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Commercial Horticulture: International Myths - Africa

I and many of us are not familiar with agricultural production in foreign countries, specifically directed to the lesser developed countries such as Africa. Typically, when we hear the word Africa, one of the first pictures we have in our mind is a very dry and poor, barren soil beaten by the hot desert sun. So that I might understand their situations and appreciate ours, I looked into Africans agricultural industry and I was quite surprised of their agricultural potential. They have other situations that hinder their productivity than soil conditions and these factors hinder their competitiveness in the global horticulture industry.

Once again, until recently, my traditional way of thinking of Africa as a typical horticulture producing country was non-existing. After research and discovery, I found that Africa has promising qualities and the potential of being productive and competitive in the international horticulture markets. In Africa, the countries of Kenya and Tanzania are surprisingly capable of growing quality produce and are currently competitive in the European market. According to a 2007 Horticulture Export Comparison study, Kenya alone exported over 1,000 million U.S. dollars' worth of horticultural produce and Tanzania exports 130 million U.S. dollars. With Kenya having over 500, 000 employees and Tanzania having 40,000 employees, this makes the horticulture industry in these two countries each a major employer. The horticulture industry in Tanzania, consist of 8-10% growth per annum making horticulture one of the fastest growing industry.[1]

[1] Mkindi, J. (2009). Horticultural Constraints and Challenges in Tanzania. Tanzania Horticulture Association. http://www.tanzaniahorticulture.com/TAHA%20REPORTS/PRESENTATIONS/HORTICULTURAL%20DEVELOPMENTS,%20CHALLENGES%20AND%20OPPORTUNITIES1.pdf

Contrary to my discovery of the promising horticulture potential within these two African countries, I also concluded that they both suffer from numerous constraints. The constraints are environmental and human based. These constraints inhibit the horticulture production, global trade of the horticulture market to flourish. There are many constraints that these countries contend with. I grouped them into the top three groups that seem most significant.

The first constraint group, which I feel is the largest group, is due to personnel. From the production field to the market, there are multiple personnel issues that are responsible for the industry's complexity.

For instance, as compared to the United States, Tanzania has poor horticulture research to support the industry. The lack of research fails in giving Tanzania higher value cropping alternatives as compared to more developed countries that are based programs and technical expertise to assist farmers with horticulture education.[2] The result is that the farmers of Tanzania have very little information based on research, if any, to use to improve their production. This factor prohibits the country in becoming competitive in the world market. The United States have Extension Agents in every state to assist farmers and residents through horticulture research and distribution of research information. In the United States, continuing horticulture education is encouraged to not only farmers, but is mandated for the personnel who are employed in the field of horticulture as well.

Inefficient personnel in the marketing of horticulture commodities are another element of this group. For instance, in Tanzania, hurdles are created in the transportation of horticulture commodities from one country to another due to the inefficiency of personnel in all facets of marketing. A lack of mutual government trade policy and regulations between trading countries, created by government personnel, are partially responsible for the slow movement of these products between countries. In process of transportation of crossing over the country border at the Namnga, Kenya, a town that borders Tanzania, unnecessary delays is created by personnel as a result of uncooperative issuances of phyto certificates at the exit points. As a result, the extended and

unnecessary delays in moving produce to market are very difficult. Another example of other countries marketing constraint is in Zimbabwe. There is a market system in Zimbabwe called the pool system. With this system, the growers consolidate their individual exports into a single consignment targeted market. There may be 50 small-scale growers in this pool and each grower is responsible for his own production, packing, and local transport to the agent at the airport. The problem arises from the fact the grower takes on all risk until the commodity is sold. Unfortunately, there may be loss of quality due to delays.[2] Although not necessarily considered a personnel constraint, another example of marketing constraint is exhibited in Kenya where the domestic transport infrastructure and the cost of access to airfare are of major issue.[3]

Another hurdle in the personnel issue is the abundant number of middle-men the horticulture commodities have to go through to get to market. The result is a very long extended production to market chain that's created. This factor would seem to slow the marketing process and raises prices of the commodity as well.

The final hurdle in the personnel issue is that once the commodities finally reaches the market, unorganized marketing practices and multiple standards result in confused markets. As compared with the United States, the United States has an agency that governs horticultural commodity standards. It's the United States Department of Agriculture (i.e. USDA). This agency sets uniform standards on all agricultural commodities in the United States. Tanzania does not have a regulatory agency as the United States.

The second constraint group is financial. Here, banks simply are not willing to risk the investment with the farmers in a lesser developed country such as Tanzania. Therefore, loans are difficult to acquire. If you are capable of securing a

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[2] Heri, S.T. (2000). The Growth and Development of the Horticultural Sector in Zimbabwe. Horticultural Promotion Council of Zimbabwe. http://www.sadctrade.org/files/tib/horti_zimb.pdf

[3] McCulloch, N. and Ota, M. Export Horticulture and Poverty in Kenya. Institute of Development Studies University of Sussex. http://www.eldis.org/fulltext/mcculloch_neil_export_horticulture_2002.pdf

short-term loan, the interest rate is usually high. This makes farm expansion and operations difficult to manage and be competitive in the market place.

The third constraint group is environmental. With no human factor here, climatic conditions play a vital role for the success or failure of the Tanzanian horticulture industry. The industries production is dependent largely on the environmental factors such as moisture by means of precipitation, temperature, and pest control. Recently, in Kenya, 1.6 million face starvation due to drastic climatic changes. Technology and knowledge of sustainability by means of trapping rainwater for a reserve is not available.[4]

In summary, there are numerous constraints in the horticulture markets of the lesser developed countries. The ones mentioned are just a few that I consider being the top three groups. In these countries, the constraints that are experienced are challenging and through education and diplomacy of personnel I believe most of these issues could be positively altered. With all of the regulations we have in this country, we should feel positive that our system works and despite some opposition, works efficiently. The United States is one of the main leaders in global horticulture production and belongs to the most productive trade agreement in the world, the North American Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

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[4] Fresh Produce Journal (12/26/2010) Vegetables can improve food security. http://www.freshproducejournal.com/2010/12/26/vegetables-can-improve-food-security/