

# **A time of opportunity for African agriculture and food systems**

By

Dr. Tesfai Tecele, Kofi Annan Foundation

Mr. Fabian Lange, Kofi Annan Foundation

In recent years, African agriculture and food systems have been changing for the better. Many African countries have started to increase investment in agriculture and adopt enabling policies to advance food and nutritional security. Public expenditures on agriculture have more than doubled since 2003<sup>1</sup>.

Despite this good news, there is long way to go until hunger is banished from the continent. In Sub-Saharan Africa, one in four people still go hungry every day.<sup>2</sup> Many more lack the nutrition necessary for proper health and development. It is difficult to understand why Africa, which is blessed with abundant natural resources, including an estimated 60 percent of the world's uncultivated arable land<sup>3</sup>, continues to suffer from high levels of under- and malnutrition and spends billions every year on importing food. Africa still struggles with the problem of low agricultural productivity. Grain yields in Sub-Saharan Africa are only between one half and one third of the world's average and have hardly increased for decades, whereas yields in Asia and Latin America have shown a steady increase.<sup>4</sup>

Low agricultural productivity, inadequate policies, and insufficient investment are at the heart of Africa's food and nutrition insecurity, which contributes directly to the wide prevalence of extreme poverty. Only by rapidly transforming the agricultural sector can Africa feed its growing population, which is expected to double by 2050<sup>5</sup>, boost the incomes of its farmers and create job opportunities, while stimulating economic growth and rural development.

This article focuses on five fundamental areas where urgent action is needed to ensure that Africa can harness its full agricultural potential: farms and farmers, infrastructure, the policy framework, women and youth, and climate adaptation.

## **The point of departure: Farms and farmers**

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2013/10/13/increasing-public-investment-in-africa-s-agriculture>

<sup>2</sup> FAO, IFAD and WFP (2015). *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2015. Meeting the 2015 international hunger targets: taking stock of uneven progress*. Rome, FAO <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4671e.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (2013). *Africa Agriculture Status Report. Focus on Staple Crops*. <http://agra-alliance.org/our-results/agra-status-reports/>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> AfDB et al. (2015). *African Economic Outlook 2015. Special Theme: Regional Development and Spatial Inclusion*. OECD Publications. Paris. [http://www.africaneconomicoutlook.org/fileadmin/uploads/aeo/2015/PDF\\_Chapters/Overview\\_AEO2015\\_EN-web.pdf](http://www.africaneconomicoutlook.org/fileadmin/uploads/aeo/2015/PDF_Chapters/Overview_AEO2015_EN-web.pdf)

For the majority of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa, agriculture is the primary source of livelihoods and the main means to improve nutritional levels. Smallholder farmers produce an estimated 80 percent of the food consumed in the region.<sup>6</sup> So food production in Africa can't be increased at the speed, scale and quality needed without mobilizing the continent's smallholders. This can only be done through a partnership between governments and the private sector which expands links with farmers' organizations and cooperatives and enhances smallholders' access to higher yielding seeds, affordable means for the improvement of soil fertility, and sustainable and efficient agronomic practices.

The focus on smallholder farmers is not a choice between big and small farms. Larger domestic and foreign commercial farms have an important role to play as long as they are not created by displacing smallholders. They are crucial if Africa is to meet both its own growing demand for food to satisfy rapid urbanization while also taking advantage of the continent's huge and largely unused opportunities for agricultural exports. They can share market access, technology and knowledge with smaller farmers to help them increase productivity, transform their ventures into successful businesses and lift themselves and their communities out of poverty. It is for these reasons that the Kofi Annan Foundation convened the *African Food Systems Initiative*, which is composed of leading African and multinational corporations interested in the development of smallholder agriculture, philanthropic and civil society organizations, and global food agencies.<sup>7</sup>

### **Upgrading rural infrastructure: a prerequisite for agricultural transformation**

The countries seeing the biggest growth in the agricultural sector are those that have invested in rural infrastructure. Clearly, investments in roads, storage facilities, telecommunications, and irrigation systems have a direct impact on the efficiency and productive capacity of food systems. The Africa Progress Report 2015 emphasizes the need to improve access to low-carbon energy to help power up Africa's agricultural sector. Investment in rural electrification, including in decentralized mini-grid or off-grid solutions, is needed to reach more remote areas and some of the poorest smallholder households.<sup>8</sup> The African Development Bank, the World Bank and other international financial institutions have funding available to support infrastructure investments. But African governments will have to set the priorities and also encourage domestic investment – public and private - in these sectors.

Digital technology must be a central part of this massive infrastructure upgrade. Mobile technologies are a particularly effective mechanism to enable farmers to purchase farm inputs and access extension and financial services, as well as market information. Governments and private investors can help promote these services and remove the constraints that limit availability and access to them.

### **Getting the policy framework right**

---

<sup>6</sup> IFAD (2011). *Viewpoint: Smallholders can feed the world*. Rome: International Fund for Agricultural Development. <http://www.ifad.org/pub/viewpoint/smallholder.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> For more information, visit [hunger.kofiannanfoundation.org](http://hunger.kofiannanfoundation.org)

<sup>8</sup> Africa Progress Panel (2015). *Power, People, Planet: Seizing Africa's Energy and Climate Opportunities*. Africa Progress Report 2015.

Africa's agricultural transformation will only happen if policies that encourage public and private investment in agriculture and in the entire food system are put firmly in place. These policies must ensure the allocation of at least a minimum of 10 percent of national budgets to agriculture in pursuit of the 6 percent annual agricultural growth target agreed in the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP). Member states of the African Union (AU) have recently renewed their commitments to the CAADP through the Declaration adopted at the 23rd African Union Head of State and Government Summit in June 2014 in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea. However, to date only a few countries have met the budgetary and the agricultural growth target.<sup>9</sup>

It is also important to expand regional markets and intra-African food trade by reducing trade barriers within the African Regional Economic Communities and amongst African countries. Tariffs and non-tariff barriers, transportation cartels and a large variety of product standards make it difficult for a farmer to sell his or her produce in another country or to develop a commercial business.

For its part, the international community has to refrain from harmful agricultural export subsidies and guard against protectionist tendencies, which put the poorest at a disadvantage. According to a recent study published by the Brookings Institution, OECD countries are spending US\$250 billion annually subsidizing their agricultural sectors to the detriment of poor farmers as they artificially lower prices for crops and block market access for food products from poorer countries.<sup>10</sup> This is 20 times more than what OECD countries allocate each year to development assistance for food and nutrition security.<sup>11</sup> There is clearly an urgent need for wealthier countries to put in place effective and equitable market access policies for food and other agricultural products from developing countries.

### **Women and youth: drivers of agriculture innovation**

It is equally important to create opportunities for young people and women in agriculture and food systems. Women are the predominant face of smallholders and a direct link to the nutrition and health of African families. However, often women have less access than men to critical resources such as improved farm inputs and extension, credit or other financial services, and new technologies. As a result, yields on their farms are 20 to 30 percent lower than on plots farmed by men.<sup>12</sup> Closing the gap can boost agricultural productivity and production and reduce malnutrition within poor families.

Additionally, Africa has the youngest population in the world. To turn this demographic fact into an opportunity for sustained growth in the agri-food sector, African countries have to engage their young workforce in innovative agri-businesses and entrepreneurship. To attract the younger generation, the perception of agriculture must also be changed. Agriculture should be seen as a

---

<sup>9</sup> A detailed overview of the countries that have met the budgetary and the agricultural growth target can be found here. <http://www.nepad.org/foodsecurity/agriculture/about>

<sup>10</sup> Homi Kharas, John McArthur, Geoffrey Gertz, Sinead Mowlds, Lorenz Noe (2015). *Ending Rural Hunger: Mapping Needs and Actions for Food and Nutrition Security*. Brookings Institution: Washington, DC. [https://endingruralhunger.org/assets/files/downloads/ERH\\_Full\\_Report.pdf](https://endingruralhunger.org/assets/files/downloads/ERH_Full_Report.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> FAO (2011). *The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-11. Women in Agriculture. Closing the gender gap for development*. Rome. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i2050e/i2050e.pdf>

viable and profitable business. Therefore, more investment is needed in mechanization for farming and along the value chain, as well as in vocational and apprenticeship training targeted at Africa's youth. Universities and research institutes have to become key partners of governments and the private sector in developing the needs and skills of the agricultural sector.

### **Preparing for the future: climate-smart agriculture**

Food production in Africa is threatened by the impact of changing weather patterns and growing seasons caused by man-made climate change. Its manifestations disproportionately affect the poor and most vulnerable. Climate-smart agricultural solutions can sustainably increase agricultural productivity while mitigating the carbon emissions associated with the agricultural sector. If implemented in the right way and at the right scale, climate-smart agricultural technologies and practices such as the use of drought- and heat-tolerant crop varieties, and improved irrigation and water management systems, will enable farmers to adapt to climate variability and build farming resilience. As the impact of climate change becomes more extreme, research and development need to be expanded further to help meet productivity goals in a climate-strained environment.

### **Conclusion: the African powerhouse**

To help ensure future growth and rising living standards, Africa must increasingly shift from subsistence farming towards growing profitable businesses, covering the entire value chain of Africa's agricultural sector. While learning from the experiences from other regions, Africa should develop and apply locally adapted solutions that fit the particular circumstances of the continent's many different regions. Africa is not a single country and policy prescriptions should be adjusted to local realities. Smallholder farmers have to be at the heart of the process of transformation, but mid and large-size enterprises also have a major part to play in sharing knowledge, resources and market access with local communities. Governments, civil society and businesses of all sizes have to work in close partnership to achieve the new Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG2) – which is *"to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture"*<sup>13</sup>, and turn the African continent into the world's agricultural powerhouse.

---

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/hunger/>