

COLEACP : "Sustainable agriculture is the trend to follow"

Horticultural exports from African countries have a role to play. Suppliers and buyers of fruit and vegetables must therefore collaborate and work side by side.

Environmental degradation on earth is reaching the tipping point of no return. Experts around the world expect the human population to grow and reach 9 billion by 2050. As our society witnesses year after year the devastating consequences of food shortages, malnutrition and famines, the world will need to produce more food with less resources⁽¹⁾. Ironically, most of the populations that are hungry are part of the food supply system today⁽²⁾. The need to increase productivity rates while preserving natural resources and habitats will imply radical changes in agricultural practices simply because "farming is the single largest threat to biodiversity and the ecosystem functions of any single human activity around the world"⁽³⁾. New business opportunities for countries interested in investing in non-traditional export crops will need to place the potential environmental burden on local resources, ecosystems and communities as the first decision-making criteria. This also means that current production sites may be relocated because of intrinsic, non-favorable environmental conditions.

Horticultural exports help alleviate poverty

Horticultural industry alone will not feed the world and it has an impact on the environment, as any human activity does. Nonetheless, horticultural exports contribute to poverty alleviation, especially among groups such as smallholders and women in rural areas who have few alternative income generating opportunities. In

addition, the advances made in the African horticultural export industry are widespread so that they also benefit production in local and regional markets, thereby tackling the issue of food security.

PIP encourages and supports the private and public sectors in African, Caribbean and Pacific countries to ensure that horticultural trade contributes to the achievement of the MDGs. Agriculture has an environmental impact on earth but it is also the main source of employment in developing countries, which means it plays a role in the fight against poverty. The challenges for the coming decades will be to increase worldwide production of food while respecting the environment and providing decent living wages for millions of farmers. The three dimensions are intertwined.

Large retailers and brand owners are conscious about the challenges that lie ahead of us. Wal-Mart and others recently announced their commitment to repositioning small-scale farmers at the center of value chains. Marks & Spencer stated its aim to become the world's most sustainable retailer by 2015. Their "plan A" includes objectives to combat climate change, reduce waste, use sustainable raw materials, trade ethically and help their customers lead healthier lifestyles.

Sustainable agriculture is the trend to follow. Environmental impacts are not limited to carbon emissions but encompass many other interdependent factors. Awareness of this makes it easier to prioritize intelligently by designing step-by-step approaches without generating non-desirable counter-effects.

Horticultural exports from ACP countries do have their role to play. By entering high value supply chains, the modernization of this sub-sec-

tor must benefit others at a local, national and regional level. In addition, inherent characteristics of the horticultural industry make it a huge development-enabler. Suppliers and buyers of fruit and vegetables must therefore collaborate and work together. New legitimate market demands must not create extra burdens for suppliers, but become catalysts for their development. The plethora of standards covering a variety of topics such as food safety, the environment, respect for decent working conditions and development impacts, are confusing both consumers and producers. Disorganization often leads to inaction. Adaptability, affordability and feasibility must be kept in mind at all times.

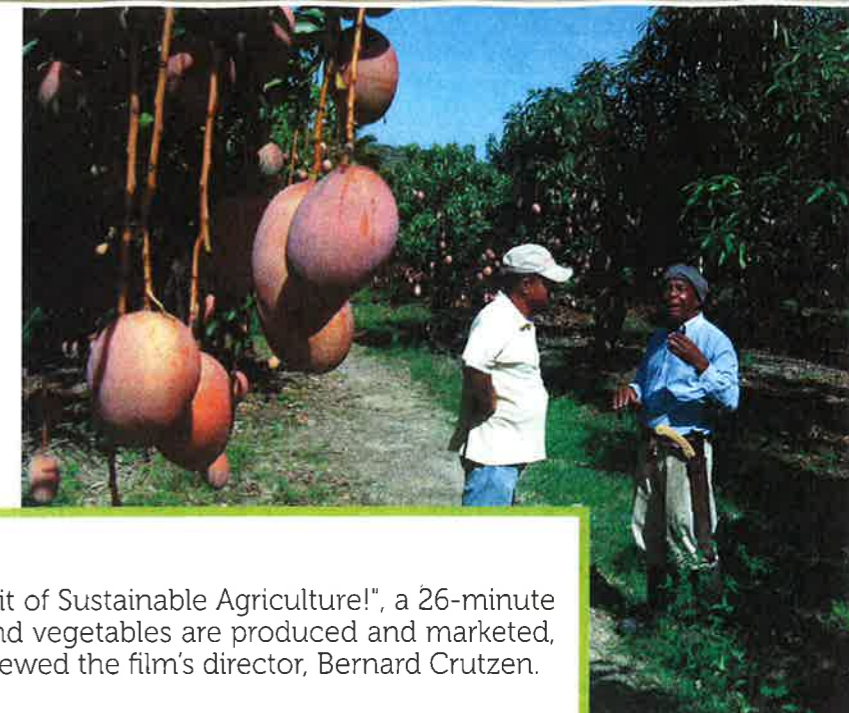
We must start thinking differently about how sustainability is rewarded

The growing confusion amongst consumers and companies is leading some players in the field to plead for sustainability to become a pre-competitive issue. Although technology may be offering promising prospects to better inform consumers when shopping at their local supermarkets, the quantity and complexity of the criteria needed to be taken into consideration will still make it a difficult choice. Products sold to consumers may one day be de facto "sustainable", but this would probably require regulation to enter the playing field. As Jason Clay puts it, "We must start thinking differently about how sustainability is rewarded; costs should be higher for companies that operate unsustainable practices – the reverse is true at the moment, which doesn't make sense." ●

(1) Presentation made by Jason Clay at TED, 2010

(2) Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, Agribusiness and the right to food, 2009

(3) World Agriculture and the Environment, A commodity-by-commodity Guide to Impacts and Practices, Jason Clay, 2004



COLEACP has just produced "Mango! The Fruit of Sustainable Agriculture!", a 26-minute film showing how sustainable tropical fruit and vegetables are produced and marketed, using mango as an example. Eurofresh interviewed the film's director, Bernard Crutzen.



E: How did the filming go?

BC: Our team received a warm welcome everywhere they went, except from a few insects... Weather conditions in the Dominican Republic were problematic. Dealing with long distances between production, packing and export sites was the most complicated aspect, and getting in and out of Accra was a nightmare. I feel really sorry for the lorry drivers who have to cover these routes regularly. The most striking thing for me is how dynamic the producers are.

E: What does sustainability mean to the mango growers you met?

BC: A small-scale grower or a large-scale exporter will give you a different answer. Sustainability to a small-scale grower is virtually a question of survival. Sustainable firstly means profitable, for the main concern is economic viability, and to achieve this he is ready to follow all the recommendations and all the trends, and will rush to take advantage of all the niche markets. The problem is the cost of upgrading. Everywhere we went, small-scale growers were complaining about the cost of certifications → all the more so because they have to be renewed. The question is

different for large-scale producers/exporters. To them, sustainability is more synonymous with environmental protection and social responsibility.

E: Does sustainability have a future in the African or Caribbean fruit and vegetable sector?

BC: It is up to COLEACP to answer this question. Personally, I think that all fields of activity will one day be confronted with the problem of sustainability. Even in my profession, doubts are often raised about overseas filming due to the carbon footprint. The European Commission recommends using local video companies more. This is a good thing, but upgrading is necessary.

E: When shall we see the Mango film?

BC: "Mango, the fruit of sustainable agriculture" is currently being offered to the European television channels interested in current affairs. There is a great deal of talk in Europe about "eating local", which could damage southern producers. COLEACP has also offered the film free of charge to television channels in ACP countries, the aim being that certain good practices shown in the film may give growers and public authorities some ideas. With the Internet, now an indispensable medium, we are also working towards online broadcasting via specialist websites. The DVD will also be widely distributed for seminars, training sessions, etc.

