

'Green fuel': Bananas to help wean Angola off oil

November 25 2018, by Jorge Nsimba And Philippe Alfroy



Angola is aiming to expand its agricultural sector, which could provide many with employment

Boxes of still-green bananas were shifted one-by-one from a towering stack of crates into a refrigerated shipping container.

Stamped "From Angola, with love", the fruit is shipped to consumers 6,000 kilometres (3,700 miles) away and are part of Luanda's drive to diversify its economy and wean itself from its dependence on oil.

Novagrolider, a privately-owned company, produces several dozen tonnes of bananas every week to be shipped to Portugal.

The firm, founded 10 years ago with Portuguese investment, has become a poster child for the economic transformation that the Angolan government is seeking.

At Novagrolider's Caxito 600-hectare (1,500-acre) plantation 60 kilometres northwest of Luanda, the banana plants, protected with blue plastic bags, bend under the weight of their fruit.

In a nearby hangar with a corrugated iron roof, two staff delicately dip the freshly-picked bunches into vast washing pools.

The bananas are meticulously sorted after being washed and weighed with as many as 4,000 boxes prepared daily.

The best-looking fruit is earmarked for dispatch to foreign markets with the rest kept for sale locally.

"We have two grades—domestic and export," said supervisor Edwin Andres Luis Campos as he watches the [production line](#) closely.



As many as 4,000 boxes of bananas are prepared daily, with the best-looking fruit earmarked for dispatch to foreign markets

"Domestic will be sold here in Angolan supermarkets in about four or five days. Export will be shipped to Europe in refrigerated containers that will arrive in Europe in between 20 and 25 days."

Novagrolider's output has grown exponentially in recent years and its [parent company](#), Grupolider, which has interests in transport and property as well, employs 3,500 people.

It grows mangoes, pineapples and watermelons as well as bananas on its four fruit farms in Angola.

After a cautious start, company boss Joao Macedo's appetite and ambition grew rapidly.

"Two years ago we started exporting to the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo—but that wasn't viable because of the state of the roads," said Macedo in his air-conditioned office in Luanda.

Bananas, our 'green fuel'

"Despite competition from South America, the quality of our products nonetheless allows us to sell in Portugal and Spain. And that's not all."

Macedo hopes to double production to 170,000 tonnes annually and establish a foot-hold in the lucrative South African market.

Back in Caxito, the province's top agriculture official shares Macedo's enthusiasm.



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"We're financially encouraging small-scale farmers to increase the size of the areas they cultivate," said Eliseo Mateos.

"Until now they've mostly used their production for subsistence, but now we want them to grow more so they can sell their crops at market.

"Bananas are our 'green fuel'—here we have one possible way of diversifying the economy."

In the decade that followed the bloody 27-year civil war that ended in 2002, Angola enjoyed strong double-digit growth fuelled by oil, which

accounts for 90 percent of Angola's exports and 70 percent of government revenues.

But the slump in the price of crude in 2014 shook the economic model of the country, which is one of the poorest in Africa, locking it into a vicious cycle of economic contraction.

Unbridled inflation, recession, soaring debt and mass unemployment all followed.

'Persuade Angolans themselves'

President Joao Lourenco vowed to revive the economy when he took power one year ago.

Lourenco targeted expanding the agricultural sector, which could provide many Angolans with employment. While oil had brought in revenue for the government, it did not create many jobs or widespread wealth.



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And by producing more at home, the country would need to use less foreign currency to import food products.

Legislation to lure foreign investors has won plaudits from observers including Carlos Rosado de Carvalho, the editor of the leading *Expansao* economic magazine.

But he warned the road to prosperity will be long and winding.

"We need foreign assistance because we lack the capital, technology and

a trained workforce," said Rosado de Carvalho.

"They also have to persuade Angolans themselves to invest in their agriculture. And for that, they'll absolutely have to sort out the problem of property ownership."

Currently the law states that all land is the property of the state, a legacy of the country's post-independence Marxist-Leninist system.

"It took me three or four years to find land," said Novagrolider's Macedo.

"Until now, we haven't had any state assistance. If we had help with fuel, exports or training, we'd develop much faster."

Despite the hurdles, he is convinced of farming's potential.

"With government support and organisation, the agricultural sector could be the driving force of this country's development".

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Citation: 'Green fuel': Bananas to help wean Angola off oil (2018, November 25) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-11-green-fuel-bananas-wean-angola.html>

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