

KEITT EXPORTERS: PUTTING MONEY IN THE POCKETS OF FARMERS

*Through its partnership with MESPT,
fruits and vegetable exporter has
significantly transformed its business*

**Japheth Mbandi,
Technical
manager, Keitt
Exporters.**

By Amos wachira

Located in the Kyangombe neighbourhood along Mombasa Road is Keitt Exporters. It is one of the leading fruit and vegetable exporters in the country.

Founded in 2002, the firm was initially shipping out 15 tonnes of mangoes and avocados to the Middle East market. At that time, it was being run by two directors, four permanent staff and fifteen casual workers. So limited were the firm's operations that its two directors used a pickup truck and a small saloon car respectively to fetch farm produce from suppliers.

Turning point

From humble beginnings, Keitt Exporters has grown in leaps and bounds. In 2015, the firm exported 13000 tonnes of farm produce with a gross turnover of Kshs2 billion. This heralded the beginning of its exponential growth that saw it recruiting over 100 permanent staff, 60 contracted employees and 500 casual workers. They were all under the stewardship of three directors. In contrast to its humble roots, the firm is currently using a fleet of 22



Fresh produce for export.

vehicles to collect produce from farmers.

Keitt Exporters is a fully fledged exporter with in-house consignment handling systems, ranging from packaging, transportation, warehousing, documentation to forwarding and shipping.

The company's export philosophy is based on two pillars – speed and vigilance, allowing it to guarantee the maximum freshness and quality of its products in the export market.

To ensure quality of produce, the fruit and vegetable exporter monitors each step of the production, procurement, and distribution

process. Consequently, it stands out from other exporters in the region.

This success, according to its technical manager Japheth Mbandi, was triggered by the firm's move to source farm produce directly from farmers as opposed to suppliers.

After this successful move, Keitt Exporters grew its business and expanded its export markets both in Europe and Middle East regions. It is critical to note that the firm's dramatic change of fortunes came after it partnered with with Micro Enterprises Support Programme Trust - MESPT.

"In 2011, we partnered with MESPT to work with farmers on the ground rather than sourcing the produce from suppliers. This was the beginning of our transformation," says Mr. Mbandi, whose job is to ensure that the firm has sufficient volumes of produce to ship to its customers spread in different parts of Europe and Middle East.

Timely intervention

According to the technical manager, MESPT interventions came in the form of farmer mobilization and training, as well as market diversification.

After the partnership, he says, Keitt Exporters was able to contract farmers



Above: Workers sort snowpeas for export. Below: Keitt Exporters employees pack avocados for export.

to grow vegetables for export, as the firm diversified the number of fresh produce that it was shipping abroad. These included snow peas and French beans.

Marketing of produce remains a challenge for most fruit and vegetable exporters in Kenya. Keitt Exporters also grappled with this hurdle, before its partnership with MESPT.

Through MESPT's support, the firm was able to attend the Fruit Logistica international trade fair in Berlin, among others. These were critical in giving the firm a new market base. It was able to identify clients in Netherlands, Hong Kong and Spain.

"In the same year, we contracted 38 farmers in Kabaa area of Machakos County to grow beans with a production rate of two tonnes per week. We have been working with these farmers up to date."

Due to the high demand for the beans variety in the overseas markets, Keitt Exporters is contracting farmers in Loitokitok to bolster the production of export vegetables. So far, Machakos farmers produce over 30 tonnes of beans every month, but this falls short of meeting the high demand for the produce.

Keitt's main produce is mangoes and avocados. The firm sources 4000 to 6000 tonnes of mangoes from Makueni County every year.

After the MESPT intervention, the firm also grew its avocados segment by a huge margin. The fruit, which is mainly sourced from Muranga' in Central Kenya enjoys a good market in Europe and Middle East.

However, the firm struggles to supply the two popular fruits - mangoes and avocados - throughout the year, considering that they are seasonal. This has been one of its major challenges so far.

"We are looking at other regions in Kenya where we can contract farmers to supply us with their produce since some crops like mangoes grow at different times of the year in various regions."

Mbandi says that in Subukia region of Nakuru County for example, avocados are ready for harvesting in July, a time when the

fruit is off season in Murang'a. He adds that the firm is looking at taking advantage of this since in July, the avocados command a good market.

Apart from popular varieties of mangoes like Apple Mango, Ngowe Mango, Tommy Artkin Mango, Sabeen Mango, Keitt Mango and Kent Mango that the firm ships abroad, it also exports batches of Custard Apple, Passion and Papaya.

In addition, the firm also exports other vegetables like Karela (Bitter Melon), Ochra (Lady Fingers), Dudhi (Bottle Curry), Aubergine, Green Chillies, Matoke, Curry Leaves, French Beans, Baby Corn, Snow Peas and Sugar Snaps in Middle East, Europe and Far East, where it has thirty two, twelve and ten clients respectively.

High volumes

The mango is Keitt Exporters' most popular good for export, according to Mbandi.

Seen as an excellent nutritional source, containing many vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants, as well as enzymes which aid in digestion and intestinal health, the fruit is also used in some parts of South East Asia as a health supplement.

Through the assistance from MESPT, the firm has managed to sustain high volumes of produce. This has been made possible by MESPT's move to train farmers as well as service providers on the best ways of optimizing crop production.

In that vein, MESPT has provided post harvest handling facilities to farmers in various locations. In Makueni for instance, MESPT has equipped farmers with a tree nursery so that they can get a different variety of mango trees.

Last year, says the technical manager who is charged with the task of ensuring that the produce meets the required quality specifications, Keitt supplied farmers with over 5000 grafted mango seedlings. Similarly in 2016, the farmers got 2000 seedlings to improve on the varieties of fruit produced.

These interventions have produced

excellent results, according to Mr. Mbandi.

"One of our challenges before MESPT's interventions was post harvest losses," he says. In Makueni for instance, pests and diseases have been adversely affecting mango production for a long period of time. Pests, especially the fruit fly, wreck havoc on farms and destroy the mango fruit, leading to heavy losses.

MESPT has since engaged farmers as well as service providers to introduce fruit fly traps, a mechanism that mitigates the fruit fly challenge.

"We offer advice and technical assistance to affiliated small farmers who form part of the company's supply network."

Through MESPT, farmers have been trained on handling the produce after harvesting, and the post harvest losses have come down to 30 per cent. Mbandi expects the figures to go down to 10 per cent or below, with the continued support from MESPT.

"In our early days, we did not have the capacity to train farmers. Fortunately, MESPT came to our rescue and trained both farmers and service providers to ensure continued quality of produce."

There is untapped potential in the export market, Mbandi says, adding that the firm is looking at getting the required certifications from the relevant authorities to allow it venture into supermarkets abroad.

Currently, Keitt Exporters is investing in its own farms - a 42 acres farm in Meru and a 128 acres farm in Subukia under avocados production.

"We are also looking into expanding into the Far East markets of China as well as tapping more clients in Kuwait and other Middle East countries. Farmers should work on delivering quality produce - we can assure them that the market is there," ends Mbandi.

