



Thinking Big by Starting Small

By Danielle Nierenberg, Washington, DC

Submitted on June 30, 2010

It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the fact that 1 billion people worldwide are going to bed hungry every night. And, in the United States, it is easy to look at sub-Saharan Africa—where the majority of people depend on agriculture for their livelihood but still do not get enough to eat—and want to just throw money at the problem. Or worse, to give up hope.

But when one talks to farmers on the ground in Kenya, Ghana, Madagascar, and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, it becomes clear that throwing money at the problem isn't enough.

It's not that funding isn't needed. With increasing extreme weather events due to climate change, skyrocketing food prices, and the highest number of hungry people in human history, funding for agriculture to alleviate poverty and hunger is needed now more than ever. The new multibillion dollar U.S. food security and agriculture initiative, known as "Feed the Future," is a timely recognition of this need.

But this money needs to be directed at the right kind of agriculture projects. Instead of silver-bullet, high-technology fixes, agriculture funding should focus on the many low-tech, African-led innovations that are already helping to alleviate hunger and poverty in environmentally sustainable ways all over the continent. As the global community looks for solutions to the problem of global hunger, it's important to remember something that we've heard again and again: Farmers already know what they need.

One Acre Fund, an agriculture organization that serves rural smallholder farmers in Kenya and Rwanda, was built on this idea. From the beginning, we sought to provide farmers with tools to feed their families and to increase their incomes by asking them what they needed—and listening to what they said.

For example, we knew that farmers needed improved seed and fertilizer, but, after many conversations, we discovered that farmers also needed financing to purchase those inputs, as well as education on how to use them. And, they needed access to a market to sell their crop after harvest[SH1]. Our service model—credit, inputs, education, and market facilitation—addresses all of these needs.

Now, when a farmer enrolls with One Acre Fund, she joins as part of a group of six to twelve farmers and receives an in-kind loan of seed and fertilizer, which is guaranteed by her group members. One Acre Fund delivers this seed and fertilizer to a market point within one mile of where she lives, and a field officer provides in-field training on land preparation, planting,

fertilizer application, and weeding. Critically, our farmers repay us, which keeps the organization focused on customer service, and means that One Acre Fund can grow to serve more farmers season after season.

One Rwandan couple benefiting from One Acre Fund's program, Edith and Gilbert, has seen an 80 percent increase in their bean harvest in the past two years. Now, not only do they have enough to feed themselves and their three children, they are also able to afford school fees. And they are making plans for the future. While just two years earlier they were frequently going without enough to eat, they now dream of purchasing more land and expanding their farm to include livestock.

Farmer-led innovation is happening all over the continent. In Mozambique, the organization ProInnova, along with the Spanish NGO Centro de Iniciativas para la Cooperación/Batá, and the National Farmers Union of Mozambique, UNAC, organized a workshop for farmers from all over the country to get together, share their experiences, and learn about different agriculture innovations being practiced in other communities. Throughout the event, farmers presented other innovations and practices—including how to prevent diseases that affect their crops and fruit trees and how to raise farmed fish. This event was the culmination of a series of workshops that Batá/ProInnova/UNAC held in 2009 to help farmers identify innovations in their communities. Workshops like these spread information about innovations that work, and, ultimately, help farmers value—and invest in—their own knowledge.

“We have enough innovations,” says Xavier Rakotonjanahary, the Rice Breeding Coordinator at Madagascar's Centre National de la Recherche Appliquee au Developpement Rural/FOFIFA or the National Center for Rural Development. His organization works with farmers to adapt different technologies and innovations to fit their own needs through extension services and on-farm testing.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, millions of farmers are working hard to eke out a living with poor seed, no fertilizer, limited access to credit, and no insurance. Improved seed, fertilizer, credit, and insurance all exist today. Adapting these products to fit the needs and resources of smallholders will require many hours of trudging through fields and learning from farmers. For solutions to reduce hunger and improve agriculture livelihoods, don't look to Washington DC, or even to Nairobi. Look to the farmers living miles away from paved roads in rural Rwanda, Mozambique, and Madagascar. Farmers know what they need.

Stephanie Hanson is the Director of Policy and Research at the One Acre Fund; Danielle Nierenberg is Co-Project Director of the Worldwatch Institute's Nourishing the Planet project; and Molly Theobald is a Food and Agriculture Research Fellow at Worldwatch
www.nourishingtheplanet.org.