

As one of the fastest growing economies in the world, India is an attractive market for many in the fresh produce sector. Having recently returned from a visit to Mumbai, Fruit South Africa CEO Dr. Konanani Liphadzi speaks with www.freshfruitportal.com about driving an ambitious plan to supply much higher volumes to the country's increasing quality-conscious consumers.

“Our message to the world already is that South Africa exports some of the best quality fruit to global markets, so supplying excellent high quality on a consistent level to a market the size of India is not a concern at all,” she says.

“South Africa has fantastic quality apples that could easily go to that market and citrus has the same potential. Apples are a big import category in India and are very popular in the local market.”

Although small quantities of apples and pears have been exported from South Africa, high tariffs have been a major deterrent for the industry as a whole.

Liphadzi says there is no need to cite this as an issue any longer. Having spoken with several key players on the Indian side, she's confident South African producers and exporters can gain a substantial foothold in the Indian market.

“One thing I've learned is that those high tariffs apply across the board, all over the world, therefore for us in South Africa we don't have an excuse and we should compete.

“It's the same high tariffs for everybody else so for me it was more encouraging to know that we are not the only ones, because sometimes you look at South Africa and think it's kind of blocked out and we are using tariffs as a barrier.

“But it was interesting to see how for example, Washington apples are all over the place, you go anywhere and you find them in India – therefore it could be the same for South African produce.”

But what needs to happen on a practical level for the South African fruit sector to really make meaningful gains in the Indian market?

“We need to establish good relations with Indian companies, especially the importers on that side so that we can work with them better.

“We obviously already work with South African agricultural government departments and would need to work with the counterparts within the Indian government.

“On the consumer side, we need to create some form of awareness because consumers need to know about South African fresh produce and all of our offerings, and then partnering with local companies can help us in developing the market in terms of creating that awareness and getting our products to the Indian market.”

Another interesting insight for Liphadzi whilst in India was the country's ‘informal channels’ and the way exporters manage to work with huge numbers of smallholder farmers whilst maintaining quality.

“I got to learn a lot about the Indian market. While South Africa goes through the formal channels, the formal retailers and organized systems, in India a lot of the produce goes through the informal markets, such as guys on bicycles delivering fruit, or somebody carrying a basket on their head going out house to house and those kinds of channels.

“An Indian exporter can get produce from such a huge network of smallholder farmers and this was an interesting point for me, because how can you work with so many farmers and still get a good quality produce that is in line with whatever the standards require?

“This was honestly amazing for me to learn as that's an issue we have been dealing with in South Africa; to try to get the smallholder farmers to a level where they can produce to a level which can satisfy the market, especially the export market.”

With careful organization and regulation, Liphadzi believes it's doable and this model could be replicated in South Africa.

“South Africa has great historical ties with India. We have a very high population of Indians in the country, one of the highest in the world, and this is another selling point.

“In terms of general trade, yes we do a lot of trade with India, not necessarily on the fresh produce side right now, but because of the good ties we have with India we could increase trade and look specifically at fresh produce.

“Just look at the numbers in terms of India's population growth, its economy and rising middle class consumers who are more aware of quality, and it's obvious we should be thinking seriously.”

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