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Obstacles of conflicts on banana production and marketing in the agricultural development project of Merka district in Lower Shabelah region, south Somalia

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the economic impact of the decline in banana exports in the Merka district, Somalia. Bananas and their business constitute the backbone of Somalia's economy, being the second most crucial component after livestock. Various reasons, including the civil war in Somalia and poor security, led banana companies to cease exporting, resulting in a significant economic impact on Somali society. The study employed a descriptive cross-sectional survey approach, distributing a designed questionnaire to the target population comprising 60 banana experts, farmers, economists, and other exporters. The researchers used the Slovenian formula to determine a sample size of 52 individuals and employed a non-probability purposive sampling method. For data analysis, descriptive statistical analysis with mean and standard deviation was conducted using the SPSS application version 16. According to the study's results, the majority of respondents, 69.2 per cent, attributed the fall in banana exports to a lack of security. Similarly, 48.1 per cent of respondents attributed the decline to inappropriate marketing. Additionally, 36.5 per cent of respondents agreed that the lack of infrastructure was the cause, while 42.3 per cent attributed it to the absence of government facilities. I strongly agree with this assessment. Finally, 30.8 per cent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that land conflicts were responsible for the decline in banana exports in Merka, Somalia. The researchers recommended enhancing security in banana plantation areas, modernising existing markets and exploring new ones, incentivising local production and improving infrastructure, particularly roads connecting plantations to markets.

Key words: Banana, decline, economic, export, Merka.



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INTRODUCTION

Somalia is one of the most African countries that exports bananas. However, nowadays, there are many challenges to banana exporting, which has caused a dramatic decline in bananas. Successful commercial prospects of root, tuber and banana crops require suitable institutional and policy interventions to facilitate improvement in production and marketing that eventually allow their alteration from subsistence commodities to high-value yields. This change will enhance the income generation role of root, tuber and banana crops and increase the employment opportunities for communities throughout the world's many diverse crop-producing areas. Somali bananas have fundamental economic importance for Somali society and are the most important cash crop in Somalia.

When the civil war broke out in Somalia, banana production was suspended. Most banana growers abandoned their farms; consequently, the plantations and the irrigation infrastructure deteriorated. Besides, irrigation infrastructure, such as pumps and tractors, was looted by advancing militias. Extortion, forceful expropriation of land, and insecurity became common in southern Somalia after 1991. Land was confiscated without adequate compensation from the original owners, primarily former government officials and foreigners (Jeilani, 2016). The farms were mainly populated by newcomers from the central regions, who lacked the technology and expertise to produce and sell their products. As a consequence, some of the new farmers ruined the plantations and returned to the cities or their home areas.

A prominent Bimal woman describes the post-war situation in Lower Shabelle: "In the past, the land was seized with the pen; today, the land is seized by gunpoint." This notion is reiterated by a Somali employed by the World Bank. He states, "In the last ten years of the military government, injustice was done using the pen, government machinery. But in the last twelve years, injustice was done using guns". He believes "the key to conflict is injustice and inequitable, non-merit-based use of resources". Accordingly, he argues, "injustice was the main accentuating force but now appears as if it is a resource conflict". Another Bimal politician from the

Shabelle region blames the colonial regime for unfair land ownership practices and unequal distribution of resources.

Furthermore, there was tough competition between the two Somali counterparts of the new competitor, US subsidiary Dole and the old Italo-Somali De Nadai group, Sombana and Somalfruit. When Sombana came to southern Somalia in 1994, they made exclusive contracts with local farmers prohibiting them from selling their produce to any other company. Somalfruit followed and contested the agreement. A Mogadishu-based businessman said trade tensions escalated after Somali Fruit raised the price of a box of 12 bananas from an average of \$2 to \$4.43. Aideed's central role in benefiting from the situation, rather than arbitrating tensions between the two competitors, became obvious.

Consequently, clashes between the companies' militias developed over production and marketing. Local conflicts were replicated in Mogadishu in what was called Somalia's 'banana war'. Both companies accused each other of recruiting and arming militiamen to block off access to the deep-sea port in Mogadishu. On January 10, 1995, a small group of militiamen on armed 'technicals' drove past Dole's lodgings of their Filipino employees in Mogadishu, opened fire, and left one guard dead. Later, on February 2, fighting broke out between the companies' militias in the port area. One United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) commander confirmed that militia close to Dole blocked off access to the port to prevent its rival company, De Nadai, from unloading their trucks. Several people were injured in this incident.

Moreover, between October and November 1997, severe floods destroyed large parts of the remaining 3,500 hectares of cultivated agricultural areas, and the road network in the Lower Shabelle region further deteriorated. Deyr (autumn) rains started excessively in October, continuing until the beginning of January. Flood control systems, such as reservoirs and dams further upstream, were dysfunctional, allowing an unhindered water flow. Since many floodgates were broken or poorly maintained, canals got silted, and crops were destroyed by excessive flooding. This is why the

irrigation system must be managed at the regional level rather than leaving it to smaller communities. Consequently, approximately 700 ha or 20 per cent of the cultivated land was destroyed. The floods had severe repercussions on food security and availability. People working on the farms lost their income, leading to low purchasing power and higher malnutrition rates (Jaspars et al., 2019).

After the floods destroyed much of the farmland and, in combination with the Geneva World Trade Organization (WTO) ruling, foreign firms hesitated to restart their investments, above all within an insecure environment. As a result, in 2002, there were no large-scale commercial banana exports; a senior businessman in Mogadishu explains: “Bananas are still produced but primarily serve the regional market. They are trucked to Somaliland and Puntland. Many people whose life depended on the banana trade lost their income. The banana sector employed people in production, transport, marketing, and export. In Lower Shabelle, Merka District has been severely affected by the collapse of the banana export business. Most of the bananas were exported through Merka port when the main port in Mogadishu closed in 1995. Alternative income opportunities are limited. Seasonal workers suffered the most from the collapse of the banana industry. Though Libya signalled interest in importing bananas, there are no international investors who would take the risk of engaging in a capital-intensive industry. In sum, the civil war and the following period of insecurity contributed to the destruction of the plenty and to mounting conflict between stakeholders of the Merka District and Lower Shabelle Region of Southern Somalia as a whole.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Banana plantations are among the crops that Somalia are proud of its dominant role in exports in the long period since the colonial period. The banana sector was not only the second export crop before the war; it was also the main employer of the local people in the cropping zones. Production in the farms absorbed a workforce of up to a whole of about 10,000 workers (Ali, 2022). Insecurity, land ownership difficulties and poor infrastructure caused by a lack of essential investment in this sector are among the main factors that are supposed to have subsidised the

decline of this subdivision, resulting in fluctuations in the crop production arrangement as newcomers and farmers moved to cultivate other crops include cereals, legumes sesame, vegetables etc.

Moreover, with the help of international and donor agencies, some other farmers have made various efforts to revive the banana exports in Somalia, but they have yet to succeed. The Banana sector has so far reached its full potential, ensuring food security, employment formation, and export earnings. Scholars and banana producers have expressed concerns about various methodological and capacity-related limitations that have hindered the industry’s progress (Abdullahi, 2018). These limitations encompass a range of factors, such as limited skills and abilities in production processes, inadequate infrastructure and knowledge, and challenges in postharvest handling. In Somalia specifically, these challenges include issues with pass-away ability, insufficient storage knowledge, and the absence of proper maturing and packaging systems. Additionally, the sector has been hampered by limited access to investment and unfavourable market conditions, further exacerbating its overall incapacitation (Abdullahi, 2018).

The risk for the Somali banana sector striving to recover exports is the seemingly complex social-cultural environment in which the value chain wishes to be developed. This requires a specific stage-by-stage approach and understanding of the condition at hand, which, if not respected, can easily stall the mobilisation and collaboration of the chain actors and stakeholders (Tinzaara et al., 2020). While trade in Somalia is thriving smoothly in the worst political confusion, a worsening political state could affect the prospective export of Somali bananas. Security also hampers access to external experts if believed convenient for direction in, for instance, quality control. Hence, strong local statements and control structures would be required to guide the export route, and this remains an area to be developed.

Somalia produces good-value bananas, which have been exported to Europe and the Gulf markets for nearly a century. It is the first crop exported abroad, constituting 20 per cent of the GAP. Banana production, which is a very profitable industry, is

considered one of the most labour-demanding agricultural projects (Fair, 2015). Before the eruption of the civil war, there was a strong banana business run by the Somali Fruit Company, which was joined by Italian businessmen (51%) and Somalia (49%). The company managed about 7000 hectares, thousands of skilled and non-skilled labour force, an extensive network of transportation trucks, a chilled marine fleet, substantial agriculture supporting services, banana treating facilities, and a packaging factory. The suspension of such a project has resulted in thousands of technicians and farm labourers being released. Almost the entire banana trade collapsed. As a result, the unemployment rate in farming societies rose (Jeilani, 2016).

Bananas are the second primary source of foreign exchange and are also the main contributor to creating job chances in Somalia. Before 1991, Somalia was known for its flourishing banana industry. However, due to insecurity, lack of inputs, and poor infrastructure, banana exports have declined dramatically over the past two decades, eventually leading to its collapse. FAO has established five banana varieties to be virus-free after testing them against local ones to recover what was once Somalia's leading basis of foreign earnings (Kema et al., 2021). Out of the five varieties, Somali banana cultivators chose Williams as a favourite variety tolerant to virus attacks and drought. Over 60,000 seedlings are being shaped and made available to the Somalia Banana Cultivators Association members. With the appearance of interest from possible banana buyers in Iran and Turkey, Somalia is likely to revive its past beauty in the long run. With peace slowly recurring in southern Somalia, investment in the banana industry is a key priority for the government, FAO, and its national and international partners (Naima, 2016).

Bananas were formerly found in Southeast Asia, mainly in India. They were transported west by Arab conquerors in 327 BC. They were moved from Asia Slight to Africa and finally carried to the New World by the first travellers and missionaries to the Caribbean. Mostly, Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin

America, and the Caribbean account for the majority of global banana exports (De Langhe et al., 2015). Only 15 to 20% of world banana production is dealt globally (the biggest banana-producing countries, such as India or Brazil, export very little and retain it for domestic consumption). This depends on only one banana variety, the Cavendish, designated for its high yields, the resistance of bananas to Panama disease, durability in long-distance transport, and consistent quality and appearance. According to Voora and Bermudez (2020), the commonly exported bananas come from countries in the so-called 'dollar zone' (Ecuador, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, etc.), the rest from the Philippines and the African and Caribbean countries (part of the Africa-Caribbean-Pacific (ACP) group). The five leading banana-exporting countries (Ecuador, the Philippines, Guatemala, Costa Rica and Colombia) account for almost 80 per cent of global banana exports.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher used a mixed methodology. Specifically, quantitative and qualitative data on development were collected concurrently and analysed separately. The data was then merged at the interpretive stage. Mixing meant that the researcher drew conclusions that reflected what was learned from the combination of results. The researcher used questionnaires to collect data from 60 respondents from different sections of society. A qualitative analysis was done on the collected data. Descriptive statistics were utilised to examine the quantitative data, which was then presented as frequency distributions and percentages in tables and narrative format.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Using frequency, percentages and correlation, the researcher delved into the extent to which Respondents agreed with various statements on the impact of conflict on access to agricultural inputs in the Merka District of the lower Shabelle Region of southern Somalia. The response modes and scoring are as follows: Strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree.

Table 1. Factors caused banana export’s decline

No	Factors caused banana export’s decline in Merka District, Somalia						Total	
	Variables		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree		Strongly Disagree
1.	Lack of Security	Frequency	38	10	7	3	2	60
		Percentage	69.5%	15.2%	9.6%	3.8%	1.9%	100%
2.	Poor Marketing	Frequency	22	27	5	5	1	60
		Percentage	38.5%	48%	5.8%	5.8%	1.9%	100%
3.	Lack of Infrastructure	Frequency	18	21	10	9	2	60
		Percentage	30.8%	36.5%	15.4%	15.4%	1.9%	100%
4.	Without Government Facilities	Frequency	24	20	7	5	4	60
		Percentage	42.3%	34.6%	9.6%	7.7%	5.8%	100%
5.	Land Disputations Problems	Frequency	5	16	9	13	17	60
		Percentage	5.8%	26.9%	13.5%	23%	30.8%	100%

As shown in Table 1 above, the majority of respondents (69.3%) said that lack of security was the cause of the decline in banana exports. Other 48 per cent of respondents agreed that the decline in banana exports in Somalia’s Merka is due to inadequate marketing in Merka, Somalia. Additionally, 36.5 per cent of respondents agreed that the lack of infrastructure is the cause of the decline in banana exports, while (42.3%) respondents strongly agreed that the lack of government facilities is the cause of the decline in banana exports. Finally, 30.8 per cent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that land conflict is the cause of the decline in banana exports in Merka, Somalia.

Water scarcity, floods, shortages of agricultural services, and canal repairs are secondary motives for diminished production and/or dislocation. Equipment and service deficiencies have made farmers incapable of clearing shrubs in riverine areas, and waterways have silted up. Sesame seeds, lemons, and bananas are the main cash crops currently grown in

Somalia, and if demand increases, they can be highly profitable; creating large profits involves obtaining and combining land and having usable employment.

The non-existence of a systematised market, low demand during the production period, the expensiveness of developed varieties, and disease were the topmost recognised problems by banana producers. In addition, a main constraint is the need for more infrastructure and equipment to store and use bananas during times of shortage. Most respondents accepted that the abovementioned factors caused the decline in banana exports in the Merka district of Somalia.

Further research was conducted to describe the problems and obstacles to banana production and marketing in the agricultural development project of Merka district in the lower Shabelle region, southern Somalia, support techniques, success, and influence. Box 1 presents a box describing banana production and marketing in the agricultural development support techniques, success, and influence.

Box 1: Problems Obstacle Banana Production and Marketing in the Agricultural Development Project of Merka District in the Lower Shabelle Region, Southern Somalia

Local market

According to Baars and Riediger (2008), recent field research on bananas indicates that the current cost of production is averaging USD 670/ha/year. Average production levels are at 35t/year/ha, whereas a new plantation takes about one year from planting to maturity and about two years of actual production. Picking intervals are timed every 15 days. Significant variations in yields and cultivation practices were observed during the study, mostly due to local market forces. The current farming practices applied reflect the prices available for the local market. However, if export quality is achieved within six months, practices must be adjusted upwards to USD 2,849 per ha and year. It is prospected that for the first year 30% of the produce will reach export quality resulting in a farm-gate break-even price of USD 102 per t of exportable bananas. For the second year, up to 50% and finally 70% could be exportable, resulting in break-even prices of USD 84 and USD 77 per t consecutively. The study indicated that technical know-how is still largely available among farmers. Soil and water analysis shows high nutritional contents with minimum supplementary fertilisers required to optimise them. Diseases prevalent in Somalia bananas are limited to nematodes, weevils, and, at times, a slight fungal attack by the *Mycosphaerella fijiensis*. Currently, the supply of fertilisers and agrochemicals poses a constraint, as irregular supply and high prices hinder farmers' planning ability. Moreover, the machine park available in the area for land preparation, supplementary pump irrigation, and, most importantly, maintenance of its irrigation systems could be better. However, it is costly to operate and inefficient. If not improved, the input supply and machinery-related constraints will likely hinder farmers' ability to secure the quality and quantity of produce essential to the revival of banana exports. Production generally fluctuates depending on climatic conditions during Somalia's four main seasons. The peak production is generally between October and March, whilst declining to June/July with almost half of the production compared to the highest level and only increasing in late September and October. Today, Somali bananas are mainly sold in South Central Somalia, though there are indications that at least 15% of the volume is reaching Somaliland and Puntland (Distance over 800km). Farmers either directly negotiate with urban traders or sell the produce through brokers.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study highlights the importance of banana business exportation for economic development in Somali society. Without it, it can negatively affect Somali people, particularly banana farmers, their families, and all banana stockholders. Such negative impacts include unemployment, poverty, currency devaluation, migration, and the potential for increased civil war and piracy among Somali youth. Supporting and developing the banana industry is crucial for mitigating these consequences.

Recommendations: The researchers propose several critical recommendations for the Somali government,

banana farmers, agronomists, economists, and all stakeholders involved in the banana industry. These include improving security in banana farm areas, revitalising existing markets, and exploring new ones. The recommendations also involve encouraging local production, providing investments and infrastructure support, training and involving experts, promoting a free and competitive market, empowering different aspects of the business, and attracting foreign investors. By implementing these measures, Somalia can enhance economic development, increase job security, and foster sustainable growth in the banana sector.

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