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The agricultural sector in Africa has long faced a plethora of challenges, whether they be political, economic, logistical or technical in nature. Over the past 20 years, the sector has found itself handicapped by limited investment and capital due to restricted access to credit, while development has been hampered by a lack of access to land, poor quality agricultural inputs and insufficient knowledge of good agricultural practices among small-scale producers. In addition, inadequate storage and road infrastructure have hampered the ability of exporters to protect the quality of their produce during transportation.

farmers undoubtedly require assistance, including from groups such as COLEACP, a not-for-profit interprofessional association that represents and defends the collective interests of African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) exporters and producers of fruit, vegetables, flowers and plants. The PIP Programme, a technical assistance programme funded by the European Development Fund and managed by COLEACP, is designed to help ACP producers and exporters overcome the difficulties they face in accessing European markets. It addresses EU regulations, including pesticide maximum residue limits, food hygiene, and traceability, and assists ACP suppliers in meeting the private standards and requirements demanded by European buyers.

"In the case of producer groups, or cooperatives, PIP support can include

and quality against long-standing producers and exporters, while at the same time meeting the standards demanded by industry. Maintaining small-scale growers within supply chains is a particular challenge and requires well structured and efficiently managed producer organisations and outgrower schemes."

Given such obstacles, it is tempting to wonder why African exporters in general remain so committed to the European market, particularly during the current slowdown brought about by the recession. Jeremy Knops, in charge of market access issues for PIP, explains that there is more to this than just the historical links between Europe and Africa.

"The heterogeneity of the European market (such as between western Europe and eastern Europe) and the emergence of different niche markets in

Africa faces up to the challenge

Despite countless obstacles that continue to hamper development of the agricultural sector in Africa, the future appears highly promising for many of the continent's growers, thanks in part to the work being done by groups like COLEACP

And there are more. New EU food safety regulations may affect the future availability of plant protection products, while growing concern over climate change is increasing attention on the issue of food miles, with many European supermarkets now labelling airfreighted produce and promoting "buy local" campaigns. Furthermore, consumers are becoming more interested in a product's social impact, with fair, ethical and sustainable trade a growing priority.

However, numerous opportunities equally exist for exporters in Africa. The emergence of supermarkets as the major buying force in Europe has made tropical crops like mangoes and pineapples mainstream. And with the trend for heightened convenience growing throughout Europe, exporters are increasingly able to add value through sorting, cutting, chopping and packing their produce. Such processing functions, however, require heavy investment.

With such challenges ahead, African

activities such as traceability and record-keeping, and training on a range of topics relevant to food safety, environmental protection and ethical production," says Guy Stinglhamber, director of PIP and the COLEACP Brussels office. "Support to producer and export companies can include activities such as the establishment of systems for food safety, traceability and integrated pest management, as well as in-house training programmes for staff and outgrowers."

With private standards becoming increasingly common, exporters require complex quality and management assurance systems that ensure full traceability and food safety throughout the supply chain. Since compliance and certification costs are high, such a system tends to favour the larger scale businesses over the small and medium size enterprises, according to Mr Stinglhamber.

"New entrants to the export market therefore face major challenges," he tells Trade Africa. "They must compete on cost

response to evolving consumer demands, including organic and fair trade, offer new and different opportunities for African farmers," he says. "The challenge, of course, is to enable them to tap into these new markets. As long as ACP produce remains competitive on price and quality on the European market, Europe will remain attractive for African farmers."

Mr Knops reveals that an increasing number of PIP beneficiaries are interested in converting to organic. Reasons for conversion include the higher prices gained for organic produce; the high growth rate for this niche market in recent years; the number of production sites, particularly among smallholders, that naturally produce according to organic principles; growing interest from buyers; and farmers' desire to promote environmentally friendly production techniques.

Many companies are also interested in fair trade, he says, but lack the necessary information and tools to make an informed decision. "Finding niche markets where



labour-intensive crops have natural comparative advantages could contribute to a sustainable growth strategy for the horticulture industry in Africa," he continues. "Niche markets such as the fair trade and organic sectors offer business opportunities for producers and exporters in developing countries. However, careful business planning is needed as these markets are still relatively small compared to conventional produce and, in some cases, exposed to oversupply. Organic and fair trade products also still have to meet the same stringent EU market requirements."

As awareness over the environmental impact of food began increasing in Europe during the 1990s, African farmers found themselves battling against the concept of food miles, with retailers reacting to growing concerns about climate change by pledging to source more food locally and introducing labels for airfreighted produce. However, simply looking at the CO₂ emissions caused by the transportation alone neglected the fact that counter-seasonal products grown locally were often less environmentally friendly than their imported equivalents, including transportation.

"The environmental impacts for the transportation of imported produce were compared to those of other industrial and daily activities in Europe, which highlighted their relatively low contribution to a country's total greenhouse gas emissions," explains Mr Knops. "Finally, the development impacts of agricultural export sectors for developing countries were

emphasised and the idea of 'fair miles' instead of 'food miles' started to gain some support.

"PIP's action under the second phase includes support to producers in sustainable farming practices, good carbon practices and water management. Additionally, crop protection technologies are being developed and promoted that rely on the rational use of pesticides and leave minimal pesticide residues."

Through PIP and also EDES, a programme that promotes interaction between public authorities and food businesses, COLEACP intends to continue encouraging its members and other private sector players to ensure that the horticultural trade contributes to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, in other words poverty alleviation, food security and environmental protection.

"The development of the horticultural industry in Africa should be led by the private sector," resumes Mr Stinghambor. "However, governments have a key role to play in enabling this development through infrastructural improvements and favourable macro-economic policies for foreign direct investments.

"COLEACP pleads for a sustainable development of the horticultural industry where social, economic and environmental concerns are tackled in order to preserve the role it plays in alleviating poverty and fostering economic development throughout the ACP region."