

# A brief reflection on the banana and avocado crops in Tanzania

## Brief Report

Avocado and banana crops grow in several parts of Tanzania. Avocados grow largely in Kilimanjaro, Arusha, Tanga, Morogoro, Iringa, Njombe, Mbeya, Songwe, Katavi, Kigoma, and Kagera Regions.<sup>1,2</sup> Whereas avocados are grown purely as a fruit crop, bananas on the other hand are a staple food amongst some of the ethnic groups like the Chagga and Haya, the surplus of which is sold out as ripe banana fruits. Traditionally a couple or few trees avocado trees have been inter-cropped with bananas in small-holder farms in the case of Kilimanjaro and Arusha, or other crops elsewhere. Recently, however, there is growing commercial production as witnessed by Africado in Kilimanjaro with 137 hectares and which has almost 2000 out-grower farmers<sup>3</sup> or Rungwe Avocado Limited.<sup>4</sup> High demand and therefore very attractive prices of avocado in the world market have attracted increased commercial interest in the country, including both domestic and foreign investments. Avocados along with bananas and other fruits such as mangoes and oranges sell at affordable prices to people of all classes in various streets of towns and cities in Tanzania; a retail activity performed largely by women and one that helps not only to improve nutrition amongst both rural and urban dwellers but also to reduce poverty amongst women especially. However, for various reasons Tanzania has so far failed to exploit fully the opportunities availed in both domestic and world market; one of them being weak extension services.<sup>2</sup> Decentralization of those services to local government authorities without sufficient devolution of corresponding decision making and financing, has apparently not been sufficiently helpful toward exploitation of extension services effectively, and thus benefit those crops. My interest in this reflection was prompted especially by the role of avocado and banana fruits in helping to reduce poverty among women in rural and urban areas, but also their importance to the lives of millions of people and huge potential to economic growth, exports and employment. The reflection draws from both literature and observations in Rombo District in Kilimanjaro Region and some of the streets of the city of Dar es Salaam and Kibaha Town, areas that the author is familiar with. This reflection is guided by the following three questions i) What is the role of bananas and avocado in poverty reduction ii) Why doesn't Tanzania exploit fully their world market opportunities iii) Why are agricultural extension services not effective enough to improve the crop.

## Avocado and bananas potentials for poverty reduction, nutrition and exports

A visit to the streets of Dar es Salaam and Kibaha in the evening will surprise you by the way women earn their living and therefore support their families through selling the two fruits, namely ripe bananas and avocado. A striking feature about this street trade is that it is solely women business much like the "Mama Ntilie" or women street-food vending business. Although bananas and avocados street selling takes place the whole day, it is far more concentrated in the evenings, in order to catch up with people arriving from office work, on their way home. In local markets in the rural areas too, for example Mrere market of Mashati Rombo, retail activity, collection, stock-

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piling and storage of the fruits for onward transportation to towns and cities, are all activities performed by women. So, it can correctly be said that those crops are a huge safety net against poverty not only in the areas that grow them but also for urban women across the country.

Apart from contributing to poverty reduction, the fruits are also a source of nutrition, exports revenue and employment. Selling at the price of between Shillings 700/= and 1000/= (US\$ 0.30 and US\$0.40) per avocado fruit and Shillings 200 (equivalent US \$ 0.09) per piece of banana, the fruits are affordable and are therefore a source of nutrition to all classes of people. Exports figures for the crops are often contentious, for avocado for example this is estimated at around 20,000 MT.<sup>1,2</sup> Altogether, tens of thousands of people across the country are engaged in the value chain of avocado and banana fruits.

The growing of the two crops is largely smallholder based, only recently has large commercial farming of avocado emerged especially. Traditionally a smallholder farmer would have a couple or few avocado trees inter-planted with bananas or coffee on the same farm. Recently, however large investments have emerged. Examples of which are Africado Limited in the areas of Kilimanjaro that occupies 137 Hectares and engage over 2000 out-growers<sup>3</sup> or Rungwe Avocado Limited; the two of them were estimated to have exported 5,000 MT.<sup>4</sup> Currently 90% of exports were destined to EU,<sup>3</sup> but South Africa, India and China are also considered to be potential export markets.<sup>2</sup>

Agricultural policy, especially Kilimo Kwanza (Agriculture First in literary translation) has earmarked horticulture as a key area of agricultural development, this includes avocado especially. Both avocado and bananas grow all over the country but the biggest growing Regions are Kilimanjaro, Arusha and Tanga in the northern part of the country, Iringa, Njombe, Mbeya and Songwe in the south-western part, Katavi and Kigoma in the western part, Kagera in Lake Victoria part and Morogoro in the eastern part.

Undoubtedly, any attempts at modernizing avocados and banana trading through packaging and supermarket sales and export trade without boosting overall production of those crops could render tens of thousands of women jobless and create a havoc to their dependents. In

order to strike a balance between survival needs of women-fruits-street sellers, and modernizing the distribution as well as export of those fruits so as to generate much needed foreign exchange and promote economic growth, it is imperative production of those crops must increase. Investments and the number of farmers engaged with them must increase, and so is productivity. Furthermore, post-harvest losses should decrease, transportation improved and exporting infrastructure made available. This calls for effective implementation of the “Kilimo Kwanza” national agricultural policy and the Agricultural Sector Development Programme (ASDP) amongst others.

### Contradictions in growing avocado and bananas

As mentioned avocado and bananas have traditionally been grown by small-holder farmers, with bananas as the main crop; here and there transplanted with a couple or few avocado trees. The coming of Africado Limited in Kilimanjaro and introduction of out-grower farming system, whereby out-growers were given seedlings with the understanding to sell their crop harvest to the company, is a radical shift to promote commercial farming of the crop. Usually households were given only a few seedlings and those were planted in banana farms, thus preserving food security since bananas (not ripe banana fruits) were the main staple food in the area. In Rombo District, an attempt to improve banana farming has recently also seen the distribution of seedlings of a new banana variety to the farmers.

There are a number of contradictions threatening the two crops today. Due to high number of rural to urban migration In Rombo District, other Districts of Kilimanjaro Region, and elsewhere, the farming of bananas, avocado and other crops, including coffee, maize etc., has gradually been left to the ageing population with less energy, motivation and entrepreneurship, to expand production. At the same time changing climate, especially long spells of dry weather have also affected both crops as well as animal keeping, traditionally the source of manure for the farms. Thus, any hopes for increased avocado and banana farming lies in stopping and reversing the trend of rural to urban migration by making agriculture more attractive to the youth. This can be achieved through increasing productivity, offering better farm prices for the crops, and reduced regulation and taxes on the crops. Efforts must also be geared toward reduction of cost of production, improvements of storage facilities, improved rural road infrastructure and transport, ports and shipment, and export marketing.

The government of Tanzania has been supporting agriculture in various ways including use of subsidies on farm inputs, improving road infrastructure, locating extension officers right at grassroots community levels, fixing minimum prices of crops, etc. (Agricultural Sector Development Programme, Tanzania Horticultural Development Strategy 2021-2031) Some of those initiatives have been met with very little success because of poor targeting, weak institutions, lack of coordinated interventions, etc. For example, Government’s initiatives to strengthening extension services through both NALERP and NAEP programs, have been met with limited success as demonstrated by a recent statement in the Parliament “ *Extension officers were merely busy with drinking “gongo” (a local illicit gin) instead of providing any help to the farmers*”, retorted a Member of Parliament.

### Decentralization of extension services failures

Challenges of the extension services have most often been viewed from scientific and technological points of view. Hence, issues have usually centred on extension services capacity (i.e. numbers of staff and their qualifications), transportation so that services are accessible to farmers, demand based extension services, financial matters, and the like. Yet, one of the biggest challenges has been the question of governance.

Decentralization of extension services management from Central Government has been proposed as a way to improve the services. In Tanzania this was first tried in 1972 and later in 1998 under the Local Government Reform Programme. In this regard agricultural extension services have been placed under local Government authorities, namely Municipal Councils and District Councils. Yet, the issue here is not decentralization per se, but devolution of decision making in order to strengthen oversight role at the Municipal or District level, and hence to enhance increased accountability among the extension officers. As has been observed by Lameck W, et al.<sup>5</sup> although decentralized, extension officers still behave as if they are accountable to Central Government rather than to the Local Government Authorities, and this, amongst others, is due to lack of sufficient devolution of both administrative and financial decisions.<sup>5-7</sup>

The problem of decentralization of extension services in Tanzania is that Local Governments are practically not able to exercise authority and enforce accountability on extension staff. In the first place, those officers are under District Directors who in turn are least accountable to the Local Government Councils; the Directors are neither hired nor removed by the Councils but by Central Government, specifically the President. The Councils similarly are not responsible for hiring nor removing the extension officers, and although Municipal and district Directors have such authority, they rarely exercise it. To make things worse, the extension officers work under very difficult circumstances – often without means of transport or fuel in case they have been given motor cycles, without materials and equipment with which to conduct demonstrations to farmers, and most of all, without required support and cooperation from their clients, namely the farmers. Such situation contributes to low job motivation; no wonder they are seen to be wasting away, as expressed by the Parliamentarian. Under such circumstances, District and Municipal Directors lack the moral authority to punish them too.

Councils hands are tied due to lack of financial autonomy especially, which is a big shortcoming in Tanzania’s decentralization. Central Government has retained for itself all major taxable sources, leaving marginal areas for local Government taxation for generating “Own Funds” component of their budgets. This leaves local Governments by-and- large dependent on the Central Government for funding and therefore unable to determine priority funding areas for the development of their districts or municipalities. Under such situation, agricultural extension services are unlikely to be their priorities over and above councillors’ sitting allowances, per diems, learning tours and the like.

There is no doubt the capacity of the councilors and local politics also matter. In the first place, it has to be asked, to what extent do Councilors view themselves as highest decision making body in the District, with all round responsibility for the development of their District/Municipality economically and socially? Councilors should be able to demand and approve plans, to oversee their implementation, to approve finances and oversee expenditure, as well as human resources including extension services. This means councilors need to be exposed to required knowledge and be fed with necessary information to be able to take appropriate decisions, including decisions relating to the performance of extension services. Apparently, councilors are locally elected, based on popularity in their electoral Wards without regard to their level of education; provided they know how to read and write. On those, is placed the big burden of taking decisions, often in matters too complex for their understanding (at least for a number of them, in some Districts quite possibly the majority). Empowerment and capacity building is therefore necessary, including the area of agriculture and avocados and bananas in particular, in order to address extension services related challenges. In the case of local politics, it is

worthy also noting that extension officers are amongst the influential people in their electoral Wards, so councillors must tread carefully in case they want to be re-elected.

## Conclusion

Bananas and avocado are a great potential that could help immensely in poverty reduction, exports, employment and economic growth of Tanzania. The Government should effectively address the challenges facing those crops, including stopping and reversing rural to urban youth migration, promoting investments, strengthening extension services and taking other measures to reduce cost of production and increase incomes of farmers. They include support in marketing, including packaging, storage, export, improvement of roads, port handling, transport and shipment, necessary deregulation and tax exemptions, etc. Government should work closely with the private sector for maximum development of the crops. Effective decentralization of extension services including devolution of administrative and financial decisions on agricultural extension and empowerment and capacity building of local councilors should be explored in order to strengthen agricultural extension services. Meanwhile, women who have traditionally been benefiting from those crops should continue to have space in trade of those crops, and be empowered through loans and training in order to be able to conduct their trading more profitably, and for the crops to continue to contribute toward women poverty reduction and the wellbeing of their families.

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## Conflicts of Interest

None.

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