



Change Africa from within

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A severe food crisis currently threatens southern Sudan. In East Africa, where millions of people already are dependent on food aid, a sharp rise in the cost of staple crops looms.

These are just the latest sources of concern in a turbulent period that began two years ago when food shortages hit many countries in Africa and Asia due to a worldwide spike in prices. Higher food prices meant that poor people, already struggling to meet basic human needs, were pushed deeper into poverty. On its heels came the global financial crisis, which also hit the poorest the hardest.

Agriculture is the main employer, job creator and export in most developing countries. Historically, agriculture has driven economic performance in many countries, generating growth that has been shown to be at least twice as effective in reducing poverty as growth in other sectors. Investment in agricultural and rural development is therefore vital to food security and sustainable economic development.

Indeed, the vast majority of today's developed countries grew from strong agricultural foundations, where surplus production generated wealth and prosperity. This is what is happening today in Viet Nam, and it is the path that China and India took on their way to becoming engines of economic growth.

Poverty is predominantly rural. Globally, three quarters of people living in extreme poverty are in rural areas and depend on agriculture and related activities for their livelihoods. About 380 million women, children and men in sub-Saharan Africa live on less than US\$1.25 a day.

Many are malnourished or hungry. But with some 80 million small farms in sub-Saharan Africa producing 80 per cent of agricultural goods, smallholder farmers have a key role to play in resolving the financial and food crises and unleashing Africa's potential to feed itself.

In order to lift people out of poverty and ensure food security, a sustained effort is needed to develop Africa's agriculture and the associated infrastructure – notably roads, telecommunications and energy – needed to unleash agricultural potential. Strengthening agriculture is one of the best investments any African country can make.

Members of the African Union recognized this in 2003 in Maputo, Mozambique, pledging to increase spending on agriculture to at least 10 per cent of national budgets. Although eight countries have met or surpassed that target, the continent as a whole has not.

But reaching this target is not enough. Governments must create the right policy environment to allow for appropriate investments in research and development to enhance productivity and increase production.

Investment in agriculture in Africa must focus on creating a dynamic smallholder sector. A vibrant rural sector generates local demand for locally produced goods and services. In turn, this can spur sustainable non-farm employment growth in services, agroprocessing and small-scale manufacturing. This is crucial for rural employment, without which poor rural young people will be driven away from their communities in search of work in the cities.

Agriculture, predominantly on a small scale, accounts for about 30 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa's GDP and at least 40 per cent of export value. In a number of small countries in Africa, agriculture plays an even greater role, representing 80 per cent or more of export earnings.

The potential in these numbers will remain untapped, unless African countries put the right policies in place to help agriculture develop and flourish. But transformation of African agriculture will not happen until the private sector is fully engaged in agricultural production, processing and marketing. Governments must become more investor-friendly to attract greater private-sector interest.

More broadly, African countries need to put their political and economic houses in order. They must continue to deepen the foundations of democracy and ensure the political stability that is so critical to economic growth. It is also crucial that they continue to improve their systems to create an enabling environment for dynamic rural growth to transform subsistence farmers into entrepreneurs.

Given their central role not only as mothers and caregivers, but also as farmers, rural women hold the key to food security. That is why any nation that does not provide opportunities for women will not reach its full potential. Significant progress must be made in Africa to advance both women's empowerment and their status in society – particularly with regard to land and credit.

Finally, although investment in development assistance is key to supporting Africa's advancement, nations will ultimately have to take responsibility for their own development. No nation, no people ever experienced growth that sprang solely from external support.

So Africa's development must be made in Africa, by Africans, for Africans. Every tree, every plant, must be fully rooted in its own soil to flourish. Change cannot be imposed from outside, it must be cultivated from within.

by

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