

FOOD MARKETS ARE BIG BUSINESS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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OUR SURVEYS

Between 1979 and 1982 we surveyed three markets in the Kainantu area of the Eastern Highlands every fortnight. This was part of a large study of seasonality of food supply. As we did this, we realised that a lot of money was changing hands in these markets. Many planners do not seem to know that selling food within Papua New Guinea is a big industry. We wanted to make people more aware of this part of the national economy.

So we then did some intensive surveys of these markets in the Kainantu area in 1981-82. The markets were the urban ones of Kainantu and Ukarumpa (SIL headquarters) and the rural one at Aiyura. We also summarized literature from earlier studies that had covered 20 markets in all parts of the country. The full results of our study and a summary of earlier studies are given in another paper by Bourke and Nema.

The results were surprising. Even in small urban areas such as Kainantu and Ukarumpa, the turnover (sales) at the markets is very high. Kainantu market had a turnover of about K228,000 in 1981-82. Sales at Ukarumpa market were K30,000 a year. At the small one at Aiyura, they were K2000 a year.

The money from selling fresh food mostly went to village women. Both men and women sold betel nut and cooked scones made from flour. At Kainantu people selling food earned an average of K2.20 each selling day.

People earned an average of K8 to K10 a day from the sale of betel nut and cooked scones (but they had to buy the betel nut



Scone sellers at Kainantu market. Even in a little town like Kainantu, total sales at the market are estimated to be worth K228,000 a year. The value of all marketed fresh food in PNG is estimated as K48 million a year. The only export cash crop with a greater value to the nation's economy is coffee.

and flour before they could earn this). A person selling fresh food could earn almost as much as the minimum rural wage at that time. Of course, people who had more food to sell could earn more than average.

A lot more food and betel nut were sold on the Government pay day or the following Saturday in all markets. This shows that a lot of the money was coming from the paypacket of public servants.

We worked out that sales in all urban markets in PNG in 1983 were worth about

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K26 million. The total value for all marketed fresh food and betel nut in the country is about K48 million. At the moment the only export crop that is worth more to the national economy is coffee.

SOME CHANGES

Before Europeans came to Papua New Guinea, there were traditional food markets in the middle Sepik (sago/fish), amongst the Tolai of New Britain, and amongst the Mekeo, Motuan and Koiari people of Central Province. Rabaul market was started in 1928, but most markets in the country only started since the Pacific war (for example Koki in 1949, Goroka in 1955, Mt Hagen in 1959). Since the 1950s, the size and number of food markets has grown rapidly. In the Eastern Highlands alone, there are now over 60 market places.

One of the changes in food marketing that has happened since 1970 is the rise of wholesaling. Before 1970 most food sold in markets was sold by the person who grew it. It was bought by people who were going to eat it themselves. In most parts of the world people called middlemen buy food from growers and then sell it to the consumers who will eat it. There were very few middlemen in Papua New Guinea before 1970.

Since then, sales by middlemen have been increasing. A person who buys K5 worth of betel nut in the Markham Valley and sells it

for K10 in a highland market is a middleman. There are more people acting as middlemen now. This is a usually good thing. It is better for farmers if they can let somebody else transport and sell food in another part of the country. Then each farmer does not have high transport costs and selling costs for a small amount of produce.

HELPING MARKETING

Marketing locally grown food is now a big industry in Papua New Guinea. But there are problems. Food imports are high and still rising.

Anything that can be done to help people market more food will be helpful to the farmers who grow it and the people who eat it. Here are some of the things that could be done to help people market more food:

- Encourage men and women to act as middlemen
- Encourage and help farmers to grow crops that are in short supply
- Point out to farmers where there is a demand for the food they want to sell
- Discourage local government councillors from making laws that make food marketing more difficult for village people



Sellers and buyers at Ukarumpa market near Kainantu. Anything that can be done to encourage marketing of locally grown or locally cooked food is helpful for growers, and the economy of Papua New Guinea.

More ideas on how to help production and sale of fresh food are given in two articles in HARVEST Volume 10, No. 2 called "Making money from fresh food in the Kainantu area".

FURTHER READING

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