

Proposed British ban on organic imports to affect African suppliers

The International Trade Centre is taking a strong stand against a proposed ban on airfreighting organic fruits and vegetables from developing countries to Britain. The United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DfID), jointly with ITC, has organised a seminar in London today, 17 September 2007, to debate the controversial issue.

The Geneva-based ITC, an agency of the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, believes that a ban of airfreight would have a very limited impact on greenhouse gas emissions, but is very likely to be detrimental to producers and exporters of organic products in developing countries.

The Soil Association, the UK's principal certifying authority of organic products, is considering a range of options, including a certification ban on environmental grounds. The Soil Association opened a consultation process this summer to gather views regarding a possible ban. This is of great interest to British consumers, who buy more and more organic food.

In response to the Soil Association's possible ban, ITC launched a research project that looks at the financial impact on farmers and exporters in developing countries and importers in the European Union.

The research, carried out by the Danish Institute for International Studies, shows that most organic fruit and vegetables (83%) sold in the UK are imported from least developed or lower-middle income developing countries, where rural communities benefit from the increased income that organic production brings. Airfreight allows exporters to preserve the freshness of certain tropical products and add value to perishable products in non-traditional ways, such as cutting, dicing, mixing and packing.

Airfreighted organic imports consisted mainly of exotic fruits, which make up almost half of the total volume, peas and beans (around a third of the total), and salad vegetables (about one-sixth).

The major exporters of airfreighted organic products, representing 70% of the market, are from the Dominican Republic, Kenya, Ghana and Egypt. ITC research has found that if retailers insist on a Soil Association certification after a ban, up to 15,000 people in Kenya and Ghana could immediately be seriously affected.

According to Alexander Kasterine, an ITC expert on trade and environment, "Organic certification has been hugely successful in reducing poverty for thousands of African farming families. A ban on airfreighted products could be catastrophic for them, while making no contribution to mitigating climate change."

Other international organisations share ITC's opinion. In a joint statement with ITC, the United Nations Conference on Trade

and Development and the United Nations Environment Programme note that a ban would hurt sub-Saharan African farmers, without making an impact on climate change.

The organisations also make the point that the Soil Association certifies British products that are highly energy intensive, compared to low-input organic farming in sub-Saharan Africa. The trade in airfreighted organic products provides large economic gains for farmers in countries where the average carbon dioxide emissions per capita are less than 3% of those of the average west European.

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