

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE ACCESSIBILITY OF OPINION LEADERS IN LESOTHO

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ABSTRACT

Against the background of the importance of fellow farmers as the most frequent source of information, opinion leaders deserve special attention. This study is focused on accessibility, which, together with competence, is probably one of the most important dimensions of opinion leadership.. The study was conducted in a typical rural district where 200 maize farmers were randomly selected and their opinion leaders identified by means of sociometric methods with the number of nominations as the major indicator of degree of influence or strength of opinion leadership. The findings reveal that socio-psychological accessibility is not a serious constraint in the diffusion of innovations through opinion leaders, because the large majority (more than 80 percent) have an assessed accessibility of high or very high. More critical is the physical accessibility since 80 to 86 percent of the opinion leaders consulted were within a radius of 2 km. Factors affecting the accessibility are gender and friendship, while variables like education and status had no influence, which, in a way, represents further evidence that accessibility is not a constraint as far as opinion leadership is concerned.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM

An extension strategy that focuses on certain “influentials” in the community, in the assumption that their influence will come to bear in the further diffusion to and influence on the other members of the target

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audience, makes sense, especially if, according to Van den Ban (1981), personal influence is called for and large numbers or a wide change agent/client ratio make it difficult to reach out to all the clients. This is typically the case in many developing countries where there is usually a shortage of extension workers to facilitate a quick dissemination of agricultural messages. In this context it is fair to assume that the use of influential farmers or opinion leaders can significantly contribute towards an increased diffusion effect.

For opinion leadership to be functional and effective, requires a knowledge gradient. Only if the nominee (opinion leader) is perceived to have some additional or superior knowledge, will it be worthwhile for the nominator (follower) to consult the so-called opinion leader. However, even if these conditions do exist, it will come to no avail unless there is accessibility between the two individuals.

Accessibility can have a physical and a socio-psychological dimension (Rogers, 1983). Perhaps the most common form of the physical dimension is geographical distance and the assumption is that accessibility is inversely proportionate to distance. Particular among the resource-poor farmers in rural Africa this can be a serious constraint in the flow of information. Indications are that the psychological or social accessibility can be even more critical, but there is as yet no clear pattern. Düvel (1996) found the psycho-sociological accessibility to be very critical among commercial white farmers in South Africa, but results from Uganda (Adupa & Düvel, 1999) seemed to indicate that accessibility was not a serious constraint.

With so little known about accessibility the focus of this study is on the nature and status of accessibility in Lesotho and on the factors affecting it. The underlying hypotheses are

- that opinion leadership is largely a function of accessibility, and
- that the accessibility is influenced by a number of personal and environmental factors.

2. METHODOLOGY

A 20 percent random sample comprising 200 households was drawn by list sampling in the Qeme area and included in the survey. The choice

of the survey area was based on representing a typical rural community with a high dependence on agriculture and on its proximity to Maseru and easy access. The latter was an important consideration in view of limited financial resources available for the research. This also motivated the restriction of the survey to maize farming, which is the most important commodity in Lesotho.

The semi-structured questionnaire was validated through perusal by a panel of experts and extensively pre-tested before administered by trained interviewers, who were closely monitored by the researcher.

The sociometric method of opinion leadership identification was used and this led to an identification of 78 opinion leaders among the 200 respondents³ (nominated respondents) and a further 312 beyond the original sample of 200 respondents (nominated non-respondents). Nominated non-respondents were included in the study as a pathway for establishing the presence of opinion leaders, and their degree of opinion leadership as reflected by the number of nominations each received. This was done randomly by the respondents, which means that an individual could be nominated more than once, thus indicating the degree of opinion leadership.

3. FINDINGS

The expectation that opinion leadership is a function of accessibility was tested in respect of both the psychic and physical accessibility.

3.1 Socio-psychological accessibility

The assessment of socio-psychological or psychic accessibility of opinion leaders gives an understanding of the social proximity of individuals as far as exchange of information is concerned. Social proximity is interpreted by Rogers & Kincaid (1981) as an indicator of least effort. For an individual to be an opinion leader, he or she has to be approached by individuals willing to seek his/her advice. The willingness to do this varies in degrees between individuals, and may be experienced to be very easy or more difficult.

³ 200 individuals with each representing a household.

Figure 1 gives an indication of the degree of accessibility and its relationship with opinion leadership. As far as the general level of accessibility is concerned, it does not appear to present any problem, since the large majority have a high or very high accessibility. The total percentages of respondents with a high and very high accessibility are 47.5 and 43% respectively. This rather skew distribution or limited variation regarding accessibility, does not allow for a clear analysis of its relationship with opinion leadership. It is noteworthy that 97.6 percent of the strongest opinion leaders (> three nominations) are found in the categories of high and very high accessibility. However, there is no clear relationship and the only permissible conclusion is that socio-psychological accessibility is not a limiting factor in the Lesotho situation.

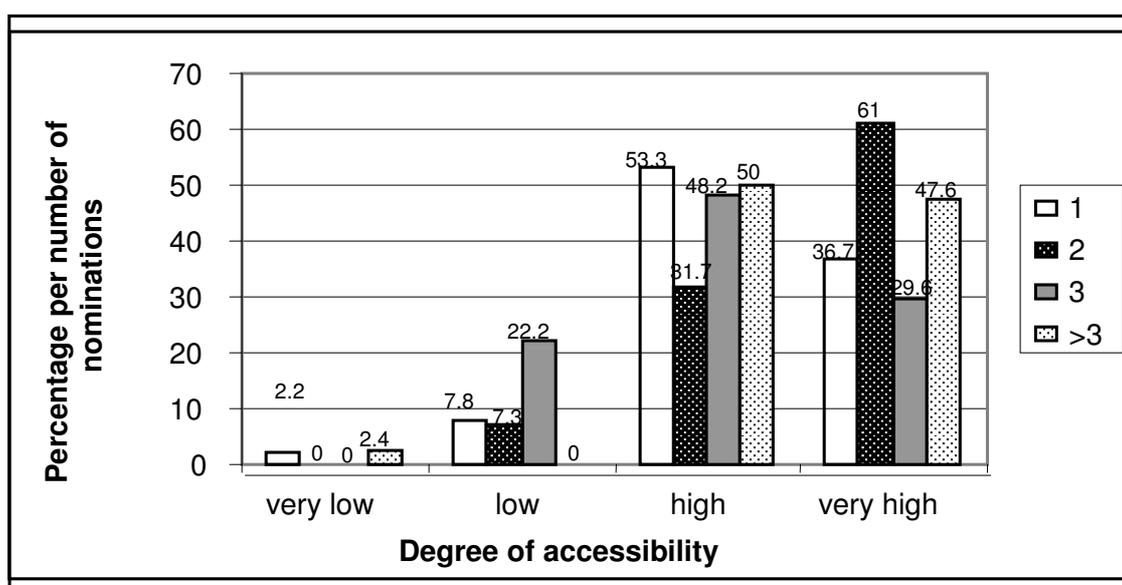


Figure 1: Percentage distribution of opinion leaders according to their degree of psychic accessibility and their strength of opinion leadership (number of nominations)

3.2 Physical accessibility

Rogers and Kincaid (1981) are of the opinion that individuals form network links that require the least effort. People in the immediate environment are, therefore, likely to have more influence than those who are far, because they are physically more accessible when their

advice is needed. Consequently it can be assumed that most opinion leaders are in relatively close proximity of those who consult them.

The relationship between strength of opinion leadership (number of nominations) and consultation proximity (distance between follower and opinion leader) is illustrated in Figure 2.

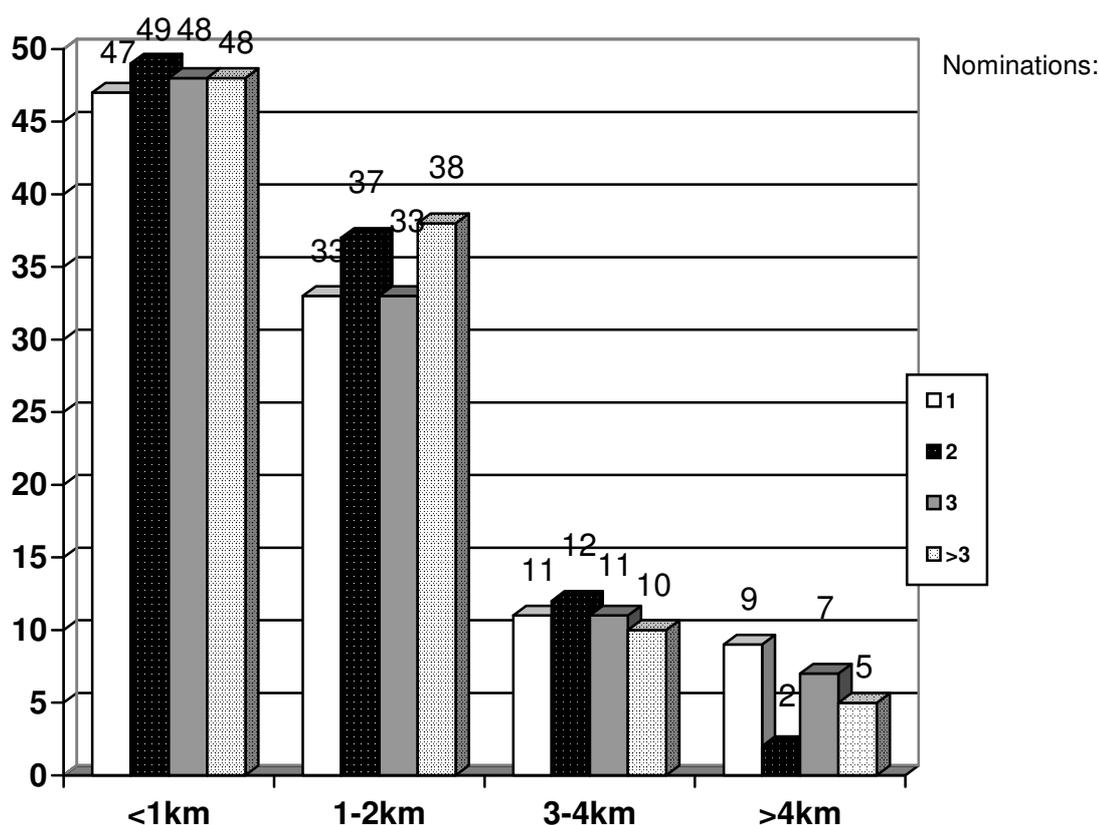


Figure 2: Percentage distribution of opinion leaders according to strength of opinion leadership (number of nominations) and consultation proximity

In all cases, that is as far as every opinion leadership category is concerned, there is an almost linear decrease in consultations with increasing distance. This seems to indicate that physical accessibility is an important factor in opinion leadership relationships and that distance can be an important constraint. This is emphasised by the fact that between 80 and 86 percent of the opinion leaders consulted were within a radius of 2km or less.

3.3 Factors influencing accessibility

3.3.1 Status

Westermarck (1981) is of the opinion that farmers may not always seek information from those farmers whose advice they value most. A contributing factor could be physical distance. As far as psychic accessibility is concerned, it was hypothesised that status could be an important contributing factor. If socio-economic status has an influence on socio-economic status, it could be expected that the rate of consultation is higher within the same status category, or that farmers would tend to consult more opinion leaders in their own status category rather than those with a significantly higher status. Accessibility in relation to social status is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Frequency distribution of opinion leaders according to their assessed status level and degree of accessibility

Degree of accessibility	Frequency distribution per status level							
	Lower		Same		Higher		Totals	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	N	%*
Very low (1)	1	4.3	0	0	2	3.5	3	1.5
Low (2)	3	13.0	11	9.2	2	3.5	16	8.0
High (3)	11	47.8	56	46.7	28	49.1	95	47.5
Very high (4)	8	34.8	53	44.2	25	43.9	86	43.0
Totals	23	11.5	120	60.0	57	28.5	200	100
Weighted Mean	3.1		3.4		3.3		3.3	

$$\chi^2 = 7.408, df = 6, p = 0.285 \quad r = 0.061 \quad p = 0.387$$

The distribution over the three status categories is very similar in all three leadership categories ($\chi^2 = 7.408$, $df = 6$, $p = 0.285$). This as well as the insignificant correlation ($r = 0.061$; $p = 0.387$) bears evidence of the fact that there is no relationship between accessibility and status. In every status category between 80 and 90 percent have a high accessibility. Although these findings provide no supportive evidence regarding the generally accepted relationship between status and accessibility or opinion leadership (Van den Ban, 1981) they don't refute them either. Again it is the lack of variation in accessibility that does not permit a conclusion regarding the mentioned relationship. The fact that status is ostensibly not related to accessibility and opinion

leadership in the Lesotho culture can be attributed to the fact that accessibility is not a constraint. Evidence of this is that more than 90 percent of the opinion leaders were assessed to have a high or very high accessibility.

3.3.2 Gender

Katz & Lazarsfeld reported in 1966 that females always look to males for advice. This could still be true, especially in agricultural matters, because in most African cultures, fields belong to males. The degree of accessibility according to gender is summarized in Figure 3 below.

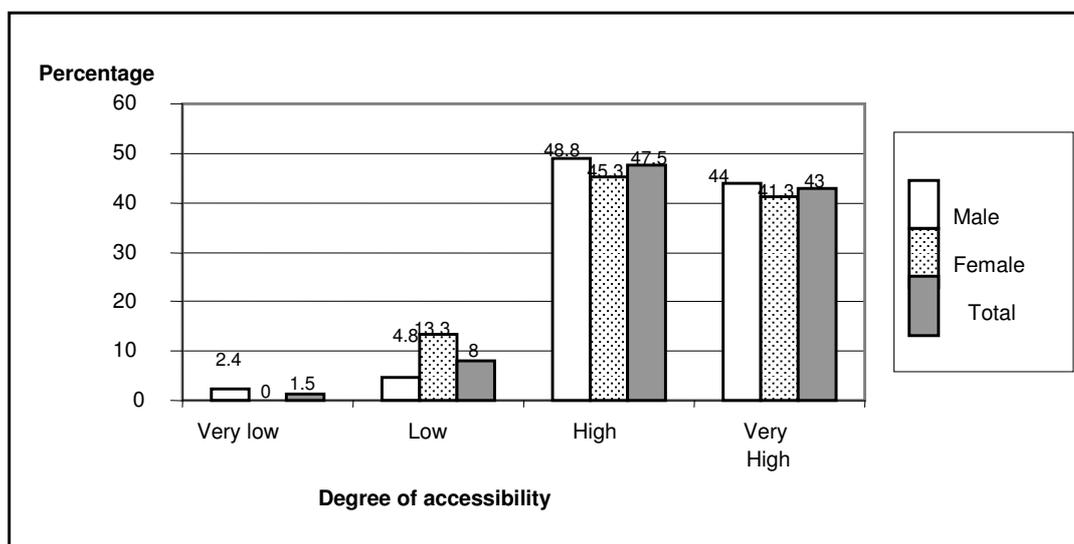


Figure 3: The percentage distribution of opinion leaders according to accessibility and gender

In spite of the skew distribution or limited variation regarding accessibility, it does seem as if males are slightly more accessible than females. 92 percent of the males as opposed to 86 percent of the females have a high or very high accessibility, while the females have a percentage majority in the low and very low accessibility categories.

Figure 4 investigates the degree to which cross-gender consultation takes place.

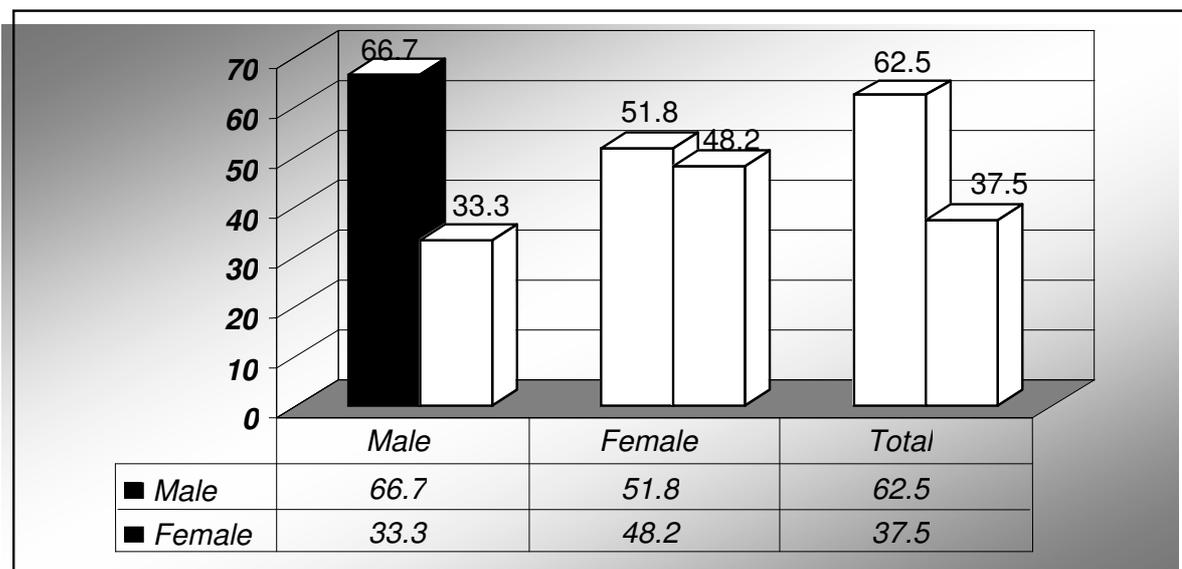


Figure 4: Percentage consultations by gender

In general male farmers seem to be consulted more than female farmers. For example 62.5 percent of the individuals consulted were males, while 37,5 percent were females. However, there is a clear preference among female farmers to consult female opinion leaders. This is evident from the fact that 48.2 percent of the respondents consulting female opinion leaders were females , while the percentage female farmers consulting male opinion leaders was only 33.3 percent.

These findings emphasise the necessity of extension to focus knowledge support on female opinion leaders in order to promote the diffusion process among the many female farmers.

3.3.3. Friendship

Friendship epitomises accessibility and consequently it is expected that friendship will significantly contribute towards accessibility, or that the accessibility will be particularly high between friends or where there is a friend relationship.

The influence of friendship on accessibility is assessed by comparing the accessibility with different relationships, namely fellow farmers, acquaintances and friends (See Figure 5).

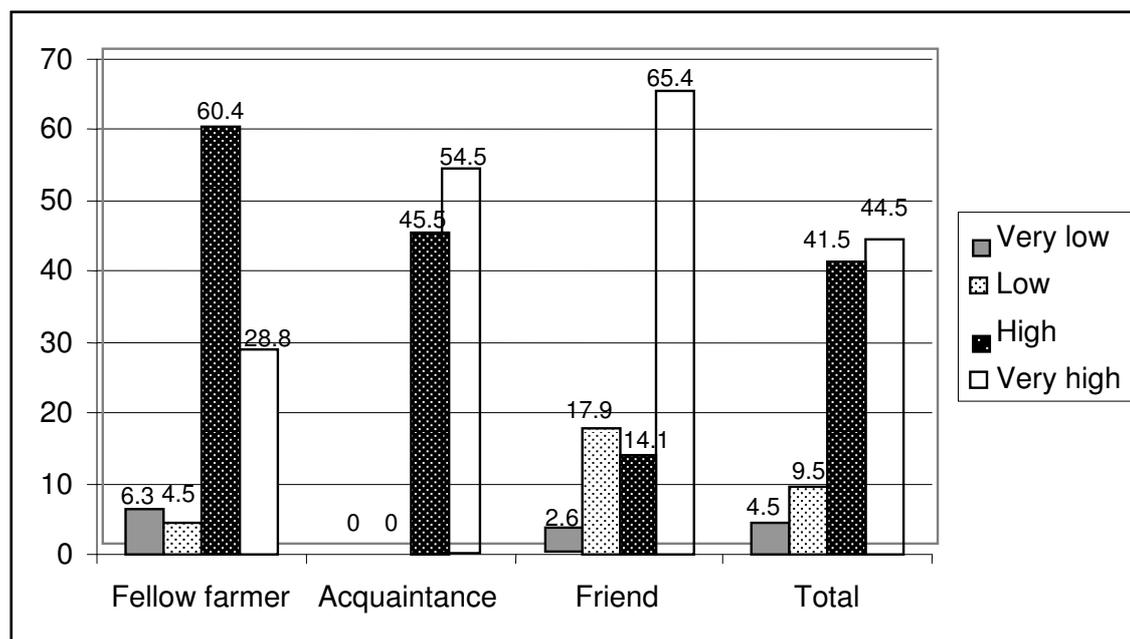


Figure 5: Distribution of opinion leaders according to the degree of accessibility and type of relationship

The histogram presentation of findings in Figure 5, gives no clear indication of the influence of friendship. This can again be attributed to the limited variation regarding accessibility, since 86 percent of opinion leaders were assessed to have a high or very high accessibility. Using only the very high accessibility as criterion, there is a linear increase in accessibility from fellow farmers to acquaintances to friends. However, based on weighted values, the difference between the accessibility of acquaintances and friends is minimal; in fact the former group has a higher overall accessibility.

Unfortunately no provision was made for opinion leaders that were members of the respondents' families or extended families, with the result that the majority of respondents could have associated them with acquaintances. This could provide an explanation for the high accessibility of the acquaintance category and even suggest that a main source of influence or opinion leadership emanates from within the family or extended family. This could have far-reaching implications for extension and needs to be verified and tested in further research.

3.3.4 Education

The level of education can be expected to have an influence on who is selected for consultation, because education is associated with more knowledge and competence. The findings regarding the relationship between qualification (level of education) and accessibility are summarized in Figure 6. The level of education was not determined in absolute terms but assessed by the respondents relative to their (the respondents) own level of education.

The findings in Figure 6 give no indication of a relationship between level of education and accessibility. This can be concluded from the fact that the opinion leaders with a lower, similar and higher level of education than that of the respondents have all more or less the same accessibility. The phenomenon that a difference in the level of education has no bearing on the accessibility is further evidence in support of the conclusion that the overall accessibility is high and consequently does not represent a constraint.

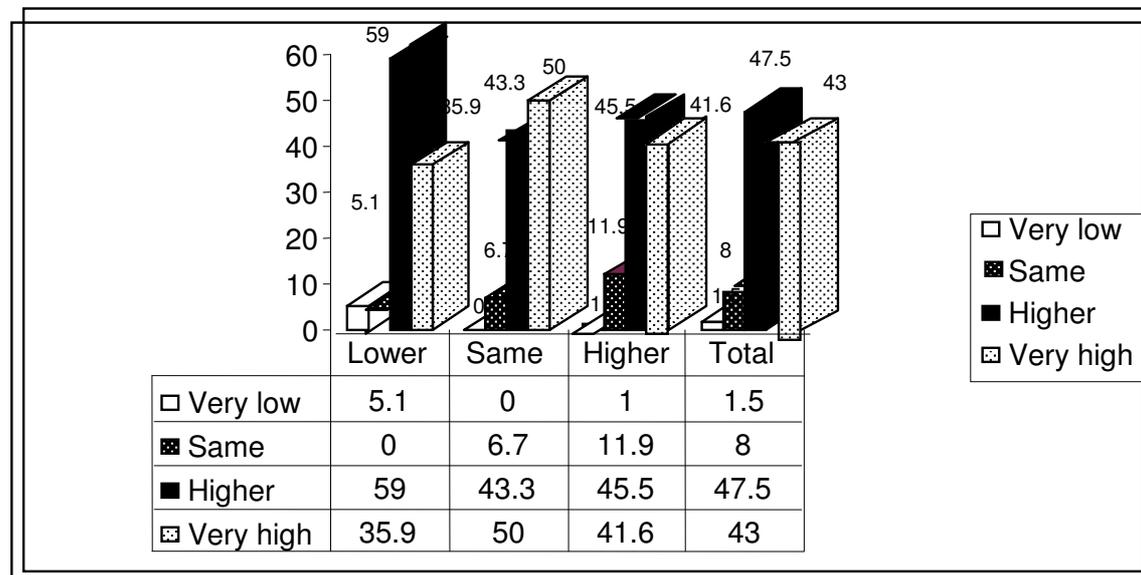


Figure 6: Percentage distribution of opinion leaders according to assessed accessibility and relative level of education

4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings confirm the overall importance of opinion leadership and give some valuable insights into the phenomenon of opinion leadership

in Lesotho. As a pilot study the findings do not yet justify large scale generalisations, but the similarity with research findings from other parts of Africa does give some clear tendencies, which can help in a more effective utilisation of opinion leaders.

An important finding in this regard is that socio-psychological accessibility or inaccessibility is not an important constraint. More than 90 percent of the opinion leaders were assessed as highly or very highly accessible. This limited variation in terms of accessibility prevented a clear analysis of the real contribution of other factors influencing the accessibility. It is nevertheless safe to conclude that education and status, which are normally important considerations in accessibility.

Women still do not feature very prominently as opinion leaders, but their influence is already significantly stronger than was found in Uganda (Adupa & Düvel, 1999). If this difference is due to time rather than situational variation the continuous emancipation of the women is likely to erase the differences still evident among the current rural population. However in view of the current dominance of male opinion leaders, but the distinctive preference of female farmers to consult fellow female farmers, purposeful knowledge support aimed at female farmers is still essential.

A noteworthy observation, although not sufficiently verified yet, is that the most prominent influence (opinion leadership) is operative within families or extended families. Indications of this are the very high accessibility of acquaintances and also the fact that the large majority of opinion leaders (80-86 percent) consulted were within a radius of less than two kilometres.

While the socio-psychological accessibility is critical but physical accessibility (distances) not a serious concern in most western cultures, the opposite appears to apply in Africa. It seems that in African cultures the likelihood of socio-psychological inaccessibility can almost be ignored, while all the more emphasis needs to be placed on strategies that create knowledge gradients over short distances and perhaps even within families and extended families. The so-called trickle-down effect is not likely to occur to a significant degree in rural Africa, but more supportive research is essential.

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