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Unlocking the global potential of Pakistani mangoes

Muhammad Junaid| 20 August 2024

Pakistan is one of the largest producers of mangoes, cultivating 24 distinct varieties known for their unique colors and flavors, making it the world's 5th largest mango producer.

The mango season begins in May and typically ends in August, with the majority of production concentrated in Punjab and Sindh provinces. Sindh is famous for its Sindhri mangoes, while Punjab is renowned for its Chaunsa mangoes. Despite this prominence, Pakistan exports only 6-7% of its total mango production, a figure that significantly lags behind its potential.

Several factors contribute to this low export volume. The challenges span the entire supply chain, from production and processing inefficiencies to logistical barriers and inadequate international branding. For instance, poor access to quality transportation infrastructure delays shipments, affects product quality, and drives up costs.

Additionally, limited adherence to international standards in branding and packaging further restricts the ability to compete in global markets.

This year, Pakistan's mango production faced a sharp decline of 30-40%, attributed to climate change and pest infestations, according to reports from mango growers. Despite this downturn, domestic demand continues to be met, and exports to key destinations such as the Middle East, the UK, and the USA are maintained.

Approximately 75% of Pakistan's mango exports are shipped to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, with 50% exported by sea, 35% by land, and 15% by air, according to official trade statistics.

However, air transport logistics remain a significant challenge. Exporters often face limited air cargo space and high costs, especially on European routes, which severely reduce their profit margins.

At Karachi Airport, inefficiencies such as the lack of suitable lifting equipment and insufficient cold storage exacerbate these problems, while frequent delays and container shortages at Karachi Port further disrupt the supply chain.

The small, outdated vessels used for transporting mangoes to the Middle East offer minimal temperature control, causing damage to the fruit during transit. Moreover, the use of substandard packaging materials, such as rough wooden crates and non-moisture-resistant cartons, leads to frequent product degradation during shipment.

Another critical issue hampering exports is the inadequate knowledge of post-harvest handling, proper storage, and international shipping requirements among many Pakistani exporters. This, coupled with a lack of insurance options for sea shipments, results in further financial risks and losses. Pakistani mangoes are also plagued by inconsistent quality and lack of standardization, which makes it difficult to build a reliable export supply chain, particularly for high-end markets that demand stringent quality controls and traceability.

Processing facilities in Pakistan are similarly underdeveloped. After mangoes are harvested, they are typically washed in warm water and packed into cartons. However, some countries, such as the USA, require additional treatments, such as irradiation, which is not available in Pakistan. As a result, exporters are forced to send their mangoes to Dubai for irradiation before re-exporting them, significantly increasing costs.

During this process, Indian exporters capitalize on the situation by rebranding Pakistani mangoes as their own, thus profiting at Pakistan’s expense due to a lack of effective branding and marketing from Pakistani exporters.

The lack of a strong international brand further diminishes the ability of Pakistani mangoes to command premium prices in global markets. For example, competitors like Mexico and India have invested significantly in marketing and branding their mangoes, giving them a competitive edge. The oversupply of Pakistani mangoes in the international market, coupled with insufficient branding efforts, has driven prices down, making it difficult for exporters to achieve profitable margins.

Furthermore, Pakistani exporters lack connections to international markets and fail to utilize market intelligence effectively. Many traders rely on informal, one-on-one contacts rather than monitoring global prices or logistical trends. This lack of market organization contributes to their inability to compete with modern export markets, which operate with precision and profitability, often dominating global trade.

Navigating customs and regulatory requirements in export markets is another hurdle. Exporters must meet complex and time-consuming procedures, including registration with local authorities, obtaining FDA certifications, and meeting USDA and APHIS regulations. The application process for import permits alone can take up to 80 days. Additionally, mangoes must be packed in APHIS-approved pest-proof boxes and certified by the National Plant Protection Organization (NPPO) of Pakistan before shipment.

To address these issues, Pakistan must make significant improvements in its marketing, packaging, and supply chain management. Establishing reliable processing facilities is essential to reducing post-harvest losses and improving export quality. Diversifying export markets, particularly to Europe, Africa, Iran, and China, could help mitigate the risks associated with oversupply and price volatility in existing markets.

Simplifying regulatory compliance procedures, such as implementing an online application system for import permits, could also streamline the export process and encourage higher trade volumes. Furthermore, investing in branding and ensuring access to international-standard packaging and infrastructure will help Pakistani mangoes gain a stronger foothold in global markets and unlock their full export potential.

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