

Review

Cotton in West Africa: The economic and social stakes (2006). Book review, OECD publishing, Paris, pp. 127, ISBN: 92–64–022505 7

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Since their inception multilateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) have always been at loggerheads with Africans and African producers. These institutions have been blamed for advancing an agenda that exploits third world countries (3WCs) resources for the benefit of the north, debates at WTO forums have been most acrimonious with the suspension of the Doha ‘development agenda’ trade negotiations in July 2006 due to an impasse on the issue of reforming rich countries’ farm subsidies. The north has been accused of subsidizing its agricultural producers and exporters to the detriment of 3W farmers who try but find it hard to penetrate international markets. It is against this backdrop that the book cotton in West Africa comes in as a welcome contribution that further exposes the mal-trade practices perpetrated by the developed countries.

Key words: Peasant producers, multilateral institutions, survival strategies

INTRODUCTION

In this book the organisation for economic co-operation and development (OECD) analyse the production of a strategic crop, cotton, in West Africa (and the Sahel). West Africa is conceptualized as the 15 ECOWAS countries plus Mauritania, Chad and Cameroon. The issues surrounding the evolution and development of cotton production in West Africa, its economic and social stakes, the challenges faced by the sub-sector internally and problems on the international market are the major themes discussed in the executive summary and introduction. Apart from highlighting the thrust of the book, the introduction of chronicles, the various initiatives that have been adopted by West African stakeholders (producers’ organizations, civil society, NGOs and politicians) to address the challenges the sub-sector faces. The initiatives laid down are not just from West Africa but also other stakeholders in the cotton industry like the African Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) and the European Union. Notwithstanding the initiatives harm to 3WCs products has continued hitherto because the Europeans and Americans have continued to provide support measures to their agriculture. The result has been overproduction and artificially lowered international prices.

Chapter 2 highlights the strategic importance of cotton production and trade to West Africa. It indicates the total population of the region and the proportion that is directly and indirectly involved in the cotton industry. The chapter also brings out the fact that cotton production done on small landholdings of 2 to 3 ha is usually one activity that is often part of a diverse range of activities. The others could be cereal and vegetable production to meet the farmer’s consumption and income needs. This scenario is juxtaposed with the situation in the north where in some cases a small number of more specialized farmers produce cotton on large, highly mechanized farms characterized by high input use. The chapter notes that West African cotton is produced using moderate levels of inputs and relatively cheap family labour. The contribution of cotton to national foreign exchange revenues is also highlighted but despite this importance reliance on export crops and primary commodities is clearly not a secure route to poverty reduction. This is so because, as the chapter notes, these are prone to price volatility on the international market as well as climatic and environmental risk factors.

Several parts comprise chapter 3. The first part deals with the cotton support systems that are in place and the

correlation between cotton and cereal production that is described as strong. Some of the support measures highlighted are consistent provision of fertilizer, pesticides, extension services, credits and technology. Debates surrounding the use of biotechnology cotton are also alluded to in the first part. Some are skeptical about the use of Biotech cotton while others argue that there are no known environmental and human health risks because no thorough research has been done in that direction. It is possible to take an exception to these views. Biotech cotton and cotton products have been tested extensively and have proven safe for the environment and human use.

The second part of the chapter discusses the existence of a correlation between cotton producing areas and improved access to social as well as economic and productive services. It highlights the fact that communities, the state and national cotton companies invest in collective resources such as schools, dispensaries, stores, water pumps and so on. These resources are available not just to cotton producing people but to non-producers as well. Towards the end of the chapter issues of gender and sustainable development are discussed. It indicates that women and children have gained in voice, skills and access to assets through income derived from cotton production. The questions of social, economic and environmental sustainability are briefly discussed here. While the use of organic manures is proposed their economic viability in the short term is questioned. Economic sustainability is said to hinge on increasing the capacity to process cotton fibre in West Africa and strengthening regional trade in finished products.

Chapter 4, West African perspectives, challenges for the cotton sub-sector, is supposed to cover the trials and tribulations of this industry in the region. However, more than the challenges faced by the cotton sub-sector, the chapter deals with some of the priority activities necessary to address the challenges the sector faces. Issues like finding a solution to low prices and price volatility and the need to develop processing capacity in the region are highlighted among others. It also raises the need to promote diversification.

In Chapter 5, there are questions that are addressed to stakeholders in the West African cotton sub-sector. Some of the questions are directed to the cotton producers themselves and their organizations while others are directed at the regional and international players in the cotton industry. Overall, these questions are a wake-up call to players in the industry for policy reform and policy coherence if challenges bedeviling the cotton industry in West Africa are to be tackled head on.

Conclusions from the foregoing discussions form Chapter 6. Among others it highlights the critical role of cotton in producers' livelihoods, agricultural development processes, national economic development, maintaining foreign exchange revenues for a large number of West

African countries and its contribution to accessing services and poverty reduction. The conclusion indicates areas that yearn for further study and analysis such as the real place of cotton in poverty reduction given the price pressures and volatile international markets. It also calls for the need to identify concrete diversification opportunities away from cotton.

It is my considered view that the separation of chapters 2, the strategic importance of cotton production and trade in West Africa and 3, role of cotton in livelihoods and access to services is frivolous (or superfluous). The baseline is that both chapters deal with the importance and contribution of the cotton sub-sector to the region and as such these could have been easily lumped together.

There was also a need to contextualise cotton production in West Africa. A different chapter dealing with the colonial development of cotton production in both Anglophone and Francophone West Africa could have given us the necessary historical perspective to contemporary cotton production in the region. Issues to do with how the British cotton growers association (BCGA) and French companies distributed seed, tools and other support services to farmers (Isaacman, 1996) and how these growers were swindled out of their products at marketing should have been discussed (Vail and White, 1980). This could have given us the historical/colonial background to cotton production so that we appreciate the continuation of exploitation of African products on the international market.

All said and done, the book achieved its goal. The economic and social stakes of cotton production in West Africa are appreciated if one goes through the paper. Case studies that illuminate the general trends have been used. However, the colonial development of the production of cotton in the region needed detailed discussion so that one appreciates the neo-colonial nature of what's going on at the international scene today. This book is useful not just to agriculturalists alone but academics and development practitioners pre-occupied with what West Africa in particular and Africa in general needs to do as it grapples with the challenge of development.

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