



ITC, UNCTAD, UNEP Statement on Soil Association Air Freight Consultation

“Organic agriculture not only saves the environment and health of consumers, but it is also a vital business and wealth creation opportunity that contributes to poverty reduction”
Right Hon. Edward Lowassa, Prime Minister of Tanzania, 1st June 2007

Benefits of organic agriculture for development and the environment

Organic agriculture is associated in Africa with increasing access to export markets, poverty reduction and protecting the environment. The last five years have seen strong growth in organic production in many African countries notably Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa and Uganda.

Smallholder farmers in Africa enjoy higher prices from exports of organic products to European markets. This gives them the opportunity for better health care and investment in education for their children.

The environment benefits from an improved capacity of farms to sequester carbon, greater biodiversity of farm species, improved water quality and soil structure and less use of energy.

The importance of the airfreight market

Increasing demand from Europe is a major reason for the growth of organic production in Africa. The majority of produce is shipped to export markets, but the fresh fruit and vegetable segment is particularly dependent on airfreight. Without airfreight, African perishable products would not be able to get to the European market on time.

The Soil Association proposal

The Soil Association is proposing to ban airfreighted products on environmental grounds. The ITC, UNEP and UNCTAD believe that airfreight is not a useful indicator of environmental damage for the following reasons:

Need to consider carbon footprint from farm to fork

Whilst transport by air or long distances may have a higher use of fuel than from domestic sources, the very low energy usage for farm production in other countries can compensate for this (Saunders 2006). Studies have shown that even when a product is airfreighted to the EU it may still have a more favourable carbon footprint than one grown in the EU (Williams 2006). This is because production uses far less fuel in the South where temperatures are higher and more manual labour is used.

The majority of energy use in the food supply chain is in UK distribution and consumption (DEFRA 2006), not in transport from the place of origin.

The Soil Association whilst proposing a ban on access for airfreighted products certifies UK products that are highly energy intensive

- Independent of whether a product is imported or not, products differ greatly in their carbon intensity of production – for example beef uses three times more energy in its production than cereals (Collins 2007).

- UK farmers (including organic) receive £2.8bn every year in farm subsidies, which support the use of carbon inputs (agrochemicals, fuel, electricity, gas). In addition, farmers receive a further 50% subsidy on their use of farm diesel fuel. African farmers receive little if anything in energy subsidies.

It does not appear consistent to withdraw certification of airfreighted products whilst continuing certification of energy intensive UK organic produce.

Sharing carbon wealth

National carbon consumption and income levels are strongly correlated. European average incomes and carbon usages are 30 times more per capita than an average Kenyan (World Bank 2007).

Trade is a dynamic way to share the wealth derived from carbon usage. The trade in airfreighted products provide large economic gains for farmers whose ecological footprint is tiny compared with the developed world.

The ITC, UNCTAD and UNEP believe that banning airfreighted product will not mitigate climate change and risk the impoverishment of very vulnerable populations particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

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About ITC

The International Trade Centre is the technical cooperation agency of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) for operational and enterprise-oriented aspects of international trade development. As the United Nations focal point for technical cooperation in trade promotion, ITC works with developing countries and economies in transition to set up effective trade promotion programmes to expand their exports and improve their import operations.

About UNCTAD

UNCTAD promotes the development-friendly integration of developing countries into the world economy. Being a knowledge-based institution, UNCTAD aims to help shape intergovernmental deliberations, policy debates and current thinking on development as well as to deliver technical assistance with a view to ensuring that domestic policies and international action are mutually supportive in bringing about sustainable development."

About UNEP

UNEP is the United Nations system's designated entity for addressing environmental issues at the global and regional level. Its mission is to provide leadership and encourage partnership in caring for the environment by inspiring, informing, and enabling nations and peoples to improve their quality of life without compromising that of future generations. "

References

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