

## Who will save the Kenyan small grower?



*Small scale farmers in Western Kenya prepare land for planting. Reproduced by kind permission of Collins Wanyama*

Our perspective and outlook on life are often influenced by where we come from and those formative years. My experience is no different. Coming from a village in Western Kenya (no - I am not related to Barack Obama), which still has no electricity, and no passable road access, I always think 'what would my family think of my life and activities of today?' And what a family, where my father had four wives and I have 46 surviving siblings! Now that I am at Harper Adams University College studying for an MSc in Crop Protection my former life seems light years away, therefore, I thought I might reflect on the small scale farmer.

Rural small-scale growers in Kenya have steadily survived for many years without being greatly affected by the dynamics of change and modernisation in agriculture until the last decade when fresh produce exports started to increase rapidly. The traditional cultivation systems such as the use of the handheld hoe have reasonably been preserved through the years.

Much research work has been and continues to be done in agriculture in general and horticulture in particular with the aim of coming up with sustainable production systems to meet the rising need for more food in line with increasing world population. Ironically third world countries which are the most vulnerable with regard to food security due to their rapid population growth trends and where most people live below the poverty line, export most of their fresh produce to developed nations. The reason for this is that a big percentage of large horticultural farms are not locally owned and the business is set up for export. Production standards on these farms follow the code of practice (e.g. Global GAP) as laid out in destination countries but work within local legislation.

Small growers contribute the bulk of total exports but they export through big companies.

With little agronomic knowledge, most of these farmers, though adaptive, are not aware of the changing world around them and have historically followed advice given by government agricultural extension officers. Driven by the urge for better sales small growers (predominantly owning farms of one acre or less) joined up in groups and started exporting through big companies with little knowledge about requirements and standards. This led to the appointment of technical managers by export firms to give advice to growers on production standards. Increase in fresh produce has led to intensification of horticulture and hence inputs. Production systems have greatly improved with the advent of certification of bodies and frequent audits but little has been achieved in relation to the farmers own safety.

The specialized good agricultural practitioners have focused mainly on residue reduction in fresh produce but have failed in helping growers protect themselves and the environment. The pesticide regulatory agencies and pesticide manufacturers have worked hard in their attempt to educate growers especially in pesticide use but with limited success. Fresh produce technical managers, who are very well placed to help the farmers, have in their position as good agricultural practice ambassadors, not been able to achieve any meaningful result. Who will come down to the level of understanding of the small scale grower and save his life and the environment?

Limited education among employees in horticulture has led to shortcomings in the interpretation of the ever changing agricultural changes resulting in conflicts. The majority of people simply do as they are told without asking why and the structures in place have failed to empower them.

The Kenyan small scale grower has been faced with many challenges and is consistently struggling to cope but has been kept in the dark. However I am not presenting a conspiracy theory, as there are many natural difficulties such as infrastructure, communications, education and language differences to overcome. There are deficiencies in the whole production chain despite many achievements. With rapid regulatory changes, no meaningful linkages and communications, the important export sector contribution from small scale growers will collapse, as has been seen by the disintegration of the traditional farmer groups that had been so important in sustaining the activities of community agriculture. The impending recession will also not help their plight as exports are reduced. There are many gaps between the exporter groups and the rural production communities. Who will save the Kenyan small scale grower from being continually exploited by big exporters?

*Collins Wanyama, December 2008*

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