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Participation of Small-Scale Farmers in an Expanding Horticultural Market: Impacts of Global Production Processes on their Livelihoods

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Abstract

Small-scale farmers in rural areas in sub-Saharan Africa are often the focus for development interventions. While small-scale farmers' adaptation and resilience to climate change has drawn much attention, their linkages with and impacts through global production processes remains strikingly absent. Economic liberalisation, the decreasing confidence in the role of states as agents for development and pressure from NGOs and consumers for multinational corporations to be responsible for their impacts on society, has led to a shift away from governmental regulation of international business activities towards more voluntary self-imposed guidelines. Associated with this change is the concept of corporate responsibility that has impacts on developing country stakeholders mainly through guidelines along the supply chain, for example with measures such as codes of conduct, quality standards and labelling. There is limited research on how these initiatives impact on small-scale farmer livelihoods, on their environment and their levels of access to resources.

The paper addresses the impact on smallholder lives through a case study in Laikipia, Kenya. Here local smallholders were integrated into global markets through the establishment of export-oriented large-scale horticultural companies beginning in the 1980s. Kenya has experienced a sharp increase in high-value exports, such as fruits and vegetables, and a decrease in the importance of traditional tropical export commodities such as coffee, cocoa and tea. As horticultural production is labour intensive and produced for a large share by small-scale farmers it is generally viewed to provide opportunities for poverty alleviation. Associated with the growing market for horticultural produce, however, are a growing number of quality standards that aims to meet end-consumer demands and food safety concerns. The increasing control of supermarkets over the supply chain further puts pressure on the production process. The impacts on small-scale farmers are not conclusive and it is called for more empirical evidence to address if the rise of and enhanced stringency of these standards marginalise small-scale farmers from the global market. The paper evaluates how small-scale farmers are incorporated in the global supply chain and how the increasing spread and stringency of standards and labels impact on their opportunity of participation.

Keywords: Corporate responsibility, horticultural production, Kenya, small-scale farmers