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THE FOOD CRISIS: A NEW-FOUND MOMENTUM TO REDEFINE AFRICAN AGRICULTURAL POLICIES

by Meti Zegeye*

The unprecedented magnitude of the current global food crisis took the world by surprise. Its hardest-hit victim, Sub-Saharan Africa (“SSA”), is in the midst of its worst food crisis in recent history.¹ Immediate responses such as food-aid and cash-handout programs, although necessary to address the urgent humanitarian dimensions of the food crisis, are not long-term solutions.² Attaining a sustainable solution to SSA’s reoccurring food crises requires that African governments engage the international community in candid discourses tackling the crisis’ main cause, namely the inherent structural fallacies of these countries’ agricultural policies.³ The recent food riots and civil unrest that occurred in many of these countries should incentivize such policy discourse, as SSA’s fragile peace is closely linked with governments’ willingness and ability to offer and sustain long-term solutions to food security.⁴

Most land in SSA countries is agrarian, with varied agro-ecological zones that are not conducive to uniform, large-scale farming techniques.⁵ SSA farmers predominantly engage in rain-fed agriculture which makes them highly vulnerable to climate variations in an area which already suffers from low soil fertility and low rainfall.⁶ Frequent weed and pest infestations, as well as inadequate farming and water management techniques, further hinder farming productivity.⁷ Despite these shortcomings, agriculture remains the most important economic sector in most SSA countries.⁸ Agricultural output represents about forty percent of exports, thirty percent of GDP, and about thirty percent of foreign exchange earnings in the region.⁹ The sector also employs more than seventy percent the workforce.¹⁰

Ironically, while other agrarian regions, such as parts of Asia, invested in green revolution, SSA adopted Bretton Woods championed developmental policies, which discounted and

neglected agriculture’s role in these countries.¹¹ Therefore, since independence, these countries have adopted various agricultural policies, which span from a focus on industrialization, to agro industries, integrated rural development, export crop-led agriculture, and finally to smallholders’ staple food crops.¹² These varied and often contradictory policies have hindered agriculture development in most of SSA countries. For instance, the neo-liberal development paradigm of the 1980s promoted drastic reduction in international assistance for agriculture.¹³ While agriculture

received eighteen percent of overseas development assistance in 1980, its share dwindled to about four percent in 2007.¹⁴ Similarly, SSA governments felt compelled to reduce their agriculture expenditure.¹⁵ Although recently on the rise, these countries allocated less than four percent of their expenditures to agriculture for the past twenty years.¹⁶

African governments’ withdrawal from the sector has

crippled farmers’ productivity. SSA farming is predominantly a household enterprise, and is mostly undertaken by poor smallholder farmers.¹⁷ These farmers represent a very large portion of the world’s most marginalized people.¹⁸ Given their extreme marginalization, SSA farmers have historically depended on government services and subsidies for access to credit and farming techniques, such as fertilizers and irrigation.¹⁹ Without government intervention, these farmers could not afford the high transaction costs associated with agriculture and experienced extensive market failures.²⁰



Photo courtesy of Megan Chapman

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Consequently, over the last twenty years, crop production per capita has decreased by 0.2% per year, while food demand has continued to increase.²¹ Confronted with such stringent realities, these farmers have expanded the arable farming land, at the expense of forests, soil fertility, and water.²² Their efforts have been unsuccessful as is evidenced by the prevalence of drought and famine throughout the continent. In SSA, agricultural productivity growth, as opposed to expansion in arable farming land, is the means to achieve food security.²³ Furthermore, agriculture must become the engine of growth in these countries, especially given the fact that three quarters of the poor in SSA depend on agriculture for their livelihood.²⁴

African governments must use this opportunity to revamp their agricultural policies. SSA countries should continue to increase their budgetary allocation for agricultural development to about fifteen to twenty percent of their revenues. They should also develop new agricultural policies, which take into account their particular agro-ecological characteristics.²⁵ These policies should create the kind of incentives and market opportunities necessary to reduce the marginality of smallholder farmers.²⁶ Particularly, the new policies must improve soil and water management, and must invest in drought resisting crops.²⁷ Finally, African countries should invest in research and development and come up with home grown viable farming.



Endnotes:

¹ See, e.g., UN CONFERENCE ON TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT, TACKLING THE GLOBAL FOOD CRISIS (June 2008), available at http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/presspb20081_en.pdf (last visited Nov. 1, 2008) (noting that agricultural productivity in lesser developed countries is declining, and was in fact more productive fifty years ago).

² See IRIN News, *Ghana: Government Expands Cash Handouts* (Oct. 29, 2008), available at <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=81166> (last visited Nov. 1, 2008); see also IRIN News, *West Africa: Region Among the World's Hungriest* (Oct. 14, 2008), available at <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=80912> (last visited Nov. 1, 2008).

³ See INDEPENDENT EVALUATION GROUP, WORLD BANK ASSISTANCE TO AGRICULTURE IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA xxiii (2007) [hereinafter INDEPENDENT EVALUATION GROUP], available at http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTASSAGRSUBSAHAFR/Resources/ag_africa_eval.pdf (last visited Nov. 1, 2008).

⁴ See Vivienne Walt, *The World's Growing Food-Price Crisis*, TIME MAGAZINE, Feb. 27, 2008, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1717572-1,00.html> (last visited Nov. 1, 2008).

⁵ See INTERACADEMY COUNCIL, REALIZING THE PROMISE AND POTENTIAL OF AFRICAN AGRICULTURE 14 (2004), available at <http://www.interacademycouncil.net/Object.File/Master/8/405/Africa%20-%20Chapter%203%20African%20agriculture%20-%20Pt%20I.pdf>; see also THE WORLD BANK, WORLD DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2008: THE AGENDA FOR AGRICULTURE-BASED COUNTRIES IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA 1 (2008), available at http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWDR2008/Resources/Brief_AgBased_SubSahara_web.pdf (last visited Nov. 1, 2008) (defining agriculture-based countries as countries where a high share of overall growth originates in agriculture and where the poor are concentrated in rural areas. Some countries that are not included in this category have sub-national regions that can also be classified as agriculture based).

⁶ INDEPENDENT EVALUATION GROUP, *supra* note 3, at 13-14. See also Agriculture World Group, Dryland Farming and Dryland Farming in India, <http://www.world-agriculture.com/dry-land-farming/dry-land-farming.php> (last visited Nov. 13, 2008) (noting that this type of agriculture refers to the profitable production of useful crops, without irrigation, on lands that receive annually a rainfall of 500 millimeters, or roughly twenty inches, or less).

⁷ See INDEPENDENT EVALUATION GROUP, *supra* note 3, at 14.

⁸ *Id.* at 13.

⁹ *Id.* at 17.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 3.

¹¹ See generally Alexandra Spieldoch, Foreign Policy In Focus, The Food Crisis and Global Institutions (Aug. 5, 2008), available at <http://www.fpif.org/fpifxt/5442> (last visited Nov. 1, 2008); see also Walden Bello, *Africa's Food Crisis: The Handwork of IMF, World Bank*, BUSINESS DAILY (Africa), Aug. 19, 2008, http://www.bdafrica.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=9406&Itemid=5821 (last visited Nov. 5, 2008); see generally INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OFFICE OF THE IMF, AN EVALUATION OF THE IMF AND AID TO SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA (2007), available at <http://www.imf.org/external/np/ieo/2007/ssa/eng/pdf/report.pdf> (last visited Nov. 5, 2008) [hereinafter INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OFFICE].

¹² See generally NAMANGA NGONGI, INTERNATIONAL FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE, POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF HIGH FOOD PRICES FOR AFRICA 21, 1-2 (2007), available at <http://www.ifpri.org/pubs/books/ar2007/ar07essay03.pdf> (last visited Nov. 1, 2008).

¹³ *Id.* at 1-2.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 1.

¹⁵ INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OFFICE, *supra* note 11, at 10.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ INDEPENDENT EVALUATION GROUP, *supra* note 3, at 9 (noting that women involvement in farming varies between fifty to seventy percent of the labor force. African countries also account for eighty-nine percent of the rural population in agriculture-based countries).

¹⁸ See WELLINGTON N. EKAYA, ACP-EU TECHNICAL CENTRE FOR AGRICULTURAL AND RURAL COOPERATION, STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING DRYLAND AGRICULTURE: ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE (Aug. 2, 2007), available at <http://knowledge.cta.int/en/content/view/full/4104> (last visited Nov. 1, 2008) (stating that fifty percent of the world's most disadvantaged countries are in dryland Africa).

¹⁹ INDEPENDENT EVALUATION GROUP, *supra* note 3, at 14.

²⁰ *Id.* at xxii-xxv.

²¹ INTERACADEMY COUNCIL, *supra* note 5, at 9.

²² *Id.* at 17.

²³ *Id.* at 18.

²⁴ *Id.* at 18.

²⁵ *Id.* at 16-18.

²⁶ See generally INDEPENDENT EVALUATION GROUP, *supra* note 3, at 15.

²⁷ INTERACADEMY COUNCIL, *supra* note 5, at 18-19.