

Lifting horticulture Tanzania to a higher level



“We want to give something back to Africa”, says Heikki Niskala, managing director of Rijk Zwaan Afrisem, a subsidiary of the Dutch seed company from De Lier, that has been developing special vegetable varieties for the African market.

“Since 2003 we have been doing very well with our seed company in Arusha, Rijk Zwaan Q-Sem, producing hybrid seeds for worldwide markets. Climate, conducive labour and year-round production (near the equator) makes this location very favourable for the production of tomato and cucumber seeds. But since there are no quality seeds available for local farmers, we thought it necessary to fill that gap.”

So in 2008 Afrisem was born, a joint initiative of Rijk Zwaan and East West Seeds, the biggest seed company in South East Asia that is also active in Tanzania. Since then the company, situated on a 20 hectare plot outside Arusha, at the foot of Mount Meru, has been breeding hybrid varieties suitable for the local market, that are characterised by higher yields and better resistance to pests and diseases. In one of the greenhouses Niskala offers a bite in a small but very juicy and tasteful cucumber, one of the products that has been selected for Tanzania. There are also sweet peppers, African

egg plant (‘the bitter one, compared to aubergine’), African kale, tomatoes and hot peppers in the greenhouses and open fields. Developing the right varieties takes a long time, stresses Niskala. “Extensive trials are necessary to get the best hybrid seeds. Only next year, six years after the start of Afrisem, we shall start marketing our first product, the African eggplant.”

Only major seed company

The company, that employs 75 Tanzanians (Q-Sem has a workforce of 220 people) aims to raise the African horticultural sector to a higher level by promoting the use of quality seeds and small, affordable greenhouses. “We are the only major seed company in Africa that is involved in plant breeding entirely for Africa”, says Niskala. The efforts of Rijk Zwaan Afrisem, that carries the motto ‘Sharing a healthy future’ are highly appreciated by the Tanzania Horticulture Association (TAHA), that also works for the future development of the sector in the East African country. “With a yearly growth of between

9 and 12 percent horticulture is the fastest growing agricultural sector in Tanzania”, says Anthony Chamanga, policy and advocacy manager at TAHA. „In the coming years we hope to grow by twenty percent.” The export of horticultural produce (flowers, vegetables, fruits, plants and cuttings, seeds and herbs) earned the country in 2013 380 million dollars, compared to 350 million in 2011. “That’s 30 percent of Tanzania’s total export of agricultural products”, according to Chamanga. Between 2012 and 2013 the total tonnage of horticultural exports increased from 200.000 tonnes to 260.000 tonnes.

Quite an achievement, since about six years ago the sector was hardly worth mentioning. The government till that time put most emphasis on traditional export crops like coffee, tea and cotton. Horticultural products were mainly grown on a small scale for the local market. But the need to diversify became apparent when prices at the world market soared. Neighbour Kenya acted as a perfect example of how horticulture could earn the country lots of foreign exchange. “We as TAHA have played an important role in boosting the industry and positioning the horticultural value chain at a competitive edge”, says Chamanga. „We closely work together with the government and foreign partners, like the Dutch embassy and the American organisation USAID, that support us with money and expertise.”

EU, US and the East

TAHA has identified six strategic areas (North, Coast, Southern Highlands, Central Zone, Lake Zone and Zanzibar) that are highly suitable for horticulture, the Northern zone (Arusha, Kilimanjaro, Manyara, Tanga) being the most important one. With many Dutch companies present, such as Dekker Bruins (chrysanthemum), Moerman (zantedeschia), Schoneveld (cyclamen en primrose), Fides (chrysanthemum, pelargonium and kalanchoë) Kiliflora (roses), Dutch Farms (lisianthus), Rijk Zwaan (seeds), Enza Seeds and Oasis Young Plants (cuttings and young plants). The main products for export are roses and summer flowers, seeds and cuttings, French beans, sugar snaps, baby corns and baby carrots, sweet and hot peppers, tomatoes, ginger and garlic, cucumbers, onions, mangoes, avocado’s, bananas and pineapples. About 80 percent of the produce is sold to the EU, the rest goes to the United States and the East. Most products leave the continent through Nairobi airport, the rest is carried on passenger planes (KLM, British Airways) that fly to and fro Kilimanjaro International Airport in Arusha on a daily basis.

“For future growth of the sector it’s important that the cargo capacity is

increased”, stresses Chamanga. „At the same time the farmers have to secure a constant flow of produce. At the moment this isn’t the case, so potential clients might look elsewhere.” Whenever the farms need assistance with permits or land and tax issues, TAHA steps in as intermediate. „We discuss the issues with the relevant authorities until we reach a compromise that is acceptable to all parties.” The organisation also helps mainly small scale farmers looking for markets, handling pesticides in the right way and with transport and clearing and forwarding. Promoting the sector is another important task of TAHA. Chamanga: “We want to do everything as perfect as possible and learn from the successes and mistakes of Kenya. All produce for export has to be of the highest quality, since the EU, our main market, has put such stringent import requirements in place.”

Much loved by consumers

For René Kleinveld and Christine Brandsma Northern Tanzania is the perfect location for their company Oasis Young Plants that is situated in Moshi, on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. On 2 1/2 ha (the farm itself is 8 1/2 ha) they produce premium cuttings and young plants of 40 different varieties of succulents and heat-loving plants (such as rhipsalis, haworthia, gasteria, echeveria, crassula, lepidium, monadenium and peperomia). “Water and climate are excellent and Kilimanjaro International Airport is only 25 km away. At a height of 1000 meters above sea level we have relatively more sun hours”, says Kleinveld. The work force – Oasis employs 110 Tanzanians – is conducive and cheaper than in Europe, he adds. The farm also breeds new varieties, that can be found in the ultra modern, fully computerised greenhouses, in all funny shapes, sizes and colours, that are much loved by consumers in the West. Because of high demand the company will put another ha under production by next year.

The farm flourishes despite setbacks (cuttings that refuse to root) and bureaucratic hurdles (permits, overzealous tax inspectors) that the Dutch growers have to overcome time and time again. “Challenges that will never go away”, says Kleinveld.

A sentiment that is shared by Heikki Niskala of Rijk Zwaan Afrisem. “Bureaucracy is quite a challenge but is part and parcel of working in a developing country. By working fully above board in a legal and official manner, we manage to keep a good relationship with the authorities.” Not in the least because of Afrisem’s efforts to uplift vegetable growing and nutrition in the country. Niskala: „In ten years time many local vegetable farmers will use hybrid seeds.”