

Title Banana cultivars, uses, production constraints and market opportunities in Malawi: banana baseline survey

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Abstract

Banana (spp.) is one of the major crops in Malawi and plays a very important role in supplying carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals to the local people. The crop is also a very important source of income to small-holder farmers. In 2004, the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) in the framework of Regional Centre for Southern Africa/Rural Livelihood Project with funding from United States Agency for International Development (USAID) carried out a banana baseline study in Nkhata Bay and Mulanje districts in Malawi. The specific objectives were to identify cultivars grown, determine the uses of these cultivars, find out production constraints and market opportunities for banana in Malawi. In Nkhata Bay banana was the second most important crop after cassava while in Mulanje it came third after maize and cassava. Banana farmers in Mulanje were getting almost twice as much income as their counterparts in Nkhata Bay. Cavendish banana cultivars such as 'Williaams', 'Mulanje', 'Kafupi' and 'Kabuthu' were major sources of cash to small-holder farmers in the two districts. The farmers used bananas for dessert and cooking. There was little processing and product development. The major constraints to banana production were diseases, pests and technological problems. The major diseases included Fusarium wilt, banana bunchy top virus and black sigatoka, while banana weevils and nematodes were the major pests. In most cases farmers uprooted or cut down their bananas, as they did not know the appropriate pest and disease control technologies. Lack of appropriate banana production technologies was also a major constraint. Market problems such as pricing and transportation were mentioned among the main constraints. Forty percent of farmers in Mulanje ranked low prices as a major production constraint, compared with 30% in Nkhata Bay. Farmers in Nkhata Bay were selling banana at lower prices than in Mulanje. Transportation was also a major constraint in Nkhata Bay, with farmers having poor access to modern methods of transportation, compared with their counterparts in Mulanje. Market opportunities, however, were still there because the markets were not saturated as evidenced by trends in demand and supply. Demand for banana was still increasing. There was high concentration on dessert banana, but demand for cooking banana was increasing. Processing could also open up opportunities to farmers constrained by transport, perishability and low prices. In Nkhata Bay, improvements in transportation were

another source of better marketing opportunities. Farmers could increase their marketing opportunities and profits if they formed marketing associations or increased banana volumes to warrant hiring of vehicles.