

Looking to Africa for food security

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By Gareth Coetzee

Food security is an important issue, the writer says, not least because a lack of food can threaten a region's political and social stability.

A billion people in the world are starving and that number is predicted to rise by 2050. Scientists suggest we either make food security and climate change our priority or we start looking for another planet; two of them if we can.

At COP17 last week, the SA Confederation of Agricultural Unions (Sacau), voicing the concerns of farmers, sought to place agriculture – food security – at the top of the agenda. Sacau quoted the World Bank as saying that investing in agriculture has four times the impact than in other sectors.



Food security is a serious issue, because a hungry person is an angry person – threatening political and social security. History is rich with examples of this from the French Revolution that was sparked by rising bread prices, the staple food at the time, to the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, thought to have been aggravated by wheat shortages.

After World War II, the world experienced something of a green revolution with an increase in agricultural produce stimulated by an increased use of chemicals and pesticides to increase yields. However, Nobel Peace Prize-winning agronomist Norman Borlaug, whose agricultural innovations in the late 1940s aided the boom, cautioned then that it would be short-lived. In fact, it is his methods of heavy chemical and pesticide use that, 60 years later, have led to devastated soils and weaker and weaker yields.

Something has to change and countries are looking to Africa for a solution. African agriculture has, for example, become a focus of the Obama administration, with moves to invest in technologies, initiatives and land for growing food in Africa; food for Americans, in the long run.

China is also clamouring for partnerships in order to secure land for its growing population, culminating in the agreement signed between agricultural ministers of Brics (Brazil, Russia, India, China, SA) countries recently.

Agricultural Minister Tina Joemat-Pettersson said recently that the Brics agreement addressed global food security, climate change, environmental protection and trade and investment promotion. A major thrust was to share new technologies that increase yields while protecting the environment. But there are concerns. Chief among these is that foreign countries are buying hectares of land in Africa and securing the best land to produce food for their own people, leaving local farmers financially devastated and local populations hungry.

The Washington DC-based Worldwatch Institute has said the trend of wealthier countries buying land in sub-Saharan Africa is growing.

The International Food Policy Research Institute has said that 20 million hectares of African land was sold to foreign investors between 2006 and 2009, greatly undermining the chances African farmers have of alleviating the poverty afflicting their people.

The topic came under the spotlight at the recent Business of Social and Environmental Innovation conference at the UCT Graduate School of Business. Speaking at the conference, SA Food Lab's Milla McLachlan said this undermining of small-scale farmers was part of the overall problem with the food system.

The SA Food Lab wants small farmers, subsistence farmers and sub-subsistence farmers to become primary producers within the system. "What we want, and indeed need, is a new food system; one that provides a diverse, nutritious diet to all the people around the world; one that uses sustainable practices and one that includes smallholder farmers," she said.

The African Cashew Initiative (ACi) illustrates the plight of the small African farmer. According to David Bond and Andrew Aitken of the Collective Leadership Institute, who also spoke at the GSB event, 40 percent of the world's cashew supply is produced in Ivory Coast, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Mozambique, and Benin, yet these small farmers struggle to make \$100 (R837) a month.

The ACi aims, through partnerships with NGOs and development organisations, to create 5 500 jobs and 150 000 small producers, increase their competitiveness, improve the supply-chain and encourage collaboration and community alignment with national goals.

"As soon as small businesses feel that their business is a part of a greater whole and is good for the country, they are much more motivated to succeed," said Bond. With farmers getting support from international bodies, the importance then will be to ensure that they use sustainable methods of farming.

A positive initiative in this direction is Woolworths' Farming for the Future that looks at improving the shared value in the agricultural supply chain by building efficiency and increasing collaboration.

This supply chain includes farmers, fishermen and hunters; the physical environment; processors; packagers; distributors; marketers; transport; the places that sell food; governments; policies; taxes; the healthcare system; and even the education system. Consumers are also part of the chain.

The retail giant, known for its organic food programme, sources 90 percent of its food from Africa and has recently paired with the World Wildlife Fund to increase the agricultural sector's awareness of the impact of farming on the environment, especially with regard to water wastage. Farming for the Future equips farmers with the knowledge and technologies to improve yield while protecting the environment. Already there has been a marked increase in savings plus improved crops.

However, sorting out the supply chain and water management issues is just part of the issue – the problem, says WWF's Tatjana von Bormann, also lies with the consumer.

“The range of consumers is so diverse that there needs to be a much greater effort in reaching people and making them aware of their behaviour, behaviour that ultimately is leading to our demise,” she said.

One example, simple though it may seem, is people's tendency to drive kilometres at a time just to buy milk – it all adds up to negative impact in the end.

Von Bormann also called for leadership with a deeper appreciation of society's needs, a greater understanding of the truth, with an ability to collaborate across profit and non-profit boundaries to encourage development in this area.

Food security is a complex issue to say the least. It embodies issues of land, wealth distribution, technology, environmental consciousness, and solidarity. There are no easy wins here, but hand in hand with the necessity for equitable distribution of the carbon budget that was the focus of the recent UN negotiations in Durban, the need to work towards an equitable and just solution for food security is just as vital to ensure that there is a future for Africa and its people.

** Coetzee writes for the UCT Graduate School of Business.*