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## **How Trade Barriers Keep Africans Adrift**

**West's Farm Subsidies Drive  
Ghanians Out of Rice Market,  
Fueling Poverty and Migration**

By JULIANE VON REPERT-BISMARCK

Tamale, Ghana -- On the lush savannas of northern Ghana, rice farmer Kpalagim Mome lets half his rice paddies lie fallow as he watches his community break up and leave for Europe.

The 42-year-old son of a once-prosperous farmer, Mr. Mome blames his misfortunes on high U.S. and European agricultural subsidies, which have priced his own produce out of Ghana's market.

"We can't sell our rice anymore. It gets worse every year," Mr. Mome says. His father's broken-down Mercedes sits on wooden blocks outside his hut. Years of economic hardship have driven three of his brothers to walk and hitchhike 2,000 miles across the Sahara to reach the Mediterranean and Europe. His sister plans to leave next year.

Mr. Mome's plight is repeated throughout farm communities in Africa and elsewhere in the developing world. Grinding poverty, often exacerbated by Western agricultural subsidies, has compelled thousands of Africans to attempt difficult -- and usually illegal -- journeys to Europe, frequently by boarding rickety boats for hazardous voyages across open seas to the Spanish Canary Islands or to Italy. Thousands die every year as they cross the Mediterranean at ever-more-dangerous spots to avoid detection by European patrols.

After global trade talks at the World Trade Organization collapsed this summer, the chances that rich countries will cut agricultural subsidies -- and that others will reduce their import tariffs -- have become even smaller, darkening the outlook for agriculture in the developing countries of Africa, Latin America and Asia. Like Ghana, many run strict open-market regimes advocated by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, with no payments to farmers and limited import tariffs.

Some Western politicians see the danger. "Subsidies are a scourge for poor farmers in developing countries," says Peter Mandelson, Europe's top trade negotiator. "They make it more difficult for poor farmers to compete, increasing poverty and, in some instances, driving migration. This is one of the key reasons why a successful conclusion of trade talks is so important."

Yet trade ministers face strong lobbies that make it politically difficult to cut aid to their own farmers. High trade barriers in major rice-importing nations, such as Japan and Indonesia, also lower world demand and depress prices.

Defenders of farm payments say U.S. rice farmers, faced with rising exports from Thailand and Vietnam, would go out of business without subsidies. U.S. aid also helps poor consumers buy cheap staples.

Critics say U.S. and European subsidies depress world rice prices and make it harder for Africans such as Mr. Mome to compete. The U.S. paid its 9,000 rice farms \$780 million of subsidies in 2006, according to the Department of Agriculture.

"Acre per acre...rice is the most distorted market in the world," says Daniel Griswold, director of Cato Institute's Center for Trade Policy in Washington.

Ghana is the U.S.'s biggest rice market in Africa. An average ton of U.S. rough rice cost \$240 to sow, tend and harvest this year. By the time that rice left a U.S. port in July, U.S. subsidies cut the price to foreign buyers to \$205, the USDA says.

That discount prices Mr. Mome and farmers in other developing countries out of the market. Using equipment that ensures U.S.-level rice quality, Mr. Mome's costs come in at \$230 a ton, he says.

"U.S. farmers have gotten too greedy. Until there is some change in this, you'll have a huge part of the population in poor countries trying to leave and raising hell," says Stephen Gabbert, Managing Principal at international business consultancy Gabbert & Associates.

Mr. Gabbert is rallying support from 25 countries -- including Ghana, Mexico and India -- to fight U.S. rice subsidies at the WTO. Prior legal challenges have succeeded: In 2005, Brazil won a legal battle over cotton subsidies against the U.S. at the WTO. Mr. Gabbert says the rice sector's complaints mirror those of cotton farmers.

Even so, officials in Ghana's cinderblock trade ministry in Accra point to the gulf that separates a powerful trading nation such as Brazil from African minnows.

"We don't have the capacity or the legislation to sue the U.S.," says Lawrence Sae-Brawusi, director at the Ghana Ministry for Trade and Industry. "We don't do so well when it comes to the arm-twisting."

In the 1970s and early 1980s, rice harvested around Tamale and further north fed Ghana and boosted exports to neighboring nations. Crop-dusters and combine harvesters worked the fields. Mr. Mome's father took bankers for rides in his Mercedes and slaughtered four bulls to celebrate the end of Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

In 1983, Ghana adopted free-market changes, followed by more in 1986. It earned accolades from the World Bank as the most promising West African economy after cutting duties and eliminating the aid that protected its rice sector. While the country's overall economy is expanding, poverty in the rural north has spiraled. Farming has been set back decades: Men harvest with small, hand-held sickles; women clean and sort rice by hand. According to the Ghana Rice Interprofessional Body, the country's three-ton-per-hectare (2.47 acres) yield is half what it could be.

As farm income shrinks, communities are fragmenting. Thirteen miles east of Tamale, the 800 villagers of Tugu are saving up to send Yussif Yakubu to Europe. They hope the 32-year-old psychology graduate will find work and send money home.

Men are leaving despite the uncertainty of the journey. Though some find success -- Siba Mohammed turned the soccer tricks Mr. Mome taught him into a University of Maryland scholarship -- the majority struggle as illegal aliens. Patrols caught and returned Mr. Mome's younger brother, who tried to leave Ghana in the anchor cabin of a freighter. One year later, he made off again, this time hitchhiking across the Sahara. The last time Mr. Mome heard from him, he was cleaning office buildings in Libya and looking for a boat ride to Europe.

The main option for women and girls -- unless they leave with their husbands as Mr. Mome's sister did -- is to make their way to Accra, about 310 miles south. They work by day as porters, carrying on their heads the shopping and firewood of richer Ghanaians for 20 or 30 cents a load.

"Our families are scattering. It's not surprising people are getting angry against the West," said Adam Mohammad Nashiru, President of Ghana's Peasant Farmers Association.

Rejuvenating Ghana's rice production will be tough. Irrigation ditches have largely silted up, and the cost of getting them back into production is high. Many farmers are searching for other crops, from cotton to shea nuts and sugar cane.

All of these plans face obstacles. Textile factories in the south use inexpensive imported cloth from Indonesia and Hong Kong. Attempts at shea-tree plantations have failed, with trees mysteriously failing to produce nuts. High European Union tariffs block other projects. Still, some farmers are tied to their fallow fields.

"I would like to leave, but I can't," says Mr. Mome. "Who will look after my father? Who would look after all of this?"

## Serious Side Effects

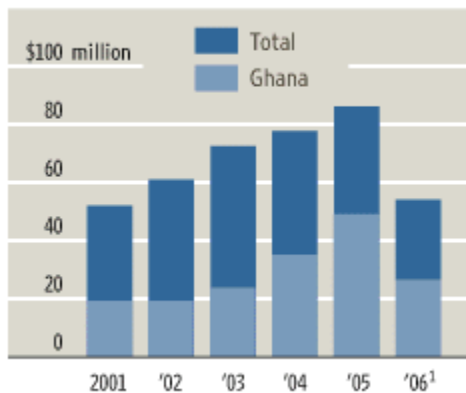
As Africa's rice and other farmers lose market share to rich countries' subsidized products, many Africans are seeking new paths to employment—both at home and abroad.

*Local rice for sale at a market in Tanale, Ghana* ▶

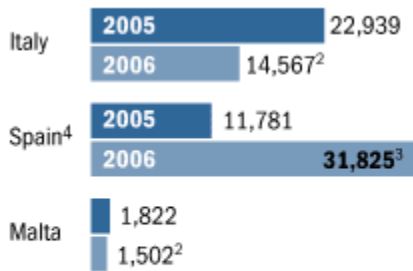


Juliane von Reppert-Bismarck

### U.S. rice exports to Sub-Saharan Africa, in millions of dollars



### Illegal immigrants from Africa by sea, detained by European Union patrols



<sup>1</sup>Through October <sup>2</sup>Through August <sup>3</sup>Through September  
<sup>4</sup>Includes the Canary Islands and Southern coast

Sources: European Commission; Department of Commerce