



Need for change in Africa's Agriculture

Africa has vast agricultural potential, yet US\$19 billion of food is imported each year and 200 million Africans – a fifth of the population – are still going hungry(1). Tapping into the continent's agricultural potential offers huge opportunities for Africans. Increasing farm productivity is the key to food security, economic development and poverty alleviation. Getting more from existing cropland gives growers and their families more food to eat, boosts their incomes and buying power, and provides access to new markets.

Low yields, untapped potential



At over 500 million hectares, the potential agricultural area in Africa is larger than the European Union. But average grain yields are just one ton per hectare – less than a third of what is achieved in other developing regions, and only a fifth of yields in developed countries(2). With population growth overtaking production in sub-Saharan Africa – where the majority of Africa's subsistence farmers live – the amount of food available per person is shrinking and a third of the population is malnourished(3). Many countries that were self-sufficient 40 years ago are now net food importers.

Africa provides huge variations in landscape, climate and agricultural systems – from the deserts of Sudan to the tropics of Ghana, the savannah of Tanzania, and the grassland and scrub of South Africa. The most viable farmland is in the continent's 'breadbaskets' – areas with fertile soil, rainfall, good infrastructure and markets, as well as large numbers of smallholders and governments committed to agricultural development(4).

But large areas of high-potential cropland remain under-used. For example, viable cropland in Ethiopia and Tanzania remains unproductive. The barriers include lack of infrastructure (such as roads and storage facilities), restricted access to agronomic inputs (such as high quality seeds, fertilizers and crop protection products), limited farming knowledge and challenging markets.

Some 170 million hectares of sub-Saharan Africa are cultivated as farmland, with crops including cassava, maize, rice and sorghum. Much of this is subsistence farming, (5) which supports millions of Africans who grow produce to live off and only sell any surplus they have left over. They typically farm small pieces of land, in many cases less than a hectare, although this varies widely between different countries. Subsistence farmers typically use traditional methods and few agronomic inputs.



Commercial agriculture in Africa is mostly small-scale, except in some countries such as Egypt, Kenya, Morocco and South Africa. Much of what commercial farmers produce is consumed by the urban African population or exported, including many of the fruit and vegetables available in Europe during the northern hemisphere winter.

Increasingly, foreign investors are striking deals with African governments for the lease of

large tracts of arable land. Foreign investment in land can provide much needed capital to improve local infrastructure and commercial farming for local and export markets, bringing significant financial benefits to African economies. However, agreements must be carefully drafted with the needs of local communities in mind to ensure enough food production is allocated to the local population before crops are shipped overseas. The development of internationally accepted codes for such investments would help to ensure they are made responsibly(6).

Challenges

African farmers face some significant challenges if they are to increase crop yields(7):

Access to technology

Few smallholders in Africa have access to the agronomic inputs that are vital to improve productivity. High transport costs, a lack of suppliers in rural areas and high dependence on imports mean African farmers pay up to six times more than average world prices for such inputs.

Soil

African soils are low in nutrients and organic matter – making the need for fertilizer even more critical – and hold little water. Three-quarters of African farmland is already severely degraded. This results in poor yields and can also damage natural ecosystems as farmers move into forests in search of more fertile soil.

Water

Over 90 percent of Africa's poor farmers depend on rainfall to water their crops rather than irrigation. This is unpredictable at best and affects the reliability of yields and the quality of crops. Irrigated land is twice as productive as rain-fed agriculture(8), but just four percent of farms in sub-Saharan Africa are irrigated compared with a third of Asian farms.

Education

Most smallholders have had little or no training on good agricultural practice. Today, African governments spend a third less per capita on agricultural research than they did 20 years ago, meaning fewer agriculture graduates and infrequent agronomist visits to support farmers. The consequence is that subsistence farmers lack knowledge about agricultural techniques that could improve their yields.

Health

There is a clear link between agriculture and malaria in Africa, because ideal crop-growing conditions also suit disease-carrying mosquitoes. Productivity in malaria-prone regions is limited by illness and short working days as growers avoid working in the fields after dusk when mosquitoes are most active.

Markets

African markets can be volatile and are often inaccessible to smallholders who lack business skills and information about where to achieve the best price. A lack of roads and other infrastructure also makes it difficult to access markets.

Ghana, Kenya and Malawi have already demonstrated the potential from tackling these challenges. They have achieved significant productivity improvements for their major crops through a combination of effective agricultural policies, subsidized inputs and education programs.

Looking to the future



The food price rises of 2008 were followed by widespread social unrest and reminded the world of the urgent need to address the challenges facing African agriculture.

Leaders of the G8 group of leading economies have pledged US\$20 billion in farm aid over the next three years to help poor nations feed themselves. This is a positive and marked shift from

previous aid that offered short-term relief but no sustainable improvement. Farm aid will enable better access to training and technology for Africa's smallholders, and world leaders hope better food security will also help to generate political stability. This is just one of many similar initiatives being launched across the continent by international agencies, NGOs, philanthropists and African governments. And this is what will help Africa not just feed itself, but begin to build agriculture as a business.

Agribusiness has a key role to play in offering solutions that help African farmers improve their productivity. This includes best practice knowledge as well as access to the best technology, such as quality seeds, fertilizers and crop protection products, and training farmers to use these tools effectively.

The subsistence trap many African families face must come to an end. Increasing farm productivity to raise profits is vital to create new markets. Trade is a critical component and the Doha Round must be pushed through. Industrialized nations must open up their markets and allow the developing nations to create a vibrant export economy for their crops and commodities too.

(1) *Alliance for Commodity Trade in Eastern and Southern Africa*

(2) *World Bank, 2007. "World Development Report 2008: Agriculture for Development"*

(3) *Barrett, C.B., 2008: "Food systems and the escape from poverty and ill-health traps in sub-Saharan Africa"*

(4) *Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA)*

(5) *UN Food and Agriculture Organization, 2005*

(6) *The International Food Policy Research Institute*

(7) *Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA)*

(8) *South Centre Analytical Note, 2008: "A positive agenda for African agriculture in EPAs"*

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