

An Assessment of the Social and Economic Welfare Benefits of Tea Marketing to Smallholder Farmers and Their Households in Buhweju District

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Abstract:

Tea marketing offers opportunities for both monetary gains and improvements in the social and economic welfare of households, including better income, access to education and healthcare, improved housing, and employment opportunities. Despite its importance, the contribution of tea marketing to household welfare remains unclear, with farmers facing challenges such as fluctuating prices, limited market access, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient knowledge of value addition. This study assessed the contribution of tea marketing to the social and economic welfare of smallholder tea farmers using Buhweju District as a case study. A cross-sectional descriptive design was used. The target population comprised 1,250 smallholder tea farming households from four major tea-producing sub-counties (Nyakishana, Burere, Engaju, and Nyakashaka), from which a representative sample of 297 households was selected through a multistage sampling technique, and key informants including cooperative managers and local leaders were purposively selected for qualitative interviews. Data were collected using close-ended structured questionnaires and interview guides. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were organized through thematic content analysis. Tea marketing significantly contributed to household welfare, with 76.8% reporting improvements in housing, 76.8% accessing credit for agricultural purposes, and 74.4% acknowledging empowerment of women within households, although only 45.5% reported increased household income and 30.3% were able to save or invest from tea earnings. Additional income sources included small businesses (47.1%), livestock products (32.7%), and off-farm employment (20.2%). The study concludes that tea marketing enhances social and economic welfare in areas such as housing, access to credit, and women's empowerment, but its impact on household income remains uneven, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to improve market access, stabilize prices, and promote financial management to maximize benefits for smallholder farmers in Buhweju District.

Key words: Tea marketing, Social economic welfare, Smallholder farmers, Households income.

Introduction

Tea cultivation is a significant agricultural activity globally, particularly in developing countries, where it often serves as a primary source of income for millions of smallholder farmers. The marketing of tea, from farm gate to consumer, plays a crucial role in determining the economic viability and social welfare of these farmers (New *et al.*, 2024). Effective marketing strategies can lead to increased income, improved living standards, and enhanced community development. Inefficient or exploitative marketing channels can trap farmers in cycles of poverty, despite their labor-intensive efforts in tea production (Sukhava, 2022). Understanding the intricate relationship between tea marketing and the socio-economic welfare of smallholder farmers is essential for developing sustainable agricultural policies and interventions (Jahan *et al.*, 2022).

The direct economic benefits of well-structured tea marketing for smallholder farmers are substantial. Access to stable markets and fair pricing mechanisms, often facilitated by cooperatives or direct trade initiatives, can significantly increase farmers' net income (Mjanja et al., 2025). For instance, in countries like Kenya and Sri Lanka, where smallholder tea farming is prevalent, the establishment of farmer-owned factories and direct export channels has empowered farmers to capture a larger share of the value chain, moving beyond simply selling raw leaf to intermediaries (International Tea Committee, 2024). This increased income translates directly into improved household welfare, enabling farmers to invest in better housing, nutrition, and education for their children (Mariet and Buyinza, 2022). This predictable income streams reduce financial vulnerability, allowing farmers to plan for the future and mitigate risks associated with agricultural production, such as climate variability or pest outbreaks (Muzira et al., 2024).

Beyond direct financial gains, tea marketing contributes to the social welfare of smallholder communities in various ways. The development of robust tea marketing infrastructure, including processing facilities and transportation networks, often creates employment opportunities within rural areas, benefiting not only farmers but also local laborers (Du et al., 2023). This can lead to a reduction in rural-urban migration as more economic opportunities become available locally. Moreover, successful tea marketing initiatives can foster community cohesion and empowerment. When farmers organize into cooperatives or producer groups for marketing purposes, they gain collective bargaining power, enabling them to negotiate better terms with buyers and advocate for their interests (International Labour Organization, 2024). This collective action can also facilitate knowledge sharing, adoption of improved farming practices, and access to credit and other support services, further enhancing their socio-economic resilience.

The long-term sustainability of tea farming and the welfare of smallholder farmers are intrinsically linked to the evolution of tea marketing. The growing global demand for ethically sourced and sustainably produced tea presents new marketing opportunities that can directly benefit smallholder farmers (Ethical Tea Partnership, 2024). Certifications such as Fair Trade, Rainforest Alliance, and organic certifications often command premium prices, and the premiums are frequently channeled back to the farming communities for social and environmental projects (Shiferaw, 2023). This not only provides additional income but also encourages environmentally sound farming practices, contributing to ecological sustainability. Furthermore, the rise of e-commerce and direct-to-consumer marketing models offers smallholder farmers the potential to bypass traditional intermediaries, allowing them to connect directly with consumers and build brand loyalty, thereby securing higher profit margins and greater control over their livelihoods.

However, challenges persist in maximizing the welfare benefits of tea marketing for smallholder farmers. Issues such as price volatility, limited access to market information, inadequate infrastructure, and the dominance of large corporations in the value chain can hinder farmers' ability to fully capitalize on market opportunities (World Bank Group 2024). Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach involving government policies that support smallholder farmers, investments in rural infrastructure, capacity building programs for farmers in marketing and business management, and the promotion of fair trade practices. By fostering an equitable and efficient tea marketing ecosystem, it is possible to unlock the full potential of tea cultivation as a powerful engine for socio-economic development and poverty reduction in smallholder farming communities worldwide.

The social and economic welfare of smallholder farmers encompasses multiple dimensions, including income generation, access to education, healthcare, improved housing, and the ability to meet household consumption needs (Mariet and Buyinza, 2022). For many rural households income from tea marketing has the potential to improve living standards by enabling farmers to invest in their families' well-being, support children's schooling, and access basic social services. Beyond immediate household benefits, tea marketing also contributes to community-level development by creating employment opportunities in processing, transport, and trade, thereby enhancing overall economic activity in the district (Mjanja et al., 2025).

Despite the recognized importance of tea marketing, the extent to which it contributes to the social and economic welfare of smallholder households remains unclear. Many farmers face persistent challenges, including fluctuating tea prices, limited access to formal markets, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient knowledge about value addition and market opportunities. These constraints often reduce the potential benefits of tea marketing, leaving households vulnerable to economic shocks and limiting improvements in their social welfare. The limited empirical evidence on the relationship between tea marketing and household welfare in Buhweju District creates a knowledge gap that hinders policymakers, cooperatives, and development agencies from designing targeted interventions to support smallholder farmers. Without this understanding, initiatives aimed at improving livelihoods may fail to address the specific constraints that prevent farmers from fully benefiting from tea production and trade. Therefore, this study assessed the contribution of tea marketing to the social and economic welfare of smallholder tea farmers in Buhweju District.

Theoretical underpinning the study

Agricultural Marketing Theory

The Agricultural Marketing Theory emphasizes the processes, institutions, and mechanisms that move agricultural products from producers to consumers, highlighting how efficient marketing systems enhance farmers' welfare. It argues that effective marketing reduces transaction costs, eliminates exploitative middlemen, and ensures fair price discovery, thereby improving farmers' incomes and market participation (Kohls & Uhl, 2002). For smallholder tea farmers, well-structured marketing channels such as cooperatives and contract farming provide economies of scale, access to information, and bargaining power (Kotler & Keller, 2016). The theory also underscores the role of value addition, grading, storage, transportation, and processing in increasing the competitiveness of agricultural commodities (Acharya & Agarwal, 2011). By linking farmers to both local and international markets, agricultural marketing fosters rural development, generates employment, and contributes to national economic growth (Abbott, 1987). Furthermore, the theory recognizes that demand and supply dynamics, pricing strategies, and consumer preferences significantly influence farmer welfare (Stanton et al., 1991). In the case of tea, marketing through fair-trade channels and certifications offers smallholders premium prices and social benefits, thereby integrating welfare with sustainability.

3.1 Study area

The study was carried out in Nyakishana, Burere, Engaju and Nyakashaka Sub-Counties, Buhwenju district located in the Western Region of Uganda. It is situated southwest of the capital city, Kampala. The district is bordered by the districts of Sheema to the north, Mitooma to the east, Rubirizi to the south, and Bushenyi to the west. The exact geographical coordinates of Buhweju District are approximately 0.4025° S latitude and 30.2200° E longitude. The district has a land area of 700.6 square kilometers and population of 126,200 with 62,400 females and 60,800 males with the average house hold size of 5.4, in a total of 15,353 households. Nyakishana and Burere Sub-Counties, were selected because they are major tea producing Sub-Counties in Buhwenju District.

Study design target population and sampling frame

The study used a cross-sectional descriptive research design to examine the relationship between tea marketing and the welfare of smallholder farmers in Buhweju District. A cross-sectional research design was employed to capture data at a single point in time from a representative sample of farmers engaged in tea production and marketing. The study involved smallholder tea farmers in Buhweju District, selected through a multistage sampling technique. The sub-counties with the highest concentration of smallholder tea farmers were chosen (Nyakishana, Burere, Engaju and Nyakashaka) followed by villages and households. The sample size was determined using Cochran's formula, with a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error. Key informants, such as cooperative managers and local leaders, were also selected for qualitative interviews to gain deeper insights into the socio-

economic impact of tea marketing. The study targeted smallholder tea farmers in Buhweju District, specifically in Nyakishana, Burere, Engaju, and Nyakashaka, with approximately 1,250 households. Using Cochran's formula at a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, a representative sample size of 297 households was determined and allocated proportionally to the four sub-counties to reflect their population distribution, with 95 households from Nyakishana, 83 from Burere, 71 from Engaju, and 48 from Nyakashaka.

3.3 Data collection methods and instruments

In the study on the social and economic welfare benefits of tea marketing to smallholder farmers, data were collected using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to ensure validity and reliability of findings. Structured questionnaires were administered to sampled smallholder tea farmers to generate quantitative data on household income, access to markets, participation in cooperatives, and social welfare indicators. In addition, key informant interviews with cooperative leaders, extension officers, and local government officials provided in-depth qualitative insights into institutional support, marketing challenges, and policy frameworks. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were also conducted with farmer groups to capture shared experiences and community-level perspectives on how tea marketing influences socio-economic well-being. The instruments questionnaires, interview guides, and FGD checklists were designed to align with the study objectives and were pre-tested to ensure clarity, accuracy, and contextual relevance. This triangulation of methods and instruments enriched the data and enhanced the robustness of the study findings.

Data processing and analysis

In the study on the social and economic welfare benefits of tea marketing to smallholder farmers, data were processed and analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.0. After collection, quantitative data from structured questionnaires were edited, coded, and entered into SPSS for cleaning and validation. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were generated to describe farmers' socio-economic characteristics and welfare indicators. Inferential statistics, including chi-square tests was conducted to establish relationships between tea marketing practices and household welfare outcomes. Qualitative data from key informant interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed and analyzed thematically to complement the quantitative findings. The use of SPSS version 26.0 ensured accuracy, reliability, and efficiency in data handling and analysis, thereby enhancing the credibility of the study results.

4. Results

Demographic characteristics of respondents

Characteristics like age, gender, family size and education level of the household heads are important proxy indicators for individual behaviors and are commonly used as explanatory variables. This section deals with these variables.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents

| Demographic characteristics of respondents | | Frequency (n=297) | Proportion (%) |
|--|----------------|----------------------|----------------|
| Gender | Male | 183 | 61.6 |
| | Female | 114 | 38.4 |
| Age | Below 25 years | 21 | 7.1 |
| | 25 - 34 years | 56 | 18.9 |
| | 35 – 44 years | 182 | 61.3 |
| | 45 - 54 years | 9 | 3.0 |
| | Above 55 years | 29 | 9.8 |
| Marital status | Single | 48 | 16.2 |
| | Married | 227 | 76.4 |

| | | | |
|---|----------------------|-----|------|
| | Separated | 10 | 3.4 |
| | Widowed | 12 | 4.0 |
| Education level | None | 14 | 4.7 |
| | Primary | 106 | 35.7 |
| | Secondary | 115 | 38.7 |
| | Tertiary | 46 | 15.5 |
| | University | 16 | 5.4 |
| Size of the household | 1 - 3 members | 20 | 6.7 |
| | 4 - 6 members | 78 | 26.3 |
| | Above 7 Members | 199 | 67.0 |
| Time spent while practicing tea growing | Below 5 years | 10 | 3.4 |
| | 5 - 10 years | 64 | 21.5 |
| | Over 10 years | 223 | 75.1 |
| Land ownership | Own the land | 222 | 74.7 |
| | Lease the land | 75 | 25.3 |
| Size of land under tea Growing | Below 3 acres | 64 | 21.5 |
| | 3 - 8 acres | 80 | 26.9 |
| | 9 – 14 acres | 89 | 30.0 |
| | Above 15 acres | 60 | 20.2 |
| | 5.00 | 4 | 1.3 |
| Annual income from tea growing | Below 1000,000 | 36 | 12.1 |
| | 1000, 000-5,000,000 | 129 | 43.4 |
| | 5000, 000-10,000,000 | 116 | 39.1 |
| | 10,000,000 And above | 16 | 5.4 |
| Additional source of income | Off-Farm Employment | 60 | 20.2 |
| | Livestock Farm | 97 | 32.7 |
| | Small Business | 140 | 47.1 |

Source: Field data, 2024

Results indicate that this research consisted of a higher proportion of males (61.6%) compared to females (38.4%). This significant difference indicates that the surveyed population is predominantly male. This implies that men were more involved in cash crop farming, such as tea, while women focused more on subsistence farming (food crops) and household activities. Similarly, Men were more actively involved in the marketing and sale of tea, attending markets and engaging with buyers, which made them more visible and accessible for this study. This agrees with Ahmed *et al.* (2018) who pointed out that in some cultures, men are more likely to own and control land, giving them a greater stake in and knowledge about the economic aspects of farming, including marketing. Results established that majority of respondents (61.3%) were between 34-44 years of age, indicating that this age group was the most represented. The second-largest group was 25-34 (18.9%) years of age, followed by the 45-54 age bracket (9.8%). Only a small fraction of respondents was under 25 (7.1%) or 55 and above (3.0%). This distribution suggests that middle-aged adults are the primary participants in the survey. This implies that individuals in the 35-44 age range were in their prime working years, and they were actively engaged in agricultural activities, including tea farming. This age group was likely to have the physical capability, experience, and economic motivation to participate fully in farming activities. Similarly, People aged 35-44 would have significant family responsibilities, including providing for children and other dependents. This makes them more interested and involved in activities that improve their socio-economic status, such as effective marketing of their tea produce. This can be compared with Tumuhairwe and Kakuru (2020) who pointed out that people in this age bracket are more likely to have established their own farms and take on the responsibility for managing and marketing their produce, compared to younger or older individuals.

It was revealed that largest group of respondents had completed secondary education (38.7%), followed closely by those with primary education (35.7%). A notable 20.9% had attained tertiary education, while a small percentage (4.7%) had no formal education. This indicates a relatively high level of educational attainment among the respondents, with a majority having at least a secondary education. This implies that majority of the respondents had attained a certain level of education that would facilitate understanding and participation in training programs related to advanced farming methods, sustainable practices, and effective marketing. This would lead to improved tea yields and quality, positively impacting socio-economic welfare. This is in agreement with Kimani and Nyangena (2019) who pointed out that the disparities in educational opportunities for children of tea farmers, particularly in remote rural areas. Limited access to quality education and healthcare perpetuates intergenerational cycles of poverty.

Results indicate that majority of respondents are married (76.4%), suggesting a stable family structure among the surveyed population. A smaller portion is single (16.2%), with minimal representation from widowed (3.4%) and separated individuals (4.0%). This indicates that marital status is predominantly married in this community. This implies that married individuals had the benefit of shared household and farming responsibilities. This would lead to increased productivity as spouses and family members contribute labor and support in farming activities. With a stable family structure, there would be a clear division of labor between household and farming tasks. This leads to more efficient management of both spheres, potentially increasing farm productivity and household welfare. This is in line with Kimani and Nyangena (2019) who pointed out that in many rural communities, married individuals might have a more prominent social and economic presence. They often take on leadership roles within the community and are more involved in community-based initiatives like tea marketing cooperatives.

The study findings established that majority of respondents (67%) had 7 or more members in their households, 78 (26.3%) had between 4-6 members in the household and 20 (6.7%) had between 1-3 members, indicating a trend towards larger household sizes. This implies that larger household sizes require higher incomes to sustain their needs. Thus, effective tea marketing would significantly impact the socio-economic welfare of these larger households by providing better income opportunities. With a significant number of respondents having large households, tea farming and marketing strategies need to consider family labor dynamics and support mechanisms that would leverage large household sizes for better productivity and economic outcomes. This is line with Barrett *et al.* (2012) who pointed out that Household members, including women, men, and children, often participate in tea farming activities such as planting, harvesting, and processing. Their level of involvement determines the quantity and quality of tea marketed, directly impacting household income and welfare.

The study findings established that majority of the respondents 223 (75.1%) had spent 10 years and above while practicing tea farming, 64 (21.5%) had spent between 5-10 years and 10 (3.4%) had spent less than 5 years. This implies that the majority of respondents (75.1%) had significant experience in tea farming, having spent over 10 years in the practice. This suggests that most of the study participants were likely to have a deep understanding of tea farming practices, challenges, and contributions to their socio-economic welfare. This is in agreement with Ahmed *et al.* (2018) who cited out that time invested in critical farming practices—such as land preparation, planting, pruning, pest and disease management, and harvesting directly affects the quantity and quality of tea produced. High-quality tea fetches better prices in the market, enhancing household income. Conversely, insufficient time spent on proper care leads to lower yields or reduced quality, limiting marketing opportunities.

Results established that the majority of respondents (74.7%) owned the land they farm, while a smaller proportion (25.3%) lease their land. This indicates that land ownership was common among the tea farmers and that land ownership status was not randomly distributed and was likely related to other factors within the study. This can be compared with Akpan *et al.* (2011) who pointed out that farmers with substantial production from larger land allocations are often better positioned to negotiate with buyers, cooperatives, or exporters. Their ability to supply large quantities may attract better prices and stable contracts, providing financial security for the household.

The study findings established that majority of the respondents 179 (60.3%) were practicing tea on a 3-8 acres land, 99 (33.3%) revealed less than 3 acres, 11 (3.7%) mentioned between 9-14 acres and 8 (2.7%) mentioned 15 acres and above. This distribution shows that most tea farmers operated on relatively small to medium-sized plots, with a minority managing larger tea plantations. This implies that the size of land dedicated to tea farming significantly impacted productivity and income levels. This is in agreement Chang (2015) who pointed out that farmers with larger plots would benefit from economies of scale, potentially leading to higher outputs and greater profits. Larger land sizes would allow for better resource allocation and management. For example, farmers with more land might have the capacity to diversify their crops, invest in better irrigation systems, or implement more advanced farming techniques.

The study findings established that majority of the respondents 129 (43.4%) had acquired less than 1,000,000 shilling annually, 116 (39.1%) had acquired between 1,000,000-5,000,000, 36 (12.1%) mentioned that they had acquired between 5,000,000-10,000,000 and 16 (5.4%) mentioned that they acquired 10,000,000 shillings and above from tea farming. This implies that a substantial portion (39.1%) of the respondents earned between 1,000,000 and 5,000,000 shillings annually. This indicates a group of farmers who were able to meet their basic needs and potentially invest modestly in improving their farming practices or household welfare. The variation in income levels suggests that while tea farming provided a stable source of income for some, it did not uniformly lead to substantial economic growth for all farmers. This disparity indicates the need for targeted interventions to help lower-income farmers increase their earnings. This is in line with Willer *et al.* (2023) who pointed out that increased income from tea marketing can be reinvested into farming activities, such as purchasing high-quality inputs, adopting better farming techniques, or expanding land under cultivation. These investments further enhance productivity and profitability, creating a positive feedback loop for welfare.

The study findings established that majority of the respondents 140 (47.1%) acquired additional source of income from small and medium business, 97 (32.7%) acquired it from livestock products and 60 (20.2%) mentioned off-farm employment. The presence of diverse income sources (small and medium businesses, livestock products, and off-farm employment) enhanced the economic resilience of the community. Diversified income streams could help households better withstand economic shocks and fluctuations in any one sector. This is in agreement with Mittei (2021) who pointed out that tea farmers are engaged in alternative sources of income especially off-farm employment to enable have diversified income for sustained livelihoods.

Social and welfare benefits of tea marketing to smallholder farmers and their households

Tea marketing benefits smallholder farmers by providing income, enabling investment in housing, education, healthcare, and nutrition, enhancing living standards, fostering financial security, and promoting community development. It also contributes to employment and economic activity, particularly for women.

Table 2: Analysis of the social and welfare benefits of tea marketing to smallholder farmers and their households

| Social and welfare benefit | Response | Frequency (N=297) | Proportion (%) |
|---|-----------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Tea marketing has increased household income | Yes | 135 | 45.5 |
| | No | 162 | 54.5 |
| I'm able to save or invest a portion of your tea income for the future | Yes | 90 | 30.3 |
| | No | 207 | 69.7 |
| I have made improvements to my housing or living conditions due to tea marketing income | Yes | 228 | 76.8 |
| | No | 69 | 23.2 |
| I have access to clean water and sanitation facilities | Yes | 121 | 40.7 |
| | No | 176 | 59.3 |
| | Yes | 135 | 45.5 |

| | | | |
|---|-----|-----|------|
| My family has better access to healthcare services due to tea marketing income | No | 162 | 54.5 |
| I'm able to invest in education for family members through tea marketing income | Yes | 90 | 30.3 |
| | No | 207 | 69.7 |
| Tea marketing has improved my access to credit for agricultural purposes | Yes | 228 | 76.8 |
| | No | 69 | 23.2 |
| I have been able to acquire additional assets or equipment for tea farming through tea marketing income | Yes | 121 | 40.7 |
| | No | 176 | 59.3 |
| Tea marketing has the potential to improve the nutritional status and food security of smallholder farming households | Yes | 86 | 29.0 |
| | No | 211 | 71.0 |
| Engagement in tea marketing has empowered women within smallholder farming households | Yes | 221 | 74.4 |
| | No | 76 | 25.6 |
| Participating in organized tea marketing channels has provided me with greater financial security | Yes | 112 | 37.7 |
| | No | 185 | 62.3 |

Source: Field data, 2024

The results indicate a mixed but largely positive impact of tea marketing on the social and economic welfare of smallholder farmers. While only 45.5% of respondents reported that tea marketing has increased their household income, a substantial majority (76.8%) have been able to improve their housing and living conditions, and a similar proportion (76.8%) reported enhanced access to credit for agricultural purposes, suggesting that tea marketing contributes more significantly to asset accumulation and financial empowerment than to immediate income gains. Women's empowerment within households is notably high, with 74.4% of respondents indicating increased decision-making power and economic independence through tea marketing, highlighting its role in promoting gender equity. However, only 30.3% of respondents reported being able to save or invest in the future, and similar proportions indicated investments in education (30.3%) and improvements in nutritional status or food security (29%), pointing to limited capacity to translate tea income into broader long-term welfare outcomes. Access to clean water and sanitation (40.7%) and acquisition of additional farming assets (40.7%) show moderate benefits, while participation in organized marketing channels providing financial security was reported by only 37.7% of respondents, reflecting potential gaps in market efficiency and outreach.

Discussion

The results indicate that a slight majority (54.5%) of respondents feel that tea marketing has not increased their household income. This suggests a disconnect between tea marketing initiatives and perceived economic benefits for most households surveyed. Conversely, 45.5% of respondents affirm that tea marketing has increased their income, suggesting that there is a segment of the population that has experienced positive financial impact. Majority response points to the need for further investigation into the reasons why tea marketing is not translating into increased incomes for many households. Factors could include ineffective marketing strategies, poor product accessibility, or insufficient consumer awareness of the benefits of tea.

For the 45.5% who reported positive effects, exploring their demographics and the specific marketing tactics that influenced them could provide insights for optimizing future marketing strategies. Despite a notable proportion of respondents who acknowledge the positive effects of tea marketing, the overarching sentiment suggests that strategies may need refinement to increase overall satisfaction and income impact, future marketing initiatives may benefit from more targeted approaches that address the specific needs and preferences of the majority of consumers. The analysis of the statement regarding improvements in housing or living conditions due to income from tea marketing reveals a positive trend among respondents.

During an interview, one of the local leaders had this to say;

“Many smallholder farmers often sell their tea through intermediaries who offer low farm-gate prices, which reduces the net income earned despite market participation. Additionally, fluctuations in global tea prices and

unstable demand patterns limit the benefits that farmers derive from marketing initiatives, making incomes unpredictable. High production costs such as labor, fertilizer, and transportation also absorb much of the revenue generated from tea sales, leaving farmers with minimal disposable income. Moreover, limited access to information and weak bargaining power prevents some farmers from fully exploiting market opportunities or participating in premium markets such as fair-trade and organic tea certification schemes

This is in line with Bermúdez et al. (2024) who pointed out that the disparities in educational opportunities for children of tea farmers, particularly in remote rural areas. Limited access to quality education and healthcare perpetuates intergenerational cycles of poverty.

A substantial majority (76.8%) of respondents indicate that they have made improvements to their housing or living conditions as a result of income generated from tea marketing. This suggests that tea marketing has a significant positive impact on the quality of life for a large segment of the population. The high percentage reflects a strong correlation between tea marketing income and enhancements in living standards, indicating that the financial benefits derived from tea marketing are being effectively utilized for housing improvements. During an interview one of the agriculture extension workers had this to say;

“Housing investments are often a priority for rural families when disposable income becomes available, as improved shelter directly enhances social status, family well-being, and security. This result suggests that, while tea marketing may not always provide sufficient resources for day-to-day income expansion, it has enabled farmers to accumulate long-term assets. Such improvements may be attributed to periodic lump-sum payments from cooperative societies, dividends, or fair-trade premiums, which households tend to channel into durable investments rather than short-term consumption”

This is in line with Deka et al. (2022) who pointed out that Income from tea marketing provides farmers with the financial capacity to invest in better housing infrastructure, such as constructing permanent homes, improving sanitation facilities, or acquiring essential amenities like electricity and clean water. These upgrades enhance the quality of life by providing safer and more comfortable living environments, reducing health risks associated with substandard housing.

The high percentage reflects a strong correlation between tea marketing income and enhancements in living standards, indicating that the financial benefits derived from tea marketing are being effectively utilized for housing improvements. The results highlight the effectiveness of tea marketing in generating income that can be reinvested into essential aspects of life, such as housing. This could encourage marketers to continue or expand their efforts, knowing that their strategies yield tangible benefits for consumers. The data suggests that tea marketing not only contributes to financial gains but also plays a crucial role in enhancing the living conditions of respondents. This positive feedback loop can be leveraged to promote tea products more effectively. This is in line with Zheng et al. (2022) who pointed out that participation in organized tea marketing channels leads to higher prices for tea produce, ultimately lifting farmers out of poverty. The additional income generated from marketing activities enables these households to access basic necessities such as food, healthcare, and education.

The impact of tea marketing on access to credit for agricultural purposes reveals significant insights into the financial dynamics within the agricultural sector. A notable majority (76.8%) of respondents indicate that tea marketing has improved their access to credit for agricultural purposes. This suggests a strong positive correlation between tea marketing initiatives and the financial opportunities available to farmers and agricultural workers. The high percentage reflects that tea marketing not only contributes to income generation but also enhances the financial credibility and borrowing capacity of individuals involved in the agricultural sector. During an interview one of the local leaders had this to say;

“Access to credit is critical for smallholder farmers, as it enables them to purchase inputs such as fertilizers, seedlings, and irrigation equipment, ultimately improving productivity and farm profitability. Tea marketing, particularly when facilitated through cooperatives or marketing associations, often strengthens farmers’ credibility

with financial institutions by providing a regular and verifiable income stream, which serves as collateral or evidence of repayment capacity”

This can be compared with Islam *et al.* (2022) who pointed out that participating in organized tea marketing channels can provide smallholder farmers with greater financial security. Collective marketing allows farmers to negotiate better prices and terms with buyers, reducing their vulnerability to market fluctuations. By diversifying their income streams through tea marketing, households become more resilient to various economic risks.

Regarding the empowerment of women within smallholder farming households through engagement in tea marketing reveals important insights into gender dynamics and economic development. A significant majority (74.4%) of respondents indicate that engagement in tea marketing has empowered women within smallholder farming households. This suggests that tea marketing initiatives are positively influencing gender roles and economic participation in these communities. During an interview one of the local leaders had this to say;

“Empowerment encompasses enhanced decision-making power, control over household income, participation in cooperative activities, and access to financial resources. Tea marketing provides women with opportunities to contribute economically, which can shift traditional household dynamics by increasing their influence in financial and farm-management decisions.”

This is in line with Kakooza *et al.* (2021) who pointed out that engagement in tea marketing has been shown to empower women within smallholder farming households. Women's involvement in marketing activities enhances their decision-making power and economic independence. Tea marketing cooperatives and associations can provide platforms for women to access credit and training, promoting gender equality within these communities. The high percentage reflects a strong recognition of the role that tea marketing plays in enhancing women's status, decision-making power, and economic independence within their households. The results imply that tea marketing serves as a vehicle for women's empowerment, providing them with opportunities to generate income, participate in economic activities, and contribute to household decision-making processes. Empowering women in smallholder farming households can lead to broader social and economic benefits, including improved family welfare, education for children, and enhanced community development. During an interview one of the local leaders had this to say;

“Tea marketing empowers women by providing them with financial and farming decisions, promoting gender equity and enhancing their participation in household affairs. This empowerment leads to improved education, health, and nutritional outcomes for children and other household members, further strengthening their social and economic agency”

This is agreement with Arhin *et al.* (2022) who pointed out that tea farming is a significant source of income for many households in tea-producing regions. Research indicates that the income of tea farmers is influenced by various factors, including market prices, productivity, and access to markets. The socioeconomic status of tea farmers is often closely tied to the economic viability of their tea cultivation practices.

The data suggests that tea marketing not only contributes to economic growth but also plays a crucial role in promoting gender equality and empowering women in agricultural settings, therefore the analysis indicates that engagement in tea marketing has a substantial positive effect on empowering women within smallholder farming households, highlighting the importance of gender-inclusive strategies in agricultural marketing and development as mentioned by 74.4% of the respondents. During an interview one of the agriculture extension workers had this to say;

“Gender-inclusive strategies in agricultural marketing enhance household welfare and community development by allowing women to participate in income-generating activities like tea production, highlighting the need for policies supporting equitable participation”

This can be compared with Ma *et al.* (2022) who pointed out that tea marketing, as a structured and profitable enterprise, provides women with the opportunity to generate independent income, access financial resources, and

gain more decision-making power within the household. This economic empowerment also helps women invest in their personal development, healthcare, and education, enhancing their social status and overall well-being.

Conclusion

The study found that tea marketing significantly improves the social and economic welfare of smallholder farmers in Buhweju District, including housing improvements, agricultural credit access, and women's empowerment. However, its impact is uneven due to factors like market access, fluctuating prices, and farm size. Targeted interventions are needed to maximize benefits.

Recommendations.

Authorities and cooperatives should facilitate better access to local and regional tea markets and implement mechanisms to stabilize tea prices, ensuring that smallholder farmers can achieve consistent and fair income from their produce.

Farmers should be supported with training in financial management and investment strategies to enable them to save, reinvest, and diversify income sources, maximizing the socio-economic benefits of tea marketing.

Programs should be developed to increase women's participation in marketing, credit access, and decision-making, enhancing gender equality and household welfare.

Investments in road networks, storage facilities, and agricultural extension services should be prioritized to improve production efficiency, reduce post-harvest losses, and provide technical guidance for sustainable tea farming and marketing practices.

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