DOSSIER
AGRIBUSINESS

Senegal gets

Fertile and politically stable, Senegal is beginning to compete with Egypt and South Africa to export fresh fruit and vegetables to European markets. The government is also developing a major rice production centre around the Senegal River

By **Rose Skelton** in Saint-Louis

When Jean-Marie Goudiaby stood in a Waitrose supermarket in Britain in 2009 and saw his test-run organic sweet onions for sale for £1 ($1.50) each, it confirmed that his dream of becoming an exporter of high-quality niche vegetables from his native Senegal could become reality. "£1 is the price of one kilo of the same onions in Senegal," he says. "When you are exporting to the European Union, the product has to be innovative and have added value. They really loved the product," he says of the company that now distributes his onions. "It was new and original."

Goudiaby is part of a movement that is beginning to sweep Senegal. Companies are positioning themselves to be suppliers of fruit and vegetables to European markets. Ranging from small-scale farms such as Goudiaby's 50ha to the French-owned 300ha *Grands Domaines du Sénégal* farm, Senegal's fertile land, good climate, abundant reserves of water and its proximity to Europe are

growing

Red onion producers in the Senegal River valley bag up their goods

ROSE SKELTON FOR TAR

making it an economical and attractive alternative to agriculture-exporting countries such as Egypt, Kenya and South Africa.

SAFE TO INVEST

Stability is also a major consideration for investors, says Juan Carlos Leon, sourcing and business development director at Barfoots of Botley, a UK-based grower of produce in Senegal. "We invested in Senegal because it is a stable country in West Africa. Despite the government change [in 2012], there were no issues with the transition."

$59m

Value of Senegal's global vegetable exports in 2014, up from $24.9m in 2010

Goudiaby, whose sister Yolande does the manual work on part of their 50ha parcel in the sandy north of the country near the city of Saint-Louis, says that although northern Senegal is arid, it has a good climate for farming. With Senegal's tropical southern region – Casamance – caught in a long-running but low-level civil conflict, investing in a farm there did not make sense, says Jean-Marie, even though the Goudiaby siblings are natives of that region.

Under a scorching sun and blasted by the hot winds that draw sand across the flat landscape, Yolande and her sole helper dig trenches in the sand so that water pumped from a tributary of the Senegal river feeds into the crop beds. Red onions, a favourite on the local market and a staple of Senegalese cuisine, are the main crop. The Goudiaby farm also produces sweet onions, delicata squash, salad leaves, herbs and red chillies. It has a buyer for fresh black beans in Italy and is experimenting with grapes in the hope of being able to supply the local market, which currently imports grapes from South Africa.

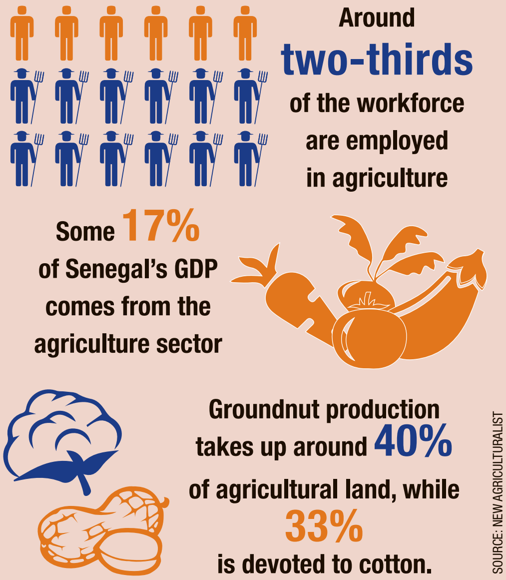
"[Our grapes] would be more affordable," says Jean-Marie, who has ambitions of joining the Lebanese and Guinean fruit traders in supplying the local market with these fruit. "We Senegalese are new in this business," he adds.

The Goudiaby siblings aim to farm the entirety of the 50ha that they own, but problems with crop-destroying insects and chilli-eating monkeys have held them back. Jean-Marie's goal, however, is to organise the many smallholder farmers in northern Senegal. They could form a collective to supply the European market and take a share in a sector currently dominated by foreign-owned companies. "The idea is to bring business to the smallholders," he says.

Scattered throughout the Senegal River Valley, where the Goudiaby siblings have started their farm, are the roofs of huge covered farms for companies such as Barfoots, which, in partnership with the Senegalese-owned *Société de Cultures Légumières*, produces sweetcorn, sweet potatoes, asparagus, chillies and beans on 2,000ha. Senegal's hot and dry weather, says Barfoot's Leon, "allows us to produce at key times of the year. This is when the crop from the northern hemisphere comes to an end and the new crop from the southern hemisphere is not quite ready, and vice versa." With this advantage, Senegal's global vegetable exports grew in value from $24.9m in 2010 to $59.1m in 2014, according to data from the UN Comtrade database.

GOVERNMENT RICE DRIVE

It is not just private investors who make up this new wave of growers. A few dozen kilometres from the Goudiaby farm, bright green rice fields stretch out along the horizon, where workers are bent low to the ground. Donkey carts rattle along dirt tracks that separate the smallholder paddy fields along the Senegal River. Irrigation channels and dams stretch from the river and its snaking tributaries, feeding the 60,612ha that the government has set aside for rice production. The government used a grant from the US Millennium Challenge Corporation to build



roads and irrigation infrastructure in the region. This valley is key to its goal of achieving self-sufficiency in rice production by 2017.

Seyni Ndao, the deputy CEO of the government-run *Société Nationale d'Aménagement et d'Exploitation des Terres du Delta du Fleuve Sénégal* (SAED), explains: "By 2017, our objective is to produce 1.08m tonnes of white rice a year. From Saint-Louis to Bakel, we are developing infrastructure, machinery, storage units, irrigation and drainage."

The government is keen to cut down on the costly importation of rice. It subsidises 40% of the cost of fertilisers and pays up to 60% of the cost of machinery for rice producers. Importers of foreign-grown rice are contractually obliged to

1.08m
tonnes of rice a year by 2017 is the production target for the Senegal River project

also buy locally produced rice, although at the moment Senegal does not produce enough to make distributers buy equal amounts.

Senegal currently imports low-quality, cheap rice from Asia that consumers generally prefer to the locally produced rice. The SAED is building 25 rice transformation centres to produce better-quality rice. It should be possible to sell local rice cheaper than imported rice, says the SAED, but both local and imported sell at 300 CFA francs ($0.51) per kilo. It is not clear how the government and other producers will convince the consumer to buy local rice unless they can lower the price.

ONION GLUT

Senegal's agricultural drive is creating both winners and losers. Carrying a dusty backpack and hitchhiking south from Saint-Louis, onion farmer Assane Sow takes out a handful of tomato seed packets that he hopes will provide an income to help his wife and three children. "There is overproduction of onions on the local market," he explains, "so I decided to stop farming onions."

In 2014, says Sow, he could sell a kilo of onions for 300 CFA francs. But now, with foreign onion imports frozen to encourage local production, a kilo of onions sells for just 100 CFA francs. "It's the government plan that is making us suffer," he says. "You see people who have no experience in farming, or people who were previously growing potatoes, now growing onions. Last year, the price was so good that now everyone is growing onions."

Jean-Marie Goudiaby, who also supplies the local market with onions, argues that this is just a momentary blip. Despite the challenges, he holds on to the memory of the moment his UK distributers received their first shipment of organic sweet Senegalese onions. "They were looking on the map at Senegal," he says, smiling. "They were thrilled: six days from Dakar to Dover and a low-cost production. We need business here," he says. "And the more business we have, the better." ●