

Banana Ripening; A Woman's Domain

By Anne Dennig¹



While the women of Nakuru market are happy to leave the unloading of bananas from Meru to the boys, the ripening sheds are their own domain. The banana ripeners explain their work.

Sourcing Bananas from Meru



Phylis Wangari has 22 years of experience and has ten banana ripening sheds. She sources her bananas from Meru. Sometimes she buys from the local markets but she prefers to go to the shambas (farms) where

she can use her experience to select the best banana bunches from the trees. She gets boys to cut them and mark them with the ripening shed numbers. Some farms are very large and she can source ten tons from just two farms, then she loads the bunches and returns to Nakuru. This can take three days, and in the meantime someone else must look after her banana ripening sheds and sell her bananas.

Phylis:

"We hire the truck from here to Meru and back, it takes one day to travel and we buy the next day. One buyer travels with the lorry but we share the truck. Some of the buyers in Meru give the farmers delayed payment, but we pay directly, so the farmers prefer to buy from us. In one truck

we carry the bananas for five or more sellers; that's why we put our names on each banana bunch. And those boys are the ones who unload them, according to the names and numbers. After that we see how much each seller has got, and then she'll pay according to the number of her bananas. There are about 400 bunches in a ten ton truck. "

The Ripening Sheds

Once back in Nakuru the bananas are unloaded and carried to sheds where they are covered with polythene and left for three days out of the light. Then they are transferred to other sheds and left for another three days with the polythene removed. From there they are moved to the sheds from which they are sold.



Phylis' Buyers

Buyers come to collect ripe bananas from Phylis' shed. They sell on the streets from wheelbarrows, from baskets on their heads or from small kiosks. Phylis also has larger contracts with schools, but the challenge here is that they take one month to pay while all the other smaller buyers pay cash.



Ruth Nyamusi sells bananas. She buys them wholesale from Phylis who she has known all her life. She pays 7/ KES for big bananas and sells them on for 10/ KES or 5/ KES for small bananas and sells them on at 7/ KES.

¹ Edited by Anne Dennig in 2014

Ruth:

"I've come to buy some bananas. I always take 150 bananas every two days. I always sell near The Kenyan Medical Training College (KMTC), I have a small grocery there and every month I pay 360 shillings rent. I always sell to the students from KMTC. These are my bananas. I take them and God willing I will sell them in two days, and then I come back for more. There isn't usually any waste if I sell them within three days. Phylis is my best friend and my mum's friend. She used to sell us bananas when I was young, then Mum sold the bananas at the school and that's how we got our school fees. That's why I always come to buy bananas here."



Some Challenges

- **Travelling Time**

Lisper Wanbui is another experienced banana seller. She explains the difficulties for some women with small children to travel to source their bananas.

Lisper:

"It's very difficult because some have children and you have to leave the children at home, so you can go. It is difficult for the children. You don't have time for the children."

- **Weather and market dynamics**

Phylis

"You know sometimes when it rains there in Meru there's not many bananas. So they sell them at a very big price. Because you know that cold makes them shrink, they don't grow quickly. So the demand goes higher than the quantity. So the price goes up and when we take them here the price is still the same. So we get very little profit or

maybe sometimes no profit. But we just persevere because of the time when there is high profit. We persevere to wait for that time to come."

- **Low Demand and Selling on Credit**

Phylis:

"One bunch costs 500/KES from the farmers or it could go down as low and 300/KES with differing sizes etc. We price depending on the size of the bunch and pay accordingly. We set the price one week ahead but if it is cold in Nakuru our sales go down. Bananas are perishable; sometimes there is low demand and too many bananas are ripe, so you are forced to sell them on credit. Some pay but some don't pay and you just persevere because you don't have other buyers. If there is waste we give the rotten bananas to the pig farmers. That's some of the challenges."

Is TSS a Possibility?

James Kanyi spoke to Phylis and Lisper about the possibility of using the Ruralnet Transaction Security Service network (TSS) in Meru to source the bananas using the T4T cash-on-the-bag financing. The ladies agree that if they used TSS they could save on travel and time away from their businesses. They could order bananas for themselves and also sell on to the other ladies who cannot travel for different reasons. The TSS agents would have to be trained by the ripening ladies on which bananas to pick and how to cut and pack them. The TSS could also arrange the payment of the farmers and the transport. This could help the ladies to grow their businesses, to get more contracts to sell to other sheds and to other vendors. James will follow up to see if this could be a viable business for the farmers, the TSS network and the banana ripeners.

Contact: James Kanyi

Email: jwkanyi@yahoo.com

Mobile: + 254 720922103