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Kenya's future lies in quality



Comment: The future of Kenyan avocado exports rests squarely on adherence to quality standards, writes Chris Flowers, MD of Kenyan exporter Kakuzi

In Kenya, the most topical buzzword in agriculture is increasingly the “value” of avocado farming. Quite rightly, we are seeing an upsurge in the number of farmers planting avocado trees out of a desire to improve their incomes. However, the critical question remains: are we as Kenya and Kenyan farmers exploiting our true market potential for avocados?

Avocado production is not new to Kenya, with the first commercial plantings established many decades ago. More recently various large-scale players are getting involved. However, in the last five years, there has been a significant increase in the production of Hass avocados from smallholder farmers, which together with production from larger farms has made Kenya's volumes grow significantly, positioning us as the eighth largest exporter in the world.

Big competition

Compared with global producers, Kenya is still small. There are major producing

countries that don't export or export only a small amount as the product is so popular domestically, such as the Dominican Republic and Mexico. To put it in perspective, Kenya exports annually around 70,000 tonnes of Hass and green-skin varieties. Mexico, the world's largest producer, grows 2.5m tonnes of Hass alone.

We need to take stock of the production levels coming from Kenya's competitors during our marketing window. Last year, in a peak week Peru exported 657 shipping containers of Hass to Europe. In the same week, South Africa exported 74 containers, and Kenya 37.

As Kenyan and worldwide production levels increase, we need to grow Kenya's market access. Reports indicate that by 2030 half of the world's fresh produce will be consumed in Asia. Access for conventional fruits into these markets is essential.

Why Kenya?

So what makes someone want to buy Kenyan fruit? This is the crucial

question, and the answer lies in our Quality, Traceability and Sustainability protocols.

The world's consumers are demanding more of us as farmers, without necessarily respecting that commodity prices must also be sustainable. That perhaps is another debate. At the end of the day, we need to sell our fruit.

The market is measuring us on pesticide residues, water sustainability, soil preservation, food miles and numerous other indices. We have to be able to demonstrate compliance for two reasons. First, simple economics. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it is the right thing to do. We have a responsibility to future generations to leave the soil, water and environment in a better shape than we found it and to develop economic sustainability through a thriving avocado industry built on Quality, Traceability and Sustainability.

Quality

Customer requirements for quality may

seem easy, but they are stringent and unforgiving. No consumer wants to buy fruit that never ripens or cut into one and find it rotten inside.

To deliver quality products to the market, we must ensure proper crop husbandry, including fertiliser and related inputs being applied at the right stage.

Harvesting, too, must be at the correct maturity level, and the correct post-harvest and cold chain management protocols adhered to, to the letter.

Sounds simple right? Like all things, it never is. If we are to do this better, we must invest further in our extension services, training, technology transfer, and strengthen our regulatory authorities.

The market isn't helping. A shortage of avocados in Europe will send agents clamouring for their phones, demanding "any available" fruit. In the hope of making a quick buck, brokers dash to farmers' fields to harvest anything that looks like an avocado, regardless of whether it is mature or not. Some money may be made but at what cost to our nation's reputation?

Unfortunately, the reputation of Kenya for avocados is not good. If demand for our fruit is to match the increased production levels, we will have to improve our reputation as a quality producer. Failing to do that could mean that Kenya remains the cheap "last resort" when nothing else is available

– a market space that others will quickly take from us.

Traceability

In a nutshell, this is the ability to trace the fruit from 'field to fork'. We must be able to trace a carton of fruit back to the grower who produced it and, more importantly, have confidence that the grower meets all food safety demands, social accreditation standards and phytosanitary requirements.

So how do we achieve traceability? One answer is developing organised and well-managed farmer groups comprising all avocado farmers within a specific and reasonably localised area. We should, however, ensure that whilst farmers are provided with skills to grow the crop correctly through these groups, payments should be made to each farmer directly from the exporter, not through an intermediary.

Creating and strengthening farmer groups is key, as is access to the correct agrochemicals and proper training, with sensible, strict and uniformly applied standards.

Who is going to do this? Exporters and their development partners must play their part in this journey, as ultimately building Kenya's reputation for quality is good for the nation and good for business. We can't just be advising farmers to grow more fruit if we don't have a clear strategy on where and to whom we are going to sell the product, and without traceability, markets become limited.

Sustainability and social value

The final part of the story, but by no means the least, is sustainability. As a country, we are acutely aware of climate change; we live with its effects daily, not just in our agricultural sector but also in the havoc it plays on our homes, roads and sanitation.

But is sustainability all about climate change? Perhaps ultimately, it all comes down to the same thing: protecting our planet for future generations. Indirectly, therefore, how we grow our fruit is essential.

Key customers are also quite right in demanding that the fruit is produced in a manner that respects all the correct social values. We as producers must be seen to be upholding those values in the way we employ people and interact with the communities that we operate in. By embracing the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, we can demonstrate to all that our customers' values are embedded within our operations.

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