Review

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 Dos 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 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 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 farmers 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 286 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, says the authors, the economic problems will reach a balance. First innovators, by tipping 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 biomass-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 basis. 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 poor 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-markchain.

4. Balance policy allocation toward local producers, especially by including poor farmers and workers in agricultural development decision-making and in socioeconomic opportunities.

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 agroprices, 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 vision.

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 Mooney and Peter Uvin
Quaker Church Publishing, $25

The Hunger Report 1995 highlights progress over the past five years on its problems of food shortages, poverty-related hunger, maternal-child nutrition and health, and preexisting vulnerabilities. Individual essays assess advances in ending famine deaths, especially by moving food to areas 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 other deficiencies as major health problems.

The International Food Agencis by Ron T. Talus
Scarecrow Press, $29.95

This technical dictionary lists the major food aid organizations of the world and gives factual data on the persons, institutions, and organizations that make them work as well as the goals they pursue and the issues they tackle. Out in 4-volumes on international organizations, earlier volumes include The International Monetary Fund and Refugee and Disaster Relief Organizations (this book is for academicians, 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 30-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 and ways to choose a provider and what useful key terms to search. Aimed at the individual or small business owner, the text explains basic concepts and gives simple instructions that illustrate many of the Internet's intricacies.

Agriculture and Environment: Bridging Food Production and Environmental Protection in Developing Countries
Annette S.R. Iac and Richard D. Freet, editors
American Society of Agronomy, $25.00

In light of the movement toward sustainable agricultural development has created great unrest in many developing countries. While industrial nations are concerned with overproduction and shrinking markets and soil, air and water pollution, many developing countries are striving to meet their basic needs. Thus, there is a sizable gap between developed and developing nations in terms of the goals and aspirations of food production. 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 in care of food production and environmental problems, this is, instead, a general interest book aimed at achieving a better understanding and awareness of some important issues for a wide range of readers.

Population and Food: In the Early Twenty-First Century
S. Nasr, 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 Nations Food and Nutrition Policy Institute. The volume focuses on the long-term balance between food supply and demand in view of unprecedented population increase, new chapters and 11 commentaries examine global and regional population trends in 2015, 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 technologies and the implications of these factors on food prices.

State of the World 1996
by Lester R. Brown
Norton, The New York Times Institute, $11.95

The annual compendium of policy analysis of the fields of environment, health, economics, and even nation 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, comments it "for "always offering" logical solutions." The New York Times says it "has the courage to take a cold, scientific look at what is happening and to figure out the causes." Lester Brown's 295-page volume appears in 27 languages with a worldwide readership purported to be in the millions. State of the World's 1996 is undoubtedly an important reference for development specialists, government officials, corporate planners and other concerned citizens.

— Lyn Crawford Cook
Book Review Editor

Winter 1996