

# Learning lessons from African supply chains

Over the past decade the demands of European consumers have spawned initiatives to increase standards of food sold in Europe. Several EU and bilateral donors and private sector initiatives are now tackling the question of how best to support smallholder participation in supply chains exporting to Europe. However, none has focused specifically on pesticides and pest management, or on the interplay between export and domestic markets. PAN UK's Food and Fairness project aims to fill this gap. **Stephanie Williamson** reports on a recent workshop.

Seventeen participants attended the PAN UK workshop, hosted by Natuur et Milieu (the Dutch environmental NGO). These included NGOs in the PAN network, agricultural development agencies, research institutes working on food standards in the development context, and export and import companies trading in horticultural products from tropical countries.

## Good for Europe, bad for Africa

Currently, donors and the food sector concentrate on achieving pesticide compliance and food safety for European consumers in export chains. However, little attention is paid to making food safer in Africa's local markets. In addition, ever stricter standards in European markets are more difficult and expensive for African smallholders to comply with. Recent research in Kenya has estimated that 60% of smallholders have been dropped from the supply networks of the top 10 exporters since EU retailers and their suppliers required compliance with EUREPGAP standards<sup>1</sup>. And markets are changing continuously. Wholesale markets in the UK are now serving as low-price spill-overs for excess supplies ordered by supermarkets (most of which is now EUREPGAP certified), and even food service catering chains are moving quickly to certification schemes. So opportunities for exporting uncertified produce are narrowing to the UK at least.

## Impact on pesticide hazards

Companies participating in the workshop indicated that since participating in certification schemes they now ensure that all workers or smallholders use full protective equipment. However, some individuals do not take this seriously and the companies find it hard to enforce at all times. In Colombia emotive posters were successfully used with the slogan 'Daddy, please come home safely tonight'. Nevertheless, wearing uncomfortable and heavy protective clothing remains a major issue for workers in hot, humid conditions.

Donors have supported projects which encourage pesticide spraying to be carried

out by sub-contracted, external, trained spray teams. However, workshop participants agreed that this reinforces dependency on pesticides by creating jobs in spraying.

On issues of storage and distribution, participants agreed that some form of centralised storage and procurement was safer than having pesticides stored by individual farmers. If export companies purchase in bulk they can pass the bulk discount they receive on to their smallholders, giving them a financial incentive for only using products authorised by the company, rather than buying chemicals on the informal market.

At €500, tamper-proof lockable metal boxes are too expensive for smallholders and would need to be provided, however this does not address issues of spillage or container disposal. Operating a well-run pesticide store, compliant with health and safety regulations, either at community level or run by company agronomists in a production district enables tighter controls. But distribution needs to be flexible and quick enough to respond to sudden demand, to avoid farmers sourcing from unauthorised dealers.

Re-use of empty pesticide containers to store food and drink is a widespread practice by smallholder households and a major route of exposure to hazardous products. The Benin Organisation for Promotion of Organic Agriculture (OBEPAB) has worked with primary school pupils to raise awareness of the hazards of re-using pesticide containers and found this was a more effective way to communicate with farming families than speaking to farmers directly.

One of the key obstacles encountered by export companies is at regulatory level within African countries. EUREPGAP stipulates that, in addition to respecting EU legislation on permitted pesticides, only pesticides registered in the country of use can be used on produce for export. Many African government departments' lists of authorised pesticides are out of date and do not include the newer and less toxic products. There are similar legal barriers to using biopesticides and botanical extracts as few of these have gone through the cumbersome and lengthy registration process. This leaves growers



Ensuring the safety of vegetables for local markets requires good hygiene practices to reduce microbial contamination as well as pesticide residues

Photo: © M.Mollica [www.mimimollica.com](http://www.mimimollica.com) with very few safer options.

## Training needs

The Pesticide Initiative Project (PIP) of COLEACP helps producers and exporters in African, Caribbean and Pacific countries comply with EU market requirements [PN73 15-16]. Their first steps in West Africa were to convince export companies to hire food safety and traceability managers who could initiate changes in management practice and internal communication required to set up traceability systems. Although the initial focus was on company-level interventions for compliance with European food safety requirements, PIP has gone on to find ways to safeguard and strengthen the position of small-scale producers in the horticultural export sector. And so they have not just delivered training directly to export companies and their growers but have also delivered training through government extension agencies and NGOs with outreach channels to independent smallholders, on food hygiene, pesticide handling, record-keeping for traceability, crop production protocols and good crop management. Although this type of training is more resource-intensive it allows a larger number of smallholders to be reached and topics can be more far-reaching than the immediate business needs of individual companies. To date, PIP estimates that over 90,000 smallholders have benefited in 22 ACP countries, covering over 80% of the horticulture exports to the EU. The programme has developed training tools and participatory methods for smallholders and for farm workers.

## Smallholder business skills

Many smallholders think they can make a huge profit in export markets because they

only look at the difference between their production cost and the final retail price to EU consumers and do not have a realistic understanding of how export supply chains work, the investment required in export logistics and the high levels of risk involved in supplying European supermarkets. The Ghana Organic Agriculture Network (GOAN) has trained thousands of smallholders in organic techniques since 1995. It is now working to establish organic agribusiness structures, exploring how trained farmers can take advantage of opportunities in local and export markets. Their main lesson is that it does not make sense for smallholders to try to get into export markets unless there is a reliable organisation facilitating the interaction between farmers' associations and exporters.

### Safer food for local markets

African participants emphasised the right of consumers to know what is in their food and the right to enjoy the same form of protection in food safety as consumers in the developed world. Participants pointed out that food safety for national consumers is neglected at policy level in African countries and among donors. Different strategies are needed to address this. For example, it will be important to raise awareness among consumers and journalists. Existing consumers' associations in Africa tend to focus mainly on pricing and access issues for poor consumers of utility services of electricity, water and telephones. They should be encouraged to make food safety more of a priority in their work on consumer rights.

Several European NGOs have run high profile media campaigns involving pesticide residue testing to challenge major supermarkets to reduce residues in their food and take responsibility throughout the supply chain. But the residue analysis requires considerable funding. Is it feasible for African NGOs to spend this amount of money or should their campaigns select particular target crops or focus on specific highly hazardous pesticides? It can be problematic for small NGOs in Africa to run campaigns that are too confrontational. Some pioneer organic NGOs encountered a backlash from the agrochemical industry and their supporters in government circles. They have since modified their communications strategy, to promote organics as one of several options. Several participants questioned the impact of media campaigns focusing only on residue data, if these do not address issues of farmer and worker exposure in food chains. There was also concern that some retailers respond by excluding suppliers who cannot comply with stricter residue levels from their operations, rather than supporting them to change their practice. In Germany, one participant noted that 30% of suppliers had been excluded from the chains of two retailers for this reason, hitting small and medium farmers hardest.



Women's horticulture group members share irrigation equipment, Senegal

Photo: © M.Mollica [www.mimimollica.com](http://www.mimimollica.com)

Surveys in Kenya, Zimbabwe, Senegal and Benin show that African consumers are interested in pesticide-free produce, but they may not be prepared to pay a premium for it. Organisations working on organic and IPM implementation therefore need to explore other ways to build consumer demand for safer food. GOAN is developing a programme for consumers to visit farmers to increase their confidence in alternative production systems, without going down the expensive route of external, third-party certification of farms or produce. Experiences from other developing countries in 'participatory guarantee' schemes to back up farmer association produce labelling could be relevant, along with using simple measures from national government standards boards on food hygiene. Several Asian countries have set up two-tier Good Agricultural Practice standards, with the standard for national markets focusing on key food safety hazard prevention issues (mainly pesticide handling) and a higher level standard for export markets. FAO's regional African Farmer Field School training programmes are looking at the feasibility of marketing produce from IPM farmers' groups.

### Integrating IPM into supply chains

The workshop revealed different views on how to achieve IPM in supply chains. NGOs generally want more requirements on IPM implementation in certification schemes including EUREPGAP. However, food company and other participants warned that this would lead to yet more complexity, higher compliance costs and further marginalisation of smallholders. Instead, IPM could be addressed through an aspirational umbrella code for horticulture, similar to the approach of the Common Code for the Coffee Community, which works to achieve continuous improvement throughout the sector, in contrast to the exclusive nature of certification schemes<sup>2</sup>.

IPM integration needs to consider practices downstream in the supply chain, as well as in the field. One food importer recounted useful experience on training

staff in one UK retailer's purchasing department to differentiate between normal spotting on mango skin and marks which are the first sign of rotting. As a result, cosmetic appearance requirements on mango were made more flexible, enabling fruit packers to reduce fungicide applications.

However, many participants highlighted the challenge in getting the investment needed for pesticide hazard reduction and implementation of IPM when EU retailers exert continual downward pressure on prices paid to their suppliers and show no commitment to long-term purchasing agreements. Sustainable agriculture needs continual support and investment from the top players in the food chain but this is far from reality, despite the rhetoric of supermarkets' public relations departments.

### Recommendations

The workshop participants recommended:

- disseminating independent and company residue data to African government decision-makers
- adapting African school and college agricultural curricula to focus on safe and healthy food, sustainable agriculture and meeting market requirements, rather than the current focus on productivity
- building national consumer awareness campaigns and materials in local languages
- making use of information on food safety standards in export chains and adapting these for local markets
- exploring how to integrate food safety actions with the new FAO/WHO initiative for a progressive ban on highly toxic pesticides
- exerting joint pressure from food companies, donors and FAO on African national regulators to update their authorisation lists
- pushing to fast-track regulatory approvals of safer pest management products including biopesticides, botanical products and beneficial insects

1. *Impact of EurepGAP on small-scale vegetable growers in Kenya. Fresh Insights series no. 6,*

*International Institute for Environment and Development, Sept 2007, [www.agrifoodstandards.net](http://www.agrifoodstandards.net)*  
2. [www.sustainable-coffee.net/en/faq.htm](http://www.sustainable-coffee.net/en/faq.htm)