

Supermarket chain's scheme to help African growers bears fruit

· It is trade, not aid, that works, says Waitrose chief · Educational support to be expanded

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Monday 29 May 2006 15.30 BST

Fruit growers in South Africa have seen more than £330,000 ploughed back into their communities over the past year by the supermarkets group Waitrose, which is hoping to raise a further £500,000 to fund educational projects over the next six months.

The cash has been raised as part of the food retailer's initiative to return a sizeable proportion of profits it earns on sales of citrus fruits to the farmers who grow them. The scheme has proved more successful than had been hoped and now the Waitrose Foundation, which operates as a partnership between the supermarket and members of the supply chain, is adding avocados to the grapefruits, lemons and clementines on offer.

Some 25 educational schemes have already been launched on 10 citrus farms across South Africa, including training in literacy and IT, as well as classes in craft work to enable farm workers to earn an income out of season. The citrus season is only six months long so it is vital to teach new skills to the growers.

Waitrose's managing director, Steven Esom, who was in South Africa last month visiting some of the projects, said: "I really wanted to see first-hand what effect it was having on the ground.

"It was very humbling. I came away with a terrific sense of pride in what they are doing out there.

"I was 100% convinced this is the right thing to do before I went; now I'm 110% convinced. It is absolutely clear that it's trade not aid that will work."

Waitrose, part of the John Lewis Partnership, had initially expected to raise £250,000 in the first year. Now it hopes to raise £500,000 in the next six months. Mr Esom is delighted with the response of the company's customers who, he says, "feel a strong link" with those who produce the food they buy.

He is keen to bring some of the farmers to Britain to meet customers. The initiative is supported by the South African government and gives the country's produce "a real advantage," he says.

The Waitrose Foundation was set up as a long-term response to South Africa's social and economic problems and its work has been welcomed by the South African authorities.

Mohammad Karaan, chairman of South Africa's National Agricultural Marketing Council, said: "The Waitrose Foundation is set to make a sterling contribution to the development of human capital and empowerment of people in South Africa. Their programme is innovative, pioneering and appears genuine in the face of the social and economic challenges of the

country. We are most pleased about this initiative and support it with much anticipation."

Mr Esom is keen to see the scheme extended. "There's an opportunity in grapes and maybe in processed products. And it could be extended to wine, although that is a long way down the road. It's a big idea and we are only at the foothills."

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