The market enabled farmers to become aware of other major players in the horticulture sector. The farmers have realized that you do not just plant potatoes and tomatoes without a market. If the export market collapses, the varieties designed for export end up being sold at

half the price on the domestic market because the domestic market has its own varieties. One of the problems is that there is no guarantee of who can take large volumes if many farmers are going to produce. A related challenge is lack of market infrastructure like pack sheds. The market has also modified the behaviour of farmers in several ways. For instance, those who used to work in isolation have become keen to collaborate as taking commodities to the market has showed farmers that the market should stimulate production not the other way round. The market is about volume, competition and quality which is why a code of conduct is necessary. For most farmers, the mass market has become major source of knowledge through diversity of ideas, openness and building farmers' ability to make sense of what is going on.

### ***Balancing farmers' learning habits and absorption capacity***

One of the major lessons from the mass market for farmers is that careful and patient use of inputs can result in better outcomes for potato producers. Farmers who have become successful in both potato and tomato production have done so due to small, incremental changes. Farmers' information absorptive capacity determines how they learn. Otherwise, too much information will not lead to learning. According to most respondents, agriculture extension officers put more emphasis on what farmers do not know and need to know rather than what they already know and practice which constitute their strengths. On the other hand, formal agriculture colleges focus too much on content dissemination. As a result, such institutions have failed to foster the love of learning since they do not motivate farmers to learn for themselves. One problem is the continuing focus on subject-based curricula which separate education from reality. As proven by the mass agriculture markets, farmers and traders do not practice farming or trading in subject areas.

### ***How a trader can almost become an agronomist***

Dealing with several farmers has many traders to become almost like agronomists able to advise farmers on varieties, time of planting and the best time for delivering to the market. Because many seed distributors are concentrated in Harare, farmers who stay in Mutare and other remote areas and do not visit the market often enough cannot tell when things have changed or which varieties have been phased out on the basis of poor market performance. However, demand drives the distribution of varieties as well as climatic issues like rainfall patterns. As a result, those who stock inputs like seed have to be educated so that they can explain to farmers the characteristics and performance of the seed they stock. Some of the information traders pass on to farmers include the fact that due to continuous breeding and competition between seed companies, a variety's life span can only be 5 to 10 years. A certain level of education is needed to appreciate horticulture, particularly hybrids. Open Pollinated Varieties (OPVs) like *Rodate* can continue growing for years but the yield is low.

Although changes are in yield and disease tolerance, there is no big learning curve on agronomic aspects because they mostly remain the same.

### ***How the market enables comparisons of contracts***

The mass market has enabled many traders to see the shortcomings of contract farming in relation to tomato and potato trading. First of all, contract farming and selling distorts the market in favour of contractors and big buyers. Contract farming does not give an option to other market forces resulting in undervaluing of the commodity, in most cases. Where it was supposed to fetch a better price on the open market, the commodity value is locked within the contract agreements for a period of a year. It would make sense if farmers had the leeway to sell at least 49% of the commodity. Commodity value is supposed to be determined by a number of factors such as: (1) Commodity characteristics (quality, size, variety, taste and quantity, etc.) which create space for competition with other commodities outside contract arrangements. (2) Supply and demand of the same commodity at a given market. Under contract arrangements, there is no room for the contracted product to compete with others even if circumstances change as often happens in the informal market. Determination of the final price is left to the contractor and so is grading.

### ***The market and commodity measurements***

The fast rate at which transactions take place in the mass market means traders have to attend to many customers at once. There is no time to measure commodities in kilograms in such a fast-paced auction system. For potatoes, cabbages, butternuts and other commodities, it can be time consuming and not practical to translate value into kilograms. Again, in the farmers' market, farmers and traders only have four hours to attend to thousands of customers and that means measuring using kilograms is not practical. To cope with this challenge, the market (farmers, traders, vendors and ordinary consumers) has established a standard way of determining value and prices of commodities. They mainly use volume not kilograms, for example a cup of beans, a pocket of oranges, a crate of tomatoes, a basket of bananas and other commodity measurements. In addition, most customers do not look for kilograms but volume, for example a pocket of potatoes which can be seen and related to price.

It is also easy to adjust volume in such a way that instead of increasing price you just reduce the volume. If there is a shortage of potatoes, where a pocket containing 10 potato tubers would go for a ZWD1, a trader can pack eight tubers for the same price. Experience in the market shows that customers are put off by price increase but do not mind a decrease in volume/quantity for the same price. In addition, many customers (most of whom have not gone to formal schools) are not conversant with the use of kilograms, grams and other modern expressions of volume and value. A common language like a cup, basket, bucket or pocket is used on a daily basis and makes translation very easy. The same language is ideal

for exchanging commodities through barter deals, for example, a box of tomatoes can be exchanged with a basket of bananas. The value can more easily be expressed in volume than weight (kg). Decision-making becomes simple due to the use of the same language which also prevents transaction challenges.

Major customers, such as vendors, also do not have scales but buy commodities like tomatoes for sale to household consumers who also buy from vendors without insisting on weighing tomatoes or potatoes they buy. Therefore, volume as a language is understood right through. Even at production level, farmers now know how many boxes (not kilograms) of tomatoes to expect from one plant. This expression of value is consistent with the informal market. Transporters also do not charge for their services in kilograms but work with boxes and kilometres. They often charge 80c/box which is around the price of a box in the market. They do not use a litre of fuel or a kg of produce which is mostly detached from the commodity.

The most satisfactory sales are conversations where you negotiate while looking at the commodity and sometimes value is determined by what the seller wants to do as well as the urgency of what needs to be done. The mass market has a way of carrying these factors along the value chain. Knowledge of how to use buckets, crates and other measurements in the market has come a long way. The mass market is also characterized by a lot of adaptation in terms of packaging – e.g., using used cooking oil tins, cardboard boxes and sacks that could have been thrown away. Planks that could be burnt as firewood are also fashioned into crates. Baskets are also woven from local reeds – a good example of adapting learning and use of local resources.

## 5. Discussion

### **African mass markets as communities of practice**

Going beyond the usual notion of communities of practice, in the mass food market farmers plant potatoes and tomatoes based on information shared in the market. After three or four months, the potatoes and tomatoes are harvested and brought to the market where the conversation among farmers and traders picks up from where it was left before potatoes were planted. In the market, farmers and traders share ideas on whether the commodities produced are in line with ideas shared before planting. They also discuss varieties that do well and why they do well. As a community of practice, the informal agriculture market is a platform for both individual and group memory. Due to the informal nature of the information system in informal agriculture markets, finding people who know is equivalent to finding the information one needs. Farmers and traders adapt more to information abundance by relying

more on human relationships than official explicit knowledge in manuals and publications or organizational rules.

Through the market, farmers and traders also rely more on networks of trusted colleagues than any particular source of information. That is why many informal market communities continue to function without formal education. Farmers and traders build their networks around people and agriculture markets where it is easy for farmers and traders to learn in the flow of their work and not trapped in classrooms or workshops. Through the market, farmers and traders also have more communities and social networks available for knowledge sharing. That means the mass market is good at connecting people to learn together and co-develop and exchange knowledge. As a result, farmers and traders make a quick transition from inexperienced newcomers to effective decision makers.

The whole market operates as a network of communities of practice according to different commodities. Farmers and traders do not allow themselves to be stuck in unviable value chains where they cannot share first-hand knowledge. Consistent with Ubuntu, sharing complex knowledge in trusted networks, such as the informal market, requires active engagement as well as verbal and non-verbal communication skills. A community like the people's market can be recognized by the energy in the place, the personal commitment of the people and their collective engagement. For these actors, informal learning is a normal and natural human activity. However, since it is invisible, most farmers and traders may be unaware of their own learning. Working and thinking aloud in the market seems the best way farmers and traders share tacit knowledge which they hold unconsciously in their memory and minds. The mass market shows that working, talking and thinking out loud are surely aids to accessing and sharing our tacit knowledge which farmers and traders do not know they hold until they tap into it when answering questions from their peers in the market.

### **Adding contextual meaning to the concept of communities of practice**

As a community of practice informed by Ubuntu, relationality and trust, among other African values, each mass market thrives on informal exchanges, unnoticed knowledge sharing as well as informal facilitation by middlemen and auctioneers who are responsible for pushing knowledge exchanges along and provoking reactions from farmers, traders, consumers and other actors. What happens in the mass market shows that solutions cannot be taught but they always have to be constructed by those who have the problem. Like communities of practice in the professional world, mass markets promote procedures and tools that allow farmers and traders to construct solutions that work for them. Through the market, farmers and traders set the context and build consensus around emergent practices. For both farmers and traders, their tacit knowledge expressed through action is an economic resource. Both farmers and traders have huge stocks of knowledge, such as lessons learned, practical skills and

experience, stored in the form of behaviour and social norms and most of this knowledge is tacit. Embodied knowledge is also prevalent among farmers and traders as expressed through individual and group memory that gives farmers and traders the capacity to act through learning. Memory enables farmers and traders to act intelligently and retain some knowledge for future action.

### ***Farmers and trader learn faster through collaborative learning***

According to trader respondents, farmers and traders learn faster by working together. While the modern world promotes individualism, farmers and traders thrive on collective interdependence. Collaboration and interdependence are salient values among informal traders and farmers. In the mass market, knowledge is built and shared through inter-generational dialogue and consensus building. This is how knowledge becomes an inclusive resource. Innovation and competition between seed companies actually works in favour of the farmer as it contributes to improved seed quality standards, according to the traders. However, lay farmers can be confused by too many varieties vying for supremacy. This affects brand loyalty, for example from *Star* varieties to *Megaton* which costs two cents per grain but does well on the market. Farmers should continuously monitor seed markets for varieties that are coming in and being phased out. That is why traders/mentors become very important because they do not provide biased information as would be expected from a seed company's Marketing and Public Relations Department.

### ***How oral knowledge sharing is the default in the market***

If documentation was the only source of knowledge, mass markets would have disappeared a long time ago, according to traders who were interviewed by the author. Documentation cannot account for the millions of undocumented knowledges and learning processes which occur daily in Mbare and other informal markets where oral knowledge sharing is the default. An oral and undocumented tradition seems to be so strong that it has held the whole informal market institution together for years. Millions of learning processes which have a social and economic effect occur daily but are undocumented. Traders and farmers share information without documentation and they can pick up that discourse, a day, a week, a month, a year, or even ten years later but without documentation. Lots of information exchange and transformation, none of it documented. And yet this learning goes on for decades, and is applied to various socio-economic problems without documentation. Traders and farmers are always creating, transferring and de-constructing knowledge without documentation.

If every small decision and activity in the mass market was to go through a documentation process, the market would stop functioning smoothly, according to the traders. The mass market encourages people to talk to each other without documentation and the only subtle means of documentation is the exchange of mobile phone numbers which form each actor's

growing list of contacts. What seems important is for traders, farmers and consumers to talk, engage and converse most of the time. Sometimes farmers and traders release knowledge if they know who will be using it and for what purpose. Documents or manuals would not only lead to resistance in sharing information but such a process would slow down innovation that happens in the fast-moving informal market.

### ***The mass market as a rapid response system***

The mass market has become a rapid response system which provides information and knowledge on demand projections. Very few farmers know what is required by a particular market in the next two to three months in terms of volumes, varieties and probable prices as well as location. Farmers get most of the useful information from the people's market where the majority of consumers buy commodities. Farmers who do not visit mass markets rely on ad hoc information and rumours. This compromises their ability to match production with supply in terms of yield, varieties and volumes. In most cases these farmers lose out because there is no demand during gluts. They also get low value for their commodities thus worsening their production capacity.

### ***The market as a source of practical wisdom for planning and decision making***

The market has made traders aware of farmers' production plans, thus equipping traders with the knowledge to diversify their business portfolio in line with supply of tomatoes from farmers. Traders have learnt that tomatoes planted in Oct-November are reduced in quantities due to too much summer rainfall. Farmers who supply end of December, January and up to May have equipment and materials for trellising. These farmers also plant tomatoes and potatoes in diverse soils ranging from sandy to red clay. While sandy soils drench well, trellising enables tomatoes to stand upright. The market also gives traders contact details and location of farmers who produce good quality product consistently. This knowledge is critical for business planning and relationship-building. By stimulating informed demand for information, the market has taught traders to re-arrange their priorities. From talking to everyone, most traders have started networking quietly and this is helping them to manage the costs of using mobile phone from USD20 per week to USD10 per week since they now focus on important business inquiries rather than just seeking information aimlessly.

## **6. Conclusions**

Our analysis has shown that the lens of the community of practice can reveal the intricate knowledge-related exchanges which are at the heart of mass food markets in Zimbabwe. Building on the work of Ikioda and others, the paper demonstrates complex personal interactions and exchanges of tacit knowledge which are employed for effective cultivation of

sales of agricultural crops. Ubuntu is alive in the Africanist notion of markets where monetary value is important but not the only emphasis. African mass food markets demonstrate that commerce and trading happen in a different way from the neo-liberal notion of markets which focuses mainly on commodities rather than entire ecosystems and relationships. The distinction between formal and informal seems to stem from traditional Western notions of markets that emphasize efficiency which is not the only value in the African perspective. While the heuristic of communities of practice provides valuable insights into the knowledge exchange at the basis of mass food markets, the values of *ute-ubuntu*, such as resilience, self-reliance, solidarity, entrepreneurship, economic justice, communal responsibility and inclusiveness, may provide further insights into the nature of global communities of practice. We will aim to consider this in future research.

Like other institutions, African mass food markets deserve to be studied and understood in order to receive commensurate recognition and support from policy makers and development agencies. If mass food markets become institutionalized in policy processes and the development sector, legitimacy will be brought to their actors and businesses. It will also give confidence to potential private and social investors in infrastructure development, service delivery and, more importantly, knowledge and information/data gathering systems in mass food markets. As legitimized institutions, African mass food markets can also become part of centres of learning and knowledge exchange within African education systems that are still engulfed in western education systems. Identifying and capitalizing on the opportunities that exist in African mass food markets can open space for more meaningful and effective dialogue and facilitate more inclusive engagement between formal and informal knowledge exchange.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors acknowledge farmers and traders in Zimbabwe's mass food markets for willingly and excitedly sharing their knowledge and experiences.

### **About the Authors**

*Charles Dhewa* is a proactive knowledge management specialist, evaluator and thought leader on African food systems, rural development and indigenous knowledge systems, based in Zimbabwe. Working at the intersection of formal and informal agricultural markets across Africa, his organization, Knowledge Transfer Africa also known as eMKambo ([www.knowledgetransafrica.com](http://www.knowledgetransafrica.com) / [www.emkambo.co.zw](http://www.emkambo.co.zw)) trends around food systems to ensure agricultural value chains are driven by knowledge, technology and innovation. He is undertaking a PhD at the Knowledge, Technology and Innovation (KTI) Department at Wageningen University and Research, The Netherlands.  
Email: [charles@knowledgetransafrica.com](mailto:charles@knowledgetransafrica.com)

Dhewa, C. and S. Cummings. 2023.  
Can African values like Ubuntu expand the meaning and understanding of communities of practice?  
Lessons from mass food markets in Zimbabwe.  
Special Issue on 'Uncomfortable truths in international development:  
approaches to the decolonization of knowledge from development practice, policy and research.'  
*Knowledge Management for Development Journal* 17(1/2): 162-180.  
[www.km4djournal.org/](http://www.km4djournal.org/)

*Sarah Cummings* is a researcher and consultant on knowledge and global development. She is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at Knowledge, Technology and Innovation (KTI) Department at Wageningen University and Research, working on the NWO Research Project 'From philosophy to action and back again: addressing epistemic justice' (Project No: 406.XS.01.054). She is also the Editor-in-Chief for the *Knowledge Management for Development Journal*. Email: sarahcummingswork@gmail.com

## References

- Chavez-Tafur, J., I. Khadar, R. Sanz & S. Cummings (2021) Learning from the past: impact of information and knowledge management on individuals and organizations over decades. *Knowledge Management for Development Journal* 16(1): 1-7.
- Chilisa, B. (2012) Indigenous research methodologies SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Clark, G. (1994) Onions are my husband: survival and accumulation by West African market women. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dhewa, C. (2016) Knowledge in informal African markets - a case study of three informal markets in Zimbabwe. Master's Thesis, Stellenbosch University.  
<https://scholar.sun.ac.za/items/dc6323f8-8975-4e06-950e-aaaf70926e9b>
- Goyal, Y. & P. Westerman (2018) A short note on the validity of rules guiding informal markets. In: Legal validity and soft law. Law and Philosophy Library. Springer Nature, pp. 183-192. ISBN 9783319775227
- Hendriks, T.D. (2017) Collaboration and competition: market queens, trade unions and collective action of informal workers in Ghana's Makola Market. *Interface* 9(2): 162-187.
- Hendriks, T.D., Verbuyst, R. & Kaag, M. (2022) Fraught with Friction: Inclusive Development for Informal Workers in Urban Ghana. *European Journal of Development Research* 34: 2305–2323. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41287-022-00511-7>
- Henson, S. & S. Jaffee (2023) Food safety policy neglects informal markets in developing countries - 3 ways this can change. *The Conversation* 23 July 2023.
- Ikioda F. (2012) Limits to communities of practice in an open air market: the case of the Alaba-Suru market, Lagos, Nigeria.
- Ikioda, F. (2013) Urban Markets in Lagos, Nigeria. *Geography Compass* 7: 517-526.
- Ikioda, F. (2014) Communities of practice in competitive settings: exploring the role of associations of market traders in marketplaces in Lagos, Nigeria. *Knowledge Management for Development Journal* 10(2): 105-116
- Lindell, I. (1988) Africa's informal workers: collective agency, alliances and transnational organizing in urban Africa. London: Zed Books
- Kinyanjui, M.N. (2014) Women and the informal economy in urban Africa : from the margins to the centre. London, England: Zed Books (Africa Now).

Dhewa, C. and S. Cummings. 2023.  
Can African values like Ubuntu expand the meaning and understanding of communities of practice?  
Lessons from mass food markets in Zimbabwe.  
Special Issue on 'Uncomfortable truths in international development:  
approaches to the decolonization of knowledge from development practice, policy and research.'  
*Knowledge Management for Development Journal* 17(1/2): 162-180.  
[www.km4journal.org/](http://www.km4journal.org/)

- Kinyanjui, M.N. (2017). African markets and the utu-ubuntu business model: a perspective on economic informality in Nairobi. *African Minds*.
- Kiwanuka, S.N., S. Cummings & B. Regeer (2020) The private sector as the 'unusual suspect' in knowledge brokering for international sustainable development: a critical review. *Knowledge Management for Development Journal* 15(2): 70-97.
- Olukaju A. (2005) Actors and Institutions in Urban Politics in Nigeria: Agege (Lagos) Since the 1950s. *Afrika Zamani* 13/14: 153–178.
- McDermott R (2000) Knowing in Community: 10 Critical success factors in building communities of practice. *IHRIM Journal* (March): 19–26.
- Meade, A. (2022) Blog: 7 February 2022. [www.km4dev.org](http://www.km4dev.org)
- Morgan, S. L. (2011). Social learning among organic farmers and the application of the communities of practice framework. *Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension*, 17(1), 99–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1389224X.2011.536362>
- Pryor, T. (2022) Blog: 29 October 2022. [www.km4dev.org](http://www.km4dev.org)
- Ramose, M.B. (2003) *The African Philosophy Reader*. Second edition
- Ropes, D. C. (2011). Measuring the impact of communities of practice: a conceptual model. *International Journal of Learning and Intellectual Capital*, 8(1), 94.  
<https://doi.org/10.1504/IJLIC.2011.037361>
- Stovel, K. and L. Shaw (2012) 'Brokerage', *Annual review of sociology* 38, 139–158.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-081309-150054>
- Tollens, E (1997) Wholesale markets in African cities diagnosis, role, advantages, and elements for further study and development. <https://www.fao.org/3/ab790e/ab790e.pdf>
- Tutu, D. (1999) *No Future Without Forgiveness*. New York: Image Doubleday.
- Vermaak, J. (2017) Social development and informal markets: lessons from Thohoyandou market, South Africa, *Development in Practice* 27(1): 53-63.
- Wenger, E., R. McDermott and W. Snyder (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.