

Knowledge-based food democracy, the way out of the African food crisis¹: realising the potential of the NARS, SROs and FARA

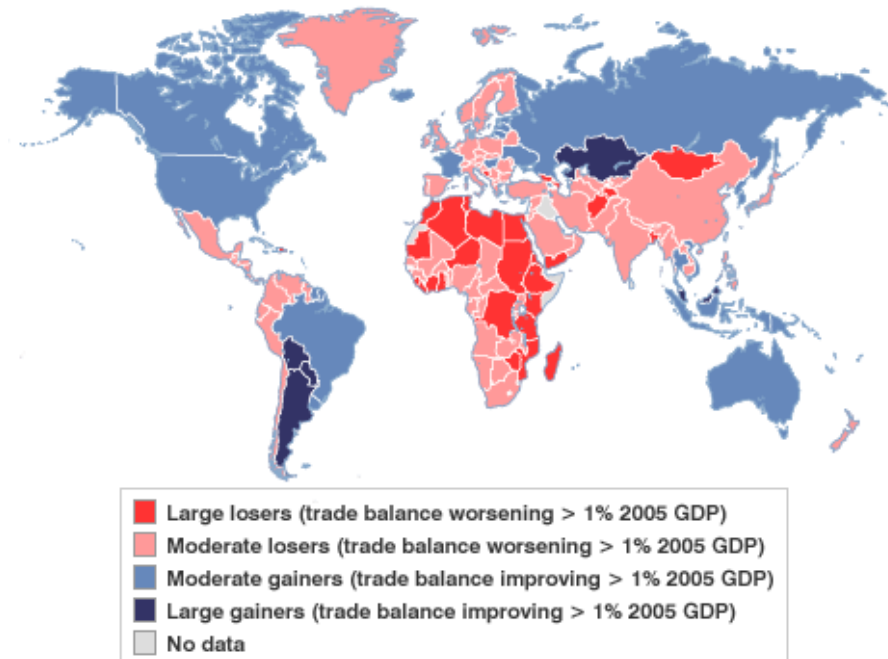
Background

This paper is being drafted as a lot is being spent on yet another World Food Summit: this time, to consider what should be done about the global food crisis. It is possible that delegates now have a better sense of urgency because the unprecedented rapid rise in food prices has caught everybody's attention. In developing countries 100 million people are threatened with hunger but the crisis is no longer 'somebody else's problem' even for citizens of the wealthiest countries, who are grappling with inflation in their cost of living.

There are many complex interacting causes for the near doubling of food commodity prices on international markets in just three years. Some of the causes are hopefully temporary such as droughts, floods crop diseases and speculation. In May 2008 wheat prices declined by nearly 27% following forecasts of good winter wheat crops in Europe and North America. That is despite a new strain of fungus attacking wheat crops across Africa to Iran and to which most of the world's wheat varieties are vulnerable. Other causes of rising prices are more systemic such as rising demand from fast-developing countries with large populations, higher oil costs and global warming.

The figure below is a graphic illustration of where the pain will be felt most severely: in Africa. It is taken from a report on the address to the 2008 World Food Summit by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

2007 - 2008 IMPACT OF PROJECTED FOOD PRICE INCREASES ON TRADE BALANCES



SOURCE: USDA

The worsening impact on trade balances in food deficit countries is an amplification of what is happening at the household level. This must be seen in the context of the poor living on less than US\$ 1 per day, of which Africa has more than its fair share; and of the super poor living on less than US\$ 0.50 per day, most of whom live in Africa. These people already spend more than 60% of their incomes on food and can only cope with rising prices by eating less and less. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has identified 36 'crisis' countries, 21 of which are in Africa, and hunger has been cited as the most humiliating and demoralising of all human deprivation. It must not be tolerated: it can and must be eliminated.

Finding ways to sustainably increase food supplies in the required order of magnitude will require the application of the best knowledge available. No one knows the situation better than the low income producers and consumers. Their voices need to be heard in all the councils of those that have the resources to work with them to solve the problems. Achieving such knowledge-based food democracy will be the surest way of achieving food and nutrition security.

Preparing for action

Ban Ki-moon has called for world food supply to increase by 50% by 2030 to meet growing demand. African leaders had earlier set a target in the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) of achieving 6% increase in production per annum by 2015. This was the minimum to get ahead of the demographic trends of increased numbers and the changing food preferences of urbanised and better-off consumers. The leaders backed this by commitments to investing 10% of their national budgets in agriculture. The United Nations and the development partners, have commissioned studies such as that by the InterAcademy Council and the Commission for Africa to determine what is needed and to get African development in general and agriculture in particular on track to meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of halving hunger (MDG1) and conserving the environment (MDG7). The G8 nations at Sea Island, Gleneagles and subsequent meetings have promised to substantially increase investment in Africa's development, including agriculture.

The changes, of which CAADP is a part, are a product of arguably the greatest African-led reform since liberalisation from colonialism committing countries to evidenced-based planning for comprehensive reforms of the agricultural springboards of their economies. Concurrent with the conception and development of CAADP, there has been the formation of an agricultural research framework stretching from national agricultural research systems (NARS), through sub-regional organisations (SROs) to the creation of the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA). These developments were interwoven into the formation of the African Union (AU) with a reinforced Commission, and strengthened regional economic communities to which AU-NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa's Development) has mandated the implementation of CAADP.

African economies have on average exceeded 5% growth per annum for over a decade and agriculture has contributed with improved factor productivity. However, as 2008 progresses there are increasing signs that the rate of progress is still neither fast enough nor sufficiently equitable to be accepted by the poor who, in the absence of alternative outlets, are increasingly inclined to make themselves heard by rioting. An urgent and effective response is needed.

Required responses

To have a lasting impact the proposed remedies must be developed and owned by those who are expected to implement them. This is not an easy task because there are many actors involved in Africa's agricultural development: farmers and their associations, government ministries, cooperatives, international centres, non-governmental organisations, and private businesses, to name just a few. To cope with this a structured evidence-based approach is needed which links the producers to the consumers into which other actors can fit efficiently and effectively. Fortunately, there are models of success, such as smallholder dairying in Kenya, which can be up-scaled.

However, the responses to today's crisis cannot rely on what was done in the past. Firstly, because the sum of past successes did not change the livelihoods of the majority and secondly, the circumstances in which they succeeded no longer exist and the rate of change is accelerating. Radical innovations in agricultural production and marketing are needed, which are adapted to the prevailing socio-economic and environmental circumstances, and which above all are owned by those expected to implement them.

Potential for innovation

African smallholders have the essential prerequisite characteristics for rapid and significant increased production, but they have to contend with constraints that result in huge gaps between actual and potential productivity. The constraints are not immutable and the yield gaps provide ample scope for improving productivity, even with known technologies. When prices have improved African smallholders have demonstrated remarkable capacity for responding very rapidly to higher farm-gate prices and new market opportunities and the farmers have not been reluctant to adopt novel crops or new production techniques. Examples include the rapid uptake of vanilla in Uganda following crop failures in Madagascar, dairying in Kenya, maize production in Malawi and cassava in Nigeria. The greatest constraint to such innovation is the low farm-gate prices resulting from poor physical and institutional infrastructure that limits and imposes undue costs on the flow of goods and information to and from markets. There is also great need for research to produce well adapted improved technologies and enabling policies.

The problem has not been the capacity of smallholders to innovate but rather the poverty of the advice and information available to them. The piecemeal approach to research and development has too often failed them. They have, for example, achieved higher yields and then not been able to find buyers for their surpluses such as happened following the adoption of the novel animal-drawn broad-bed maker for improved drainage of Vertisols in Ethiopia, which dramatically increased maize yields.

Through CAADP, African governments and Africa's development partners have made commitments to support comprehensive development programmes that are African-owned and which engage all the vital actors in the agricultural value chains. They have agreed on an integrated institutional framework which, if adhered to, will guide the formidable institutional evolutions and reforms required, as well as the necessarily ambitious investment plans. CAADP places farmers, the majority of whom are women, at the centre of the action, rather than treating them as passive beneficiaries.

Innovating with innovation

African smallholders, despite their presumed aversion to risk, have proven to be adept at innovation, but there is a lot of room for improvement in their farming systems. This fact points to the conclusion that the African agricultural research and development community, including the development partners, have failed to create the circumstances in which smallholder innovation can flourish.

In response to this, FARA and its constituent SROs were established and have evolved to provide leadership for CAADP Pillar IV. This pillar encompasses agricultural research and technology dissemination and adoption with capacity strengthening as a cross-cutting issue. The success of Pillar IV is essential for catalysing and advancing the innovations needed by CAADP's three other pillars: I. land and water management; II. rural infrastructure and trade; and III. increased food supply and reducing hunger. Without research and capacity strengthening CAADP will remain hostage to old technologies and approaches.

FARA's strategic planning process involved wide consultations with SROs and all categories of CAADP stakeholders, African and non-African. The process identified five areas in which the Forum, as a continental institution, could beneficially improve the networking of its stakeholders to build critical mass, reduce wasteful duplication and avoid leaving critical gaps and which are necessary to reinforce each other for optimum impact. These five networking support functions are summarised as:

1. Advocacy and resource mobilisation to acquire the institutional, financial and infrastructural support for innovation.
2. Information and technologies which are the raw materials of innovation.
3. Policies and markets to assure innovators of enabling policy environments and efficient input and product markets.
4. Human and institutional capacity to implement the ambitious programmes and originate innovations suited to Africa's highly diverse agricultural and socio-economic systems.
5. Partnerships and strategic alliances to establish effective and efficient platforms for multi-institutional innovation involving the value chain actors.

The participatory prioritisation of the SROs provides a head start for the stocktaking required to form the basis for CAADP round table planning processes. This provides detailed reasoning for chosen priorities and establishes methodologies for reassessments as circumstances change. It has also created pragmatic frameworks within which to address trans-boundary issues such as pests, diseases and trade, and to share resources to more efficiently address common constraints, e.g. crop and livestock diseases. The SROs have recently restructured their programmes, taking advantage of lessons learnt in promoting such collaborations between the NARS of their member countries.

The purpose of creating FARA, the SROs and the NARS is to harness the comparative advantages that are found at their different continental, sub-regional and national levels to support national agricultural research and development institutions. This has created two way links extending from the smallholder to the highest levels of policy making in the AU and in the international agencies and development partners. For example, the bulk of the action in FARA's Sub Saharan Africa Challenge Programme takes place on smallholdings in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zimbabwe but the decisions, results and impacts are

shared with member states and institutions of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR).

In this and many other ways the SROs and FARA bring the producers and low-income consumers into the discussion when their futures are being deliberated upon. This approach to food democratisation promises to be more effective than discussions and planning on how to improve food and nutrition security conducted without their participation. It will incorporate their profound knowledge of their production systems. It will also force clearer articulation of the equity issues which are increasingly important with growing middle classes.

Immediate actions for agricultural research and capacity strengthening

The following is a non-exhaustive list of urgent agricultural research and capacity strengthening activities which the SRO and FARA stakeholders must pursue as soon as they can realise the necessary resources:

- Active involvement in the CAADP Pillar IV processes by providing an effective Expert Reference Group geographically distributed and empowered to bring the right expertise, from within and outside Africa. This must be bolstered by expert capacity in institutional evolution, change management and capacity strengthening to work with national agricultural research and development institutions.
- Work with countries engaged in the CAADP round table processes to develop pragmatic financing proposals drawing on lessons learnt across the continent . Supported by all five of FARA's networking support functions, and guided, at sub-regional and national levels, so that the programmes and projects are conducted within innovation systems delivering actions across value chains.
- Work with the major agriculturally-oriented development projects to ensure that gaps and distortions in the innovation systems are identified quickly and responded to effectively.
- Strengthen the combined CAADP-FARA-SRO monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system to be an effective management tool identifying best practices that should be scaled up and failures that should be eliminated before too much time and money is wasted. Vital within the system is predicting capacity so that Africa will be able to plan for the future, rather than planning as a reaction to food crisis.
- Combined with strengthened M&E and predicting capacity, is the use of modern modelling tools that can draw on FARA-SRO-NARS access to the knowledge and wisdom of the producers and consumers, and advances in global science that can make food democratisation a practical reality.

Overall, the key role of research is to guide long-term investments by both government and private sector, in scaling out successful interventions scattered across the region.

Conclusion

Africa has not been standing idly by letting the food crisis unfold. It has been engaged in difficult wide ranging institutional restructuring involving farsighted reforms. Within the

limits imposed by huge demands on limited budgets, African governments are increasing their investment in agricultural research, development and capacity strengthening. However, to avoid a continent wide calamity Africa also needs the support of its development partners to facilitate the engagement of all stakeholders in true knowledge-based food democracy in line with their commitment to increased better harmonised and better quality development assistance.