



Nyeri, Kenya  
10,684 km  
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Supermarkets in Europe reject Kenyan-grown French beans that are not straight enough or are too long. The result is food waste and worse: farmers lose out on income. Nevertheless growing beans for export is still good business for smaller farmers in Kenya, even though they are constrained by the demands imposed by the companies they supply.

by **Joris Tielens**

**R**ows of women are sorting huge piles of French beans, mange tout and sugar snaps at long metal tables in a large packhouse, which is open on one side. Beans, mange tout and sugar snaps that are not straight but curved, or are too long or too short or discoloured are thrown into crates on the ground. These ones are not attractive enough to be exported to western supermarkets. The beans that meet the requirements are placed in neat rows in plastic trays and then wrapped in cellophane. Some of the beans

are trimmed first. A sticker, which the women cannot read as it is in Dutch, is fixed to the packages: *'fine French beans, haricots verts'*. Further along, avocados are being packaged. After packaging the beans are put into cool storage next to the packing space, awaiting transport to the nearby airport.

About a quarter of the beans in the warehouse are rejected for export, says a bean exporter who prefers to remain anonymous. He looks on as small trucks deliver their loads and his people package the goods. He explains that he is a fairly

small exporter, supplying on average ten tons a week to customers all over Europe, including the Dutch supermarket Albert Heijn. 'Up to half of the beans can be thrown away in the rainy season because they get wet and have black patches on them. Not that they are unhealthier or less tasty, but importers don't want ugly beans.' He says he has no choice: he has to supply what the customer wants. 'Competition is fierce. If I tell my clients that their requirements are unreasonable, they go to someone else, here or in Ethiopia or Morocco.'

Appearances are not the only issue: pesticides count too. If farmers use too much or the wrong type of pesticide the levels of residue in the beans is too high. Both the Kenyan government and the EU carry out random checks. If residue levels are too high the whole batch is rejected and dumped. Early last year the EU blacklisted Kenya and as a result the Kenyan government made it compulsory for all exporters to comply with the guidelines; otherwise they lose their licence. But the exporters say that they are not treated equally: products from Kenya must contain less pesticide residues than products grown in Europe.

Many importers also demand Global GAP certification: a 'Good Agricultural Practices' standard. These include guidelines for cultivation methods, pesticide use and for the health and safety, and welfare of employees and farmers. It's a waste of time in this exporter's opinion. 'I'm perfectly capable of checking my farmers and deciding how much they earn. It's not necessary for someone else to supervise this. It just costs money and the only ones who benefit are the certification bodies.'

#### No contract

The exporters in the packhouse never know what, how much or when they'll be able to supply produce. The importers in Europe, who are the ones supplying the supermarkets, have no contracts with the Kenyan exporters. They send an order each week for the following week. One week they might order five tons of extra fine French beans; the next week ten tons of fine beans. Requirements for length and circumference (to the millimetre), colour and shape are described in great detail. If only extra fine beans are in demand, anything that is too long or too fat is thrown away. It is not unusual for an order to be cancelled at the last minute.

The women and a couple of men who work in the packhouse have no contract. They turn up in the morning and the exporter chooses a group for the day depending on how much work there is. They are paid five hundred shillings a day, about 4.50 euros. That is the rate for eight hours' work, but the women often work twelve hours. During peak periods they sometimes work up to 24 hours



# The ugly bean

at a stretch, the packhouse manager says. Even so, he stresses that it's a good job and that women queue up for the work. Although it is fifteen times less than the minimum wage in the Netherlands, the salary is above the minimum wage for Kenya.

Built by the Kenyan government Horticulture Crops Development Authority, the packhouse is in a fairly deserted area located strategically close to Nairobi airport. Small and medium size exporters can rent part of the space and cold storage here. 'Small exporters don't have money for their own packhouse. The idea is that they can build their business up in this one until they earn enough to build their own factory,' says the coordinator.

Jane Maina has managed to do this. She and her husband own a small export company, Vert, and employ over one hundred people. Half of them work in the company's packhouse, a short ride away from the government packhouse. Things are different here. The packhouse is a closed building and it is cool inside. The beans are graded in a cooling room, where the men and women wear thick sweaters. Before we enter, like the workers inside, we have to put on a white coat, a cap and wash and disinfect our hands – all hygiene measures. Most people have a contract with the company; day labourers are taken on when it's busy. These women also earn five hundred shillings a day.

'If we are to stay in the business we have to fulfil the market requirements,' said Maina, who is responsible for the company's marketing. 'The competition is tough. We've created a niche for ourselves by focusing exclusively on the premium segment of the European market.' This means that the company observes strict hygiene rules and only supplies top quality produce. 'And, indeed, that includes the appearance of the beans. If that's what the customer wants, that's what we supply.' Maina has no contract with the buyers either, but sometimes she gets more notice for orders – at times as much as six months in advance. This means she can offer more security to the small farmers who are her suppliers.

### Discussion on waste

'What's the use of rejecting vegetables because they don't meet cosmetic requirements while there's nothing wrong with them?' asked Amos Thiong'o, the coordinator of AgriProFocus in Nairobi. AgriProFocus stimulates and promotes farmer entrepreneurship in Africa. In Kenya, as in eleven other African countries and Indonesia, it has a network of organizations, businesses, government representatives and professionals aimed at farmer entrepreneurship and agribusiness. The Kenyan network has more than a hundred organizations and over a thousand individual members. One of AgriProFocus's activities is to organize a monthly agricultural fair, attended by various parties involved in agribusiness.

Food waste is an outrage, says Thiong'o, who has already done a lot in Kenya to raise awareness on the subject. The discussion on waste that he started on the AgriProFocus website provoked many reactions from farmers, businesses and organisations, acknowledging that there is a problem. The difficulty is that there are few alternative markets for vegetables that don't meet cosmetic requirements, because Kenyans are not used to eating fresh French beans. Or as exporter Jane Maina put it with a broad grin: 'We don't like to eat these beans as much as we like to sell them.'

Thiong'o: 'In Nairobi it's only the middle class and expats who eat them.' To raise awareness

## The packhouse manager swears that women are queuing up for this work

terms of waste and the strict requirements imposed by the importers. Farmers are paid less because of the wastage, and the land and water they used to grow the beans could have been used to grow other vegetables. The farmers are also the victims of stricter pesticide regulations. In an attempt to impress the EU, the Kenyan government imposed a tight deadline for introducing a ban on the use of excessive amounts of pesticide. Many small farmers hadn't even heard about the measure, let alone had the time to learn how to do things differently, and lost their business.

This didn't happen to Muthomi Maringa, a well-off farmer with eight hectares of land, above the average landholding. He has been growing

than from growing maize. 'A kilo of maize sells for 25 shillings (23 eurocents); a kilo of beans goes for 50 shillings (45 eurocents). And beans grow much faster. They ripen in eight weeks. After harvesting I can sow a new crop and I can harvest four times a year.' He has to invest more in irrigation, fertilizer and pesticides for beans, and they require more labour. But for each twelve-week growth cycle the farmer can earn 50 thousand shillings (455 euros) per acre minus costs. Despite this he rotates beans with maize and other vegetables. 'I grow maize for my own consumption and to sell on the local market. And there's not enough demand for more beans.'

who explains as we walk around Maringa's farm that the exporter estimates how much he can sell to the European market. Twelve weeks in advance he gives a farmer exactly enough seed to be able to produce that amount. The costs of the seed are subtracted later from the payment the farmer receives. If demand is high the farmers plant more, if demand is less they plant less.

On one field things have gone wrong. Maringa points to a patch with dry, sorry-looking beans. It turns out that the seed that was used did not come from a seed company, but had been produced by someone locally. The supplier was not reliable and Maringa got the wrong seed. The beans did grow, but were not of the quality that

'but the focus is on ensuring productivity and being able to supply on a long-term basis. We raise standards in an area: if we don't empower people now, we'll have a weak and poor community and there'll be no good farmers who can grow our beans.' The other way for exporters to work, said Ojepat, is to buy a piece of land or lease it and start their own farm. 'But that is expensive.' According to Ojepat, the higher income enables farmers to send their children to school and to buy more nutritious food.

The exporter has also built a shed with tables on Maringa's farm. Once a week a vehicle comes from the exporter to buy up the harvest, and smaller farmers in the area can sell their beans here too. A preliminary selection takes place in the shed: 15 to 20 per cent of the beans are rejected said Ojepat, either because they are not straight enough or too long, or damaged. And in the packhouse in Nairobi they are graded once again. Ojepat: 'If the farmer follows our instructions, he'll produce nice straight beans and we don't have to reject much. But if he gives the beans too little water or harvests too late, we may even have to throw everything away.'

It is clear that exporters, by training, advising and controlling farmers, try to ensure that they can deliver beans that live up to the European requirements. Yet Bernard Muchiri, who as the director of the local NGO Help Self Help Centre knows the region well, is not so convinced that the exporters are a blessing for the smaller Kenyan farmers. 'Farmers can earn more through them. But it has happened in some regions that traders suddenly stopped coming to an area to buy because they found an easier source elsewhere.' Home Grown, a big fair-trade certified exporter that supplies British supermarkets, did this. Farmers who had got used to being able to sell their beans woke up one day and found themselves without a buyer.

We drive on and see farmers growing beans, but this time the farms are much smaller, less than a hectare of land. To be able to fill an exporter's truck fifteen farmers work together in a group and share a collection point. 'I like to grow beans because they ripen fast and I can harvest all year round, instead of once a year like maize. And I earn more money,' says Sospita Muguera, a farmer.

Further along two women are picking beans. Mama Murimi said that selecting beans is a problem: 'Often it's only the very small beans that are wanted.' She holds a bean up. 'This is too big. And we are not paid for what they don't take, so we lose income.' About a quarter of the beans she can't sell, she said, but the beans don't end up on the compost heap either. Kenyans in Nairobi may not eat beans, but these people do. 'And we give them to the cows.' Nevertheless these farmers would like to grow more beans too. 'But there are not enough orders from the company.'



In a packhouse near Nairobi women sort mange tout by size

### Tight control

Maringa has a contract with an exporter and is only allowed to sell to that company. The export company employs agricultural experts to train the farmers in cultivation methods and to check that they are meeting standards. In this way the exporter keeps tight control over what the farmers grow and the methods they use. To avoid the risk of farmers using forbidden pesticides the exporter sends a spraying team along regularly. The farmers are not allowed to spray themselves.

One of the agronomists is Okisegere Ojepat

the company wants to buy. 'This whole field will be lost,' said Maringa.

The export company has built a new toilet block and storage unit for fertilizer and pesticides on Maringa's farm. There's a bucket and soap next to it with a sign: *wash your hands*. According to the Global GAP guidelines there must be a toilet on the farm, a bathroom in the farmer's house, a good waste disposal system and a first aid kit. The farmers get training – not only in how to grow beans but also in hygiene. 'They are taught how to grow hygienically,' said Ojepat,

among politicians he organized, together with the famous UK food waste campaigner Tristram Stuart's Feeding the 5000, a dinner for MPs, exporters and international guests at the UN Environmental Programme UNEP headquarters in Nairobi. At these events the menu consists entirely of food that would otherwise be thrown away.

A number of exporters have their own farms where they grow vegetables for the export market. But 95 percent of the beans come from the hundreds of thousands of small farmers in the Kenyan highlands. They are the biggest losers in

French beans for a small export company for a few years. As we arrive at his farm in the green hills he's talking on his mobile phone. We walk with him through fields of bright green beans. Here in Kagio, not far from Mount Kenya, the upland conditions are ideal for growing beans. It's exactly the right temperature for growing beans all year round. Irrigation is used to water the plants – the water is piped along channels. Each plot has a board with the name of the variety and when it was sown.

Maringa said he can earn more from beans

## Mutual dependence

According to Ojepat the agronomist, the solution to the problem of food waste is simple: if farmers follow the export company's instructions to the letter they will produce nice straight beans and they won't have to throw much away. But according to Alphonse Muriu, who works for SNV in Nairobi, it's not that simple. In the SNV office he discusses possible solutions with Amos Thiong'o

from AgriProFocus. 'I think exporters could do more,' said Muriu. He says that many exporters do not train the farmers well. 'And they could also pay the farmers for the lesser quality beans: they make enough profit.'

Together with Solidaridad and AgroProFocus, Muriu is working on the Kenyan Horticulture and Food Security Program, which brings farmers in contact with vegetable exporters. Under the pro-

try, which could mean an alternative market for the lesser quality produce. 'We try to increase sales by offering reject vegetables to hospitals, schools and prisons. Local demand can increase, it's healthy food.'

Muriu adds that pineapples started off in Kenya as an export crop grown by Delmonte. But when world prices fell, attention turned to the domestic market. 'Now more pineapples are sold



Mama Murimi picks French beans in the highlands near Mount Kenya

## 'We are not paid for what they don't take'

gramme farmers get training, inputs and finance. In the follow-up project, the Kenya Market-led Horticulture Program which starts in 2015, attention will also be devoted to food waste. Both programs are funded by the Netherlands embassy and AgriProFocus is in charge of knowledge development and exchange in both programs. Muriu says that there is mutual dependence between exporters and farmers. Amos Thiong'o added: 'Exporters are companies. Some behave ethically, others less so. Some do their best to build up a good long-term relation with farmers. Others are less concerned with their well being.'

Some of the less attractive vegetables already find their way to Dubai in the Middle East. Thiong'o says there are opportunities to create more demand for French beans within the coun-

try, which could mean an alternative market for the lesser quality produce. 'We try to increase sales by offering reject vegetables to hospitals, schools and prisons. Local demand can increase, it's healthy food.'

But Jane Maina of Vert doubts whether this is a feasible option. 'The product price isn't the biggest cost along the chain. It costs the same to transport beans by aeroplane, whether they are straight or not. In that case I'd rather supply straight beans to the European market.' She also admits that it would be more complicated to have to sort and package beans into two different quality classes. Maina is more convinced that it's



In export company Vert's packhouse the temperature is cool and hygiene is strict

## About a quarter of the beans in the packhouse are rejected for export

worth building up a good relationship with the farmers from whom she buys. 'Farmers are our partners from day one, and it's a long-term relationship. Providing good training and support to farmers, and the mutual trust between us means I can count on my suppliers, and I can teach them how to sow and harvest so that we get the beans we want.'

### Supermarkets

Marc Jansen, director of the Dutch branch organization for supermarkets, Centraal Bureau Levensmiddelenhandel, said that quality requirements are a matter for supermarkets and their suppliers. 'It's not our business. What I can say is that of course there's nothing wrong with vegetables that are not straight and it's a crying shame that

they are thrown away. One solution might be to cut up these beans for use in ready-to-eat products, or to look for a local market for them. I can imagine people are loath to transport curved beans by plane, because you'll be transporting more air and thus increasing CO2 emissions.'

Albert Heijn supermarket said that the exporter mentioned in this article is not one of their suppliers, although the exporter himself said he is. Albert Heijn said it only buys from three other companies in Kenya, and that for this reason it was not prepared to answer the question of why the beans it buys have to comply with cosmetic standards. Jumbo supermarket has replied to questions that its beans must meet requirements for shape, length and colour. 'The reason for these requirements is that Jumbo wants to offer

its customers consistency, in terms of cooking time, shelf life and quality.' According to the Jumbo spokesperson, curved beans are stringier and contain more seeds, which makes them less edible and reduces their shelf life.

Consumers may have other reasons for not buying beans from Kenya – a journey by air of over six thousand kilometres produces a lot of greenhouse gases, and those who want to reduce climate change are better off buying vegetables in season that are grown locally. Yet for many farmers in Kenya, growing beans for export to western supermarkets is still good business, even though they are constrained by the demands imposed by the companies they supply. ■