

Impact of subsidized drying floors on changes of visual quality parameters of spices - farmer attitudes and trader responses

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For exportable products such as spices, extrinsic quality is vitally important because the ultimate consumers believe the product must be safe to eat and free from all contaminants. Major quality criteria considered in spices are the moisture content, appearance, presence of extraneous matter, microbes and micro-toxins, heavy metals and pesticide residues. The quality of spice imports have regulated in all major consuming countries by putting stringent specifications for all above parameters. The quality deterioration is largely due to the unhygienic handling and processing practices. Spice farmers use different type of drying floors, ranging from gunny bags to floors of public roads, and many are unsuitable and unhygienic. The Department of Export Agriculture (DEA) has implemented an assistance scheme for decades to upgrade the drying process and this study tried to assess the performance of this scheme.

Farmers who constructed drying floors with the assistance from the DEA were interviewed with a structured questionnaire. Sample contained 207 purposely selected recipients from 8 spice growing districts. Farmer attitudes on the changes of visual quality improvements and responses they received from immediate traders were asked and the quality parameters considered were product color, moistness, mould growth, presence of extraneous matter, dead or live insects and the presence of mammalian fecal matter.

Findings revealed that about 70% of farmers had understood the improvement of visual quality of spices due to new drying method but only 42% of traders had that realization. Traders may have purposely neglected to notice such improvement in fear of request of higher prices by farmers and others may not have been aware of that. Also about 30% recipients had no idea about any quality improvement in products. Habit of product grading, a prime objective of the assistance scheme, has not been improved significantly mainly because of the inadequate premiums for better grades and unawareness of farmers. The market links have improved by around 15% with shifting sales from petty traders and village collectors to buyers in towns and whole sale buyers. Majority of recipients use the drying facility for multi purposes (69%) and difficulty in collecting at the rainy days was reported as the major difficulty experienced in using.

Study revealed that farmers have positive attitudes towards the benefits of improved processing methods but the acknowledgement they get from traders is not impressive.