

Green revolution with black gold

Last year Angola earned 48 billion US dollars from petroleum. Yet the country that was once Africa's largest agricultural producer is reduced to importing food. Now the government and private investors want to develop the agricultural sector, in the hope that Angola could become a new Brazil. But will there still be room for small-scale farmers?

Pungo Andongo is one of Angola's few tourist hotspots. And if Marco Brandão has his way, this historic location will point the way forward for Angola's agricultural sector. "Until not long ago, there was nothing but savannah here. But until a few years ago there was nothing in Mato Grosso, either, whereas today thanks to its agricultural production it is one of the richest states in Brazil."

The agricultural engineer steers his pickup over a broad field track. Harvesting machines the size of detached houses strip to and fro across the field, spluttering noisily and spitting the dried leaves of the sugarcane plants onto the ground. Sliced into forty-centimetre-long transplants, the sugarcane lands in lorries that trundle alongside the harvesting machine over the rough clod. "We still devote around 5,000 hectares exclusively to producing transplants," says Brandão and sweeps his gaze across the wide plateau. The sugarcane plantation is part of an emerging agroindustry park: the Pôlo Agroindustrial de Capanda (PAC) in Malanje Province is unparalleled in Angola and beyond.

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It covers an area of 410,000 hectares, of which almost 300,000 hectares are earmarked for farming use. The government wants this park in the valley of the Kwanza River to kick-start the resurgence of Angolan agriculture. Or more accurately: to catapult it into the future.

■ The woeful legacy of the civil war

Back in the 1960s the former Portuguese colony was Africa's largest agricultural producer. Freighters set off from Angola's ports to ship cargoes of sugar, cotton, bananas and palm oil all over the world. The country used to be the world's fourth-largest coffee producer.

But the war of independence, immediately followed in 1974 by the outbreak of civil war, put an end to all that. The National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), having been supported by the USA and the South African apartheid state, did not surrender until 2002 following the death of its leader Savimbi.

The civil war cost hundreds of thousands of lives, and huge sections of the infrastructure were destroyed. Outside the booming capital Luanda, burnt out tanks can still be seen, and buildings that have collapsed under continuous shelling like houses of cards. Even today, a great deal of arable land still lies fallow, so Angola has to import the majority of its food.

Over half of the country's imports are foodstuffs. But according to government figures, out of the country's total area of 124.7 million hectares, 30 million are usable for arable farming. That is almost one-third of the entire European Union's arable land area. Moreover the climatic conditions are excellent, particularly in the central highlands where two harvests a year are possible, depending on the crop. But so far this has drawn remarkably little interest – mainly because offshore oilfields and

Together with a sugar factory, the sugarcane plantation is to create jobs for just under 1,500 people.



Photo: J. Boethling



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A woman hacking weeds from coffee plants on the Fazenda of Fernando Sobral.

these players include China's Citic Construction. The company's red and white logo is in evidence throughout Angola.

But Odebrecht has the competitive edge at the PAC agro-industry park. By 2018 the sugarcane plantation is scheduled to

expand to 32,000 hectares. According to Brandão's figures, the plantation and the sugar factory will create 1,470 jobs. The plantation's Angolan operator is the Bioenergy Company of Angola (Biocom), a joint venture between Odebrecht, the state oil company Sonangol and a group of Angolan investors. It is an open secret that one of these is President dos Santos's daughter, who also happens to own the country's largest mobile telephony company. Nobody will confirm this officially, however. President dos Santos of the former liberation movement MPLA has been in office for almost 33 years. Nobody in Angola can defy his clan. Although the national flag still bears the machete and cogwheel symbols and the MPLA leadership still calls itself the politburo, Angolan-style socialism has been a sham for some long time.

■ Restoration work

Angola has a tradition of large-scale farms. During the Portuguese colonial era, predominantly large fazendas supplied the local and global market. On many of these the hard work was done by forced labourers. Small farmers tilled their land just to subsist. The bulk of agriculture and the associated production chain – marketing systems, the machinery and tool trade, ferti-

liser manufacture – was in Portuguese hands. When the country gained independence in 1975 and most of the Portuguese left, the agricultural sector collapsed.

A half-day car journey from the Biocom sugarcane plantations, sightseers can still view the remains of the illustrious past. The region around the small town of Calulo was one of the most important coffee production areas. It is reached by driving down a red sandy track. Turnings branch off on either side to abandoned fazendas. Briars sprawl among the white flowered coffee plants. The once-elegant villas are now derelict. On Fernando Sobral's fazienda the buildings are not in much better condition, but the plantation is being worked. "Over 100 years ago, my grandfather was the first to start farming in this region." The farmer beams from behind dark sunglasses. Behind him women with machetes are hacking down the weeds between the coffee bushes.

diamond mines generate abundant revenues, at least for the country's upper class. Luanda is the second most expensive city in the world after Tokyo. Yet now as ever the majority of the population lives in bitter poverty: 70 per cent still have to survive on less than 1.70 US dollars per day.

■ The first sugar factory takes shape

At the centre of the plantation, a sugar factory is just taking shape. It will be Angola's first sugar factory. "Before the war we had three in the country, but those are run down or destroyed now," says Marco Brandão, the Angolan with Portuguese roots, who grew up in Luanda and studied in Lisbon. His employer Odebrecht, based in Brazil, is one of the largest global corporations. In Brazil it is one of the most important sugar and ethanol producers; in Angola Odebrecht has built bridges, roads, dams and shopping centres. For around five years the corporation has also been active in agriculture, mainly on behalf of the state agricultural agency Gesterra (Gestão das terras aráveis). Founded six years ago, the agency's mandate is to develop large-scale farms. It has commissioned various global players to clear and cultivate several thousands of hectares per farm. Along with Odebrecht

■ Prices set by the state

"Fighting in this region was fierce until the end." Fernando Sobral went to live in Luanda for a while, and for longer in Portugal where he worked in the pharmaceutical industry for 14 years. Now he is trying to get the plantation flourishing again. In the colonial era, the family harvested 500 tonnes of dried coffee beans per year from the plantation, which is around 700 hectares in size. Today five tonnes is all they produce. The plantation can only be worked by hand, and is fertilised with fermented fruit flesh and plant residues. In Angola, chemical fertilisers cost three or four times the global market price. Pesticides are not used either. "So our production is organic," says Fernando Sobral and grins. But the farm cannot afford to gain certification. The price for the shelled and dried beans is set by the state – and is much too low, in the opinion of most producers. Fernando

Sobral earns more by selling his manioc and the self-produced palm oil that he markets directly to Luanda. "Really I ought to modernise the plantation completely, but the necessary support isn't there," he says.

Ownership rights to agricultural land do not exist in Angola. Users lease their fields and arable land from the government. When most of the Portuguese fled in 1975, the socialist government confiscated their land but made no sweeping changes to tenant farming law. Those who stayed on, like the Sobral families, kept the land. The other fazendas fell into the hands of high-ranking army officers or the nomenclatura of the governing MPLA party. Few of these tenants if any have paid any attention to their holdings so far. But that is now changing.

■ A chance for small farmers, too?

Since the financial crisis of 2008 and a brief slump in demand on the petroleum market, the government has registered that the country's economy can be diversified with the help of agriculture. After all, a country like Brazil earns thirty per cent of its gross national product from agriculture. Angolan businesspeople, politicians and military leaders are now beginning to invest in arable land. This is evident from the first large-scale farms and meat plants, constructed by experts flown in from Portugal or the Netherlands. Skilled workers come in their largest numbers from the former motherland, battered by the economic crisis.

But how compatible is this with the subsistence agriculture of the country's many small farmers? Virgilio Nguli from the village of São Pedro sees his farm as his lifeline. It feeds his family of five. It was still wartime when he took over the farm in Kwanza Sul province from his father, and repeatedly had to flee from fighting in the surrounding mountains

and forests. Only since the permanent ceasefire has he been able to make full use of his resources.

Virgilio Nguli's fields slope down towards a small river. If need be, he can irrigate them with river water. But in fact there is sufficient rainfall on the Kwanza Sul plateau, meaning that in the former granary of Angola, tillage farming can continue all year round – if the resources to do so are available. After the war, Virgilio Nguli had no seed. Agricultural equipment was also non-existent. "Without the seed bank I would not have made it this far." The 56-year-old points to his fields of chillies, garlic, potatoes and maize. The seed bank, established with German support from *Brot für die Welt* (BfdW, Bread for the World), is organised on a cooperative basis. It loans out transplants and seeds. After the harvest, the farmers must give back double the quantity. Virgilio Nguli started producing maize and beans. He took his very first bean harvest to the capital, Luanda. For the first leg of the journey, he transported almost a tonne of beans to the great river using a yoke of oxen. "The bridge was still destroyed and I had to cross by boat." From there, they continued by lorry. "The trip took two days but for that I got a really good price in Luanda." Virgilio Nguli runs a hand over the grey stubble on his face, and grins. He can spout the figures for all his inputs and returns off the top of his head. His nine hectares make Virgilio Nguli the second largest farmer in São Pedro.

■ Concern over land rights

The population of Angola numbers

Farmer Virgilio Nguli with his son. He makes use of the seed bank set up with the support of Brot für die Welt.

Photo: J. Boethling



just 18 million people in an area more than three times the size of Germany. Only one-fifth of its potential arable land is in use. So says the government, at least. Does this figure include the land used by the small farmers of São Pedro? They are not in possession of land titles or tenancy contracts. Many do not even have identity documents. "We receive information from various sources and from reports by partner organisations about the unjust granting of land-use titles in Angola," says Petra Aschoff, regional officer for Southern Africa at BfdW. She hears that the state is increasingly reassigning small farmers' traditional land-use rights to private investors. "This results in de facto land dispossessions which deprive smallholders of their subsistence base," Petra Aschoff goes on.

Marco Brandão from Odebrecht believes in the coexistence of agroindustry and farmers in the province of Malanje. "They will benefit from the infrastructure that we are creating here with Biocom." Odebrecht is supporting small farmers in the immediate vicinity with a project that, among other things, supports vegetable production. Women in particular are earning money from it by selling vegetables to the Odebrecht canteens and at local markets. They talk enthusiastically about their new business venture. Is this the start of a livelihood that can be sustained? Perhaps, but only if they are not forced out by one of the large-scale farms in the near future.