CHAPTER 17

Banana and plantain in the East African highlands

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17.1 INTRODUCTION

The East African highlands comprise a system of high plateaux, mountain valleys and lakes, located between 2°N and 10°S extending over six countries – Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda and the Eastern province of Zaire. The Rift Valley fault system is the principal geological feature of the highlands. See Fig. 17.1.

Total annual production of banana and plantain in the East African highland countries during 1984–1986 was some 13.2 million tons (INIBAP, 1986), which represents about 20% of the global production.

Banana and plantains are principally consumed and traded in the region. Small volumes are exported. The major highland banana producing zones are located over 800 km from the coast. Inadequate transport infrastructure constrains intra-regional and international trade in this landlocked area.

17.2 INTRODUCTION OF BANANAS TO EAST AFRICA

De Langhe (1961) suggests that plantains entered the highlands from the humid tropics of Western and Central Africa, where some 116 named African cultivars have been identified (Swennen, 1990). Plantain cultivation comprises one component of a general eastward expansion of Bantu culture in the East African highlands. This occurred independently of a westward diffusion of banana cultivation from the Indian Ocean coast. Human selection and prevailing agro-ecologic conditions enable plantains to manifest their latent perennial characteristics in the highlands (De Langhe, 1961b).

Figure 17.1  East African highlands: principal banana growing regions.