

## Local Economies and Global impacts

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African farmers need to be lifted out of poverty. The World Bank said so last week when it called for greater investment in agriculture for developing countries. But the farmers can be forgiven for being sceptical about promises from western countries that are forever finding new ways to stop them actually earning a decent living.

The latest fad, the food miles movement, sets up an ethical tariff against African farmers. The cellophane packet of runner beans flown in from Kenya is the new enemy of the local food movement, which argues that these imported out-of-season vegetables are destroying the environment. We are told to buy a muddy paper bag of potatoes from the farmer up the road instead. In addition, the Soil Association has just announced that it is calling for air-freighted food to conform to fair trade as well as stringent environmental standards.

But these beans are grown in commercial farms that provide good livelihoods for hundreds of workers. The farms also provide schools and clinics for their workers. And the planes that fly the food out had first flown in to Africa carrying clothes, televisions and refrigerators to be sold to the continent's small middle class. Roses grown with solar and thermal energy in an east African flower farms and flown to Europe actually use less energy than roses grown in Holland and trucked around the continent.

International powers have never had a fair approach to African farming. Britain and France saw their colonial lands on the subcontinent as the perfect place to grow raw materials to drive their own industrial growth. So farmers in Mali were told to grow cotton, Ghanaians planted cocoa, and the cool Kenyan highlands were turned into tea plantations. At independence, African countries were left with an agricultural sector completely reliant on global commodity prices, growing crops that could not be used to feed their own people.

The Fairtrade movement has tried to address this injustice by giving cotton and coffee farmers a fair price for their crops. But the movement works only with cooperatives and small-scale farmers. Large commercial farms cannot be certified. Is this really what we want for Africa? Peasant farmers growing economically unviable cash crops, helped by the occasional subsidy from a

western consumer organisation?

Shouldn't we instead be encouraging the consolidation and diversification of the sector, encouraging these countries to grind and package their own coffee, design and make their own chocolate bars, before exporting them to the west at a substantial premium? Instead of letting them set up their own industries, the World Trade Organisation is trying to persuade African countries to open up their markets to western manufacturers and services.

And the EU has threatened to withhold aid to developing countries unless they sign up to economic partnership agreements, which will allow European farmers to flood their markets with heavily subsidised food and take away African governments' ability to tax these imports.

The World Bank spent decades forcing African countries to cut public agricultural subsidies through economic reform programmes, which drove thousands of small scale farmers to bankruptcy and destabilised the continent's food supply. It has now admitted its mistake, and accepts that African countries need a reliable, thriving agricultural sector to drive development. Other groups, such as the EU, the World Trade Organisation and the western consumer, now need to stop changing the rules, and give African farmers a fair chance to prosper.