

Exit, voice and loyalty in Kenya's french bean industry: what lessons can we learn from smallholder farmers' past response to international food safety standards?

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Abstract

Kenya is one of the leading exporters of fresh vegetables to Europe. Kenyan exporters have since the 1990s targeted the leading European supermarkets with their produce. However, the food safety scandals of the 1980s and 1990s led these supermarkets to adopt stringent food safety protocols relating to pesticide use, hygiene, and traceability. These standards were then passed on to Kenyan exporters. In turn, many leading fresh export companies in Kenya developed their own stringent private protocols relating to food safety standards. Others adopted the European Retail Group's Good Agricultural Practices or their European buyers' private food safety standards. In both cases, Kenyan exporters required full compliance with the food safety standards in order to continue buying beans from their suppliers. This study examined how Kenyan smallholder growers responded to the standards and how their response affected their continued participation in the supermarket business. It applies Hirschman's concept of exit, voice and loyalty to assess the strategies used by Kenyan smallholder French bean farmers in response to international food safety standards (IFSS). It then assesses the factors that influence the success or failure of such strategies. Data obtained in this study suggest that smallholder farmers used different strategies to respond to IFSS. The initial overwhelming response was to exit production. Other farmers resorted to voice strategy: complaints, petitions, threats, lobbying, in attempt to influence buyers/exporters to relax or change the standards. Such farmers largely failed. The rest of the farmers, however, proactively complied with the standards by using collective action and were able to stay in the fresh export business. This strategy of compliance with IFSS has since become the model in smallholder export horticulture in Kenya. This study, therefore, demonstrates role that collective action and proactive response to standards can play in maintaining their participation of smallholder in fresh vegetable export business and suggests the need for assisting the poor smallholder farmers to keep their share of market.