

Labour, Gender, and Poverty in Africa

Alexandra Booth, Olam International Ltd

Singapore

By 2050 Africa's population will reach 2.5 billion people, with 1.1 billion people in the workforce, making it the largest in the world. Likewise the number of households with disposable income will increase to 128 million over the next decade. Consequently, the African palm oil industry will inevitably experience reinvigoration and growth in order to meet a burgeoning regional demand for edible oil. Today, Africa has 60% of the world's arable land, yet most of its countries remain net importers of edibles oils, let alone basic food staples. Many leaders in the region have committed to increasing agricultural productivity 6% per annum under the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme, and have partnered with public and private investors on commercial and smallholder projects. Oil palm plantation development and its ancillary activities will act as a springboard for further expansion of the agricultural sector, increasing food security, and regional economic development.

The development of commercial and smallholder palm oil plantations will provide an equitable environment for women in particular, who already play a critical role in food and cash crop farming, accounting for 70% of agricultural workers. Through palm, female workers can benefit from an alternative source of income, better access to medical care and education for both their children and themselves. Furthermore, the development of associated critical infrastructure, training programs and provision of inputs will provide better access to local markets and increased productivity for all.

With the area under oil palm cultivation in Africa likely to reach 1.1 million hectares by 2020, and average labour productivity of one worker to eight hectares, the palm oil industry will play a critical role in generating employment for a growing population and establishing much needed infrastructure. Meanwhile, RSPO can provide a framework through which African policy makers and the private sector can address both social and environmental concerns, such as biodiversity, land tenure and use, child labour and work place standards. Additionally, the sustainable development of palm works in step with the region's effort to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (which will come under Sustainable Development Solutions post-2015), stimulating expansion of the agricultural sector, offering alternative rural livelihoods and eradicating poverty.