

AGRICULTURE AND FISHERIES

Agriculture in Africa may have begun as long ago as 10,000 BC when, in Egypt and Nubia, wild grains were adapted to domestic production. In the fertile fields of what is now the Sahara desert agriculture was thriving in 5,200 BC with the native grain Sorghum spreading into West Africa.

When the Sahara dried, the division of Africa into the agricultural regions which exist to this day began. It also contributed to major ethnic and cultural divisions and today the largest part of the continent, i.e. that part to the south of the great desert, is referred to as "Sub-Saharan Africa."

North of the Sahara the climate helps produce typically Mediterranean products such as grapes, citrus fruits and olives and these are replicated in the extreme south of the continent notably in the Western Cape region of South Africa. Here significant added value has been achieved by producing wines of considerable quality and through professional marketing which has achieved considerable success in enticing European consumers who had previously boycotted all South African products during the Apartheid era. Climatic conditions in equatorial areas allow an abundant production of other fruits such as bananas, mangoes and papayas. The African plains offer near-perfect conditions for pastoralist agriculture and off to the west the seas fill the supermarkets of France with red mullet (rougets) and the oysters of the Namibian coast are sweet and delicate. On the eastern coast vast shoals of sardines provide seasonal employment for fishermen while abalone, known locally as perlemoen, a shellfish which in Asia is regarded as precious as caviar, abounds.

Yet Africa's agriculture and fisheries are in crisis and only genuine freedom of trade can change the situation. Many poor countries are still heavily dependent on agriculture and most poor countries are in Africa. Agricultural exports represent a diminishing proportion of trade and income in world terms and after Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa's dependence on agricultural exports at 16 per cent are second highest in the world. Sub-Saharan Africa has traditionally depended on an extremely narrow range of commodities whose prices on world markets have dropped considerably in the last decade. In fact prices fell in real terms by more than 50 per cent in fifteen years meaning that African exporters have had to double production to maintain revenue.

Reduced revenues have reduced capabilities to import modern equipment which can enable production become more profitable. There are, therefore,

opportunities for western investors to become involved in increasing the efficiency of African agriculture.

Cocoa production is a particularly important example of how a lack of liberalization of trade damages African economies. Tariffs imposed by developed countries on raw materials are considerably lower than tariffs on processed materials. This is a form of protectionism for processors in the developed world.

The result is that countries such as Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana have been relegated to exporters of raw unprocessed cocoa while Germany has become the world's biggest exporter of process cocoa. Once again it can be shown that genuinely fair liberalized trade can benefit Africa inward investment in providing added value can not only be profitable to the investor but can improve the quality of life in African countries.

In East Africa coffee production has been an important cash crop but major problems have developed. The coffee culture in the affluent west has led to an enormous increase in consumption. Coffee bars in Europe and the US have become crowded with people drinking an increasingly wide range of products at increasingly high prices. The Italian words Cappuccino, Macchiato and Latte have gained currency throughout the English-speaking world but East-African coffee producers in Kenya, Ethiopia and other are caught in the depths of a recession comparable to that experienced in the rest of the world in the 1930s.

Nine countries in Sub-Saharan Africa depend on coffee for more than 25 per cent of their export earnings. Ethiopia is perhaps the most dependent but farmers in that country, unlike their counterparts in the US and Europe, are given no state protection against falling incomes. Once again genuine liberalization of trade can be of immense benefit.