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Exacting standards

High value horticultural export crops have been one of the major agricultural success stories out of Africa in recent years. The Kenyans, with the right climate, cheap labour, and good market access in terms of regular flights, have been particularly successful at growing French beans, mangetout and baby corn for the European market. A feature that is perhaps surprising is that small scale growers, devoting between half to one hectare to horticultural export crops, have been able to enjoy a share of the business. There have been as many as 250,000 households involved in horticulture in Kenya, about 6,000 in Zimbabwe and, in Zambia, which is a relative newcomer, there are already 1,000 households and the number is growing rapidly.

The exporting companies are sometimes accused of exploiting the small scale growers who, individually, would be unable to access the market. As with any successful business, there are advantages to both sides. Taking Zambia as an example, a household that is not involved in horticulture may have an annual income of about US$95 whereas a household that is growing a hectare of baby corn may earn between US$400-600 per crop. If they are lucky with the season's weather, they may get two to three crops a year. But why are the export companies prepared to work with small scale growers when it would be logical to suppose they would prefer to deal with fewer, larger growers? One reason is that individual households have shown that they have a high personal commitment to quality and that this is only possible when producing on a small area. It is an irony that those most committed to meeting quality standards are least able to demonstrate their compliance.

But all is not well. In 1997, some 70% of Kenya's export earnings from high value horticulture was supplied by small scale growers. By 2000, this had fallen to 30%. In 2002, 1,600 growers lost their contracts. The major reason for this is that within Europe and the United States there are increasing concerns over food safety. New, more rigorous legislation has been put in place and growers must of course comply. The relevant international WTO standards are the SPS (Sanitary and Phytosanitary) and TBT (Technical Barriers to Trade) agreements. The EU and US have stricter controls in place. European supermarkets, individually, have their own codes and, collectively, 17 major European supermarkets have formed a group and developed a code called EUREP-GAP (European Retailers Protocol for Good Agricultural Practice). This covers ethical practices such as worker welfare and environmental issues, as well as food safety. Whereas the SPS agreement requires 'equivalence of risk outcome', EUREP-GAP requires 'equivalence of system'. This presents a problem to growers who may be able to produce a safe product using their own systems (equivalence of risk outcome), but cannot hope to be able to reproduce an exact equivalence of system. This is why 1,600 Kenyan growers lost their contracts virtually overnight. They were told that because the European supermarket required 100% compliance by January 2003, and it was obvious they would be unable to comply, the product would in future be sourced from big commercial growers.

Many Europeans imagine that small scale growers will have a problem with food safety assurance but this is like saying 'guilty until proven innocent'. Studies in Kenya, Zimbabwe and Zambia by the Natural Resources Institute (NRI) show that food safety hazards on small farms are actually very low in most cases and that it is not true to say that they have big

pesticide or micro-biological problems. Potential risks certainly exist but these are mostly due to lack of access to information. Farmers would adopt safer practices if they knew what they were and some may be very simple. In Kenya, for example, NRI found that people were grading French beans on the ground. Although the export company had provided a shed to protect the workers - and the beans - from the rain, the shed had no walls and no seats. NRI was able to reduce the *E.coli* contamination by 60-70% simply by putting in rough wooden tables and a bench to sit on. Of course not all food safety hazards are so easy to deal with.

One of the major difficulties facing small scale growers in Africa is that the protocols being applied by EUREP-GAP and others have been designed for European conditions. Pesticide use is tightly controlled by standards which state not only which chemicals are permitted but the rate of application in terms of so many kg to so much fluid per hectare. A small scale grower in Kenya or Zambia does not calculate his land in terms of hectares and the protocols need to be adapted to accept this and try to ensure equivalence of risk outcome. However, if a grower applies pesticides by dipping a bunch of twigs into a bucket and flicking the liquid over the crops, he is not going to be able to keep his place in the export market even if his crops are well within the maximum residue levels allowed.

Traceability and auditing are another hurdle for small scale growers. EUREP-GAP requires their growers to have an annual farm audit. An audit costs about £300, an insignificant sum for a European grower but, for a grower in Ghana for example, this will absorb perhaps 70% of his profit. At the present time there is no alternative. What is needed - and this is where NRI is working - is an auditing system which is appropriate to the needs of small scale growers in Africa and acceptable to all parties.

The UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID) is working through its Crop Post Harvest Programme at NRI to develop partnerships throughout the chain to tackle some of these issues. Concentrating on Zambia and Zimbabwe, a number of small scale growers have signed up to work with the project for two years. The export companies through whom they are selling are also part of the team; Agriflora in Zambia and Hortico in Zimbabwe. The government is involved through community health workers, many of whom are subsidized by the commercial companies, and through the extension service where it has the capacity and commitment to do the job. Training is an important element and a partnership has been established with two colleges in Zambia and Zimbabwe, both of which teach horticulture. Taking a lead role in the major area of research and training in Zambia is NZTT, a government/private sector partnership and, in Zimbabwe, the Agricultural Ethics Assurance Association. As improved management and auditing systems are developed, training people who can pass on that knowledge becomes critical. Laboratory testing in the two countries has generally been far from satisfactory and commercial export companies prefer to send samples to Europe for analysis. Efforts are being made to restore both infrastructure and capacity - and industry confidence - in the National Institute for Scientific and Industrial Research near Lusaka airport and with what used to be the Tobacco Research Board, and the government research laboratory, in Zimbabwe. SADC is also involved as a partner, bringing a regional perspective and outreach for the systems being developed. The European side is of course equally important and links are being sought with one of the major importing companies and with supermarkets who buy from the farmers in Zambia and Zimbabwe. Discussions are scheduled with EUREP-GAP and other European institutions such as COLEACP.

It is important to remember that growing horticultural export crops is not always a golden opportunity. If there is a strong local market for horticultural crops, growers will probably be wise to concentrate on supplying to that rather than trying to comply with international food safety standards. And no small scale grower should consider turning over all his land to export crops and, indeed, would not do so. The priority will always be crops for the household to eat, crops for the local market and only then a small area for horticultural export crops. But what the future holds for small scale growers remains to be seen.

For further information, contact NRI www.nri.org or www.cphp.uk.com

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