

## Bittersweet Harvests for Global Supermarkets: Challenges in Latin America's Agricultural Export Boom

by Lori Ann Thrupp with Gilles Bergeron and William F. Waters  
World Resources Institute, pub., \$19.95

### Review by Don Reeves

When the snow is deep, and my wife, Barbara, wants to do something special for me, she'll buy and fix some fresh asparagus or snowpeas. Likewise, I may pick up a bunch of cut flowers for her, if I think I can get them home without freezing.

Odds are that these special treats, and many other out-of-season vegetables, flowers and fruit come from relatively new production areas in Latin America. They are non-traditional agricultural exports (NTAEs), as opposed to traditional agricultural exports from the same areas such as coffee and bananas, which have always been tropical, and beef and cotton, which have been exported long enough that they are now "traditional."

Roses from Colombia, snow peas from Guatemala, strawberries from Costa Rica, and broccoli from Ecuador all share two important characteristics: High value per unit and labor-intensive production. It is these very qualities that make them attractive as development tools in poor countries where jobs are scarce.

But how much of the \$3.50 per pound for asparagus actually reaches the farmer or worker who produced it? What were the conditions like for the women who grew the flowers? And, what about pesticides and other chemicals now prohibited in the United States?

In *Bittersweet Harvests for Global Supermarkets: Challenges in Latin America's Agricultural Export Boom*, Lori Ann Thrupp, Ph.D., senior associate at World Resources Institute (WRI), and co-authors Gilles Bergeron and William F. Waters survey the scope of the veritable explosion of NTAEs, then balance some clear gains with real problems and risks.

Not surprisingly, since the publisher

is WRI, the authors focus heavily on questions of environmental sustainability. But they also include questions of equity and social impact as part of their analysis and recommendations. Jonathan Lash, WRI President, notes, "If sustainable development means anything, Dr. Thrupp and her colleagues maintain it means not just conserving the natural resource base, but also ensuring a better life for the rural poor."

The thin volume is fact-laden – with 298 endnotes for 147 pages, and is a little heavy going in places – 10 acronyms in one paragraph, for instance, eight of which don't appear earlier in the text. And since several of the analyses are based on pre-1990 data, I was left wondering in a few places what has happened since. Nevertheless, it is a rich lode.

Practically everyone, it seems, is contributing to the rapid increase in NTAEs in Latin America. Vegetable consumption in the United States has increased steadily over the past two decades, with a growing preference for fresh vegetables and fruit over canned goods. Governments hard pressed to earn more dollars to pay debts, or increase imports, press NTAE development, and producers respond. Development agencies, especially USAID, have been glad to assist as have chemical suppliers, transporters, and middlemen.

NTAEs are now counted in billions of dollars; new jobs in hundreds of thousands. But not all the fruits are sweet. *Bittersweet Harvests* analyzes three sets of problems: economic viability, environmental soundness, and social equity.

Over time, say the authors, the economic problems will reach a balance. First innovators, by tapping a new market, will make the most profit. Those who copy may or may not strike riches. And

many small farmers will be forced out of the NTAE markets because the markets are extremely volatile -- a freeze in Florida may spell the difference between huge profits and loss. Growers with deeper pockets and better access to information tend to survive. Growing more than one crop may spread the risk, but is not yet common practice.

Environmental problems are of two principal types: toxicity from high uses of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and soil depletion. Some misuse of chemicals is from lack of good information. But investment in crops is high, as is the premium for blemish-free produce. Many pests and diseases are particularly virulent on temperate crops grown under tropical conditions. Growers are strongly tempted to rely on chemicals that "work," even though not approved, using too much chemical or unnecessary treatments. Better information and integrated pest management – treatment only when pests are present, and improved cultural and organic practices – can reduce some risks, but increase others. They also require more knowledge by producers, so are catching on slowly.

Soil depletion is partly tied to the third, and probably thorniest of the problems: social equity and control over land and other resources. Traditional exports, except coffee, are usually grown on large farms, and very often on the best land. Cotton, sugar cane, and particularly beef all require extensive acreage. Most of the best land is owned by relatively few people, while poorer farmers farm land more subject to erosion.

The good news is production of NTAEs starts from a somewhat different base. Many of these crops must be grown in the highlands where land ownership is

more dispersed and owners less well-off. But these growers, many indigenous, are often disadvantaged in access to credit, market information, or other amenities. The question of whether control over NTAE agriculture can remain with small producers is still an open, and critical, question.

By focusing on and linking these problems in measured ways, while recognizing that NTAE production will likely continue to grow, even to become traditional, Lori Ann Thrupp and colleagues have done good service. They offer six recommendations to help make growing more equitable and sustainable:

1. Promote participatory approaches, especially by including poorer farmers and workers in agricultural development decision-making and in socioeconomic opportunities.
2. Build a policy environment to mitigate or avoid adverse impacts of NTAEs and to support and multiply sustainable and equitable patterns of trade and agricultural development.
3. Promote and develop sustainable agricultural technologies and practices, stressing integrated pest management (IPM), organic practices, and crop diversity, through changes by all actors in the production-market chain.
4. Balance policy attention toward local vs. export production, placing priority on alleviating hunger and fulfilling local food security needs.
5. Help empower and increase the status of poor producers and workers in production and marketing to overcome market barriers and to promote equitable alternatives.
6. Increase information on market conditions and impacts of agroexports, and improve access to such information for a broad audience of interested people.

If followed, these recommendations should slow or reverse environmental damage and increase social equity. Even those involved in traditional agriculture can benefit from this book's wisdom.

*Don Reeves, long-time farmer and Quaker activist, is economic policy analyst for the Bread for the World Institute.*

## Books in Brief

### The Hunger Report 1995

Edited by Ellen Messer and Peter Uvin  
Gordon and Breach Publishers, \$25

*The Hunger Report 1995* highlights progress over the past five years on the problems of food shortage, poverty-related hunger, maternal-child nutrition and health, and micronutrient malnutrition. Individual essays assess: advances in ending famine deaths, especially by moving food into zones of armed conflict; ending hunger in half the world's poorest households, especially by expanding health coverage for mothers and children; and the elimination of Vitamin A and iodine deficiencies as public health problems.

### The International Food Agencies

by Ross B. Talbot.  
Scarecrow Press, \$29.95.

This historical dictionary lists the major food aid organizations of the world and gives factual data on the persons, institutions, and mechanisms that make them work as well as the goals they pursue and the issues they tackle. One in a series of volumes on international organizations, (other volumes include *The International Monetary Fund* and *Refugee and Disaster Relief Organizations*) this book is for academics, students and librarians as well as anyone who observes or participates in the activities of these organizations.

### The Essential Internet: Basics for NGOs

by InterAction's Alliance for a Global Community and VITA.  
InterAction, \$12.00 plus \$3.00 for shipping and handling.

This 50-page guide is the first how-to directory of development-related Internet sites geared toward the international relief and development audience. It offers options for getting on-line such as how to choose a provider and what are useful key terms to search. Aimed at the individual or small business owner, the text explains basic concepts and gives simple instructions that illuminate many of the Internet's intricacies.

### Agriculture and Environment: Bridging Food Production and Environmental Protection in Developing Countries

Anthony S.R. Juo and Russell D. Freed, editors.  
American Society of Agronomy, \$25.00.

In light of the movement toward sustainability, agricultural development has created great uncertainty in many developing countries. While industrial nations are concerned with overproduction, shrinking markets and soil, air and water pollution, many developing countries are striving to meet their basic needs. Thus, there is a sizeable gap between

developed and developing nations in terms of the goals and aspirations of food production. In this 275-page softcover book, more than 30 experts in various fields discuss how society can develop new global land use strategies as well as food production and distribution systems that can enhance natural resources and protect the environment across international boundaries. Not an authoritative prescription to cure food production and environmental problems, this is, instead, a general interest book aimed at creating a better understanding and awareness of some important issues for a wide range of readers.

### Population and Food in the Early Twenty-First Century

Nurul Islam, editor.  
International Food Policy Research Institute, single copies free; additional copies \$10.00 each

This book is the result of a 1994 meeting of some 30 experts from a range of disciplines sponsored by the United National Fund for Population Activities and the International Food Policy Research Institute. The volume focuses on the long-term balance between food supply and demand in view of unprecedented population increases. Nine chapters and 11 commentaries examine global and regional population prospects to 2010, including projections of world and regional population growth and three alternative projections of food supply and demand. Food supply, land and water use and environmental changes such as global warming are discussed. The volume also considers recent breakthroughs in biotechnology and other agricultural technological progress and the implications of these factors on food prices.

### State of the World 1996

by Lester R. Brown.  
The Worldwatch Institute, \$11.95.

The annual compendium of policy analysis in the fields of environment, health, resource consumption and even taxation has, once again, garnered favorable reviews from the national media. *The Washington Post* calls it, "carefully spelled out and documented." *The New York Review of Books*, commends it for "always offer(ing) logical solutions." *The New York Times* says it "Has the courage to take a cool, scientific look at what is happening and tries to figure out the causes." Lester Brown's 200-page volume appears in 27 languages with a worldwide readership purported to be in the millions. *State of the World 1996* is undoubtedly an important reference for development specialists, government officials, corporate planners and other concerned citizens.

—Lynn Crawford Cook  
Book Review Editor