

Multiple pressures of soaring food prices and food security in Africa

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Introduction

THE global price of basic food commodities and products has increased rapidly over the past three years resulting in increased food insecurity. In Africa, for example, social cohesion, peace and stability, as well as the encouraging economic gains among others, are at risk. The United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon warns of a *rapidly escalating crisis of food availability around the world reaching emergency proportions*. The President of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), Lennart Båge opines that *responding effectively to the impact of higher food prices must be a top priority for the global community, particularly when the impact is combined with the projected effects of climate change*. IFAD further indicated that in the first quarter of 2008 wheat prices hit a high 130% increase. Maize prices on the other hand increased by 30% over those in 2007. Rice prices rose moderately in 2006 and more so in 2007 but in February 2008, a 10% increase was reached with a further 10% in March 2008.

Thus, poor African food consumers including resource-poor farmers are hard hit and the following key reasons can be attributed:

- food production not keeping pace with population increase in Africa and the world in general
- changing food habit whereby people consume more of the three key staples – rice, maize and wheat as well as increased consumption of livestock and dairy products and hence more grain conversion to feed
- increase in fossil fuel prices and hence the need to search for quick turn round alternative biofuel crops including food biofuel crops
- climate change as a result of too much water (flood) and or too little (drought), and low (freeze) and high temperatures (dry) and hence increased crop failures and grain shortages
- future markets where we see huge capital flows to speculative commodity trading (we will not discuss this issue here).

Soaring food prices and impact on African economies

The multiple pressures of population increase, changing food habits, increasing energy cost and biofuel substitution, climate change and possibly, speculative commodity trading, are largely responsible for the global food crisis. Although producers in developed countries generally stand to benefit from higher food prices, on the contrary, the African farmers and rural and urban poor consumers face increased hunger, malnutrition and poverty. Owing to recent civil riots in Cameroon and Senegal in Africa, and millions facing starvation in Ethiopia, the African Governments are becoming increasingly vulnerable, and peace, stability, security and governance are increasingly threatened.

Producer prices for staples have increased by 10–50% in Kenya while in Ethiopia, livestock product price has increased over 40% for meat; up to 30% increase in milk; and 20% for eggs. A 15–20% price increase has been reported in Cameroon and Mali, while in Nigeria, producer prices for millet, maize and sorghum have increased by about 100–200% over the past year. Maize price in Angola have increased five times in the last year and in Egypt, wheat prices have more than doubled. Development agencies estimate that in Ghana, for example, staple food prices for sellers have increased by 50%, while consumer prices have increased by 100% partly due to high internal transport costs as a result of increased fuel prices. In Mali, producer prices have increased by 15–20% and consumer prices by 20–50%. In Senegal, a 100% price increase in the majority of foods has occurred. These figures signal a threat to urban and rural livelihood and a major risk to good governance that is taking root in parts of Africa.

Higher food prices have also affected price increases in downstream and upstream products and services. People are now eating less frequently and in lesser quantities, as well as cheaper and less nutritious food. The impact of all these are increased levels of malnutrition and disease, increased poverty, and threats to peace, stability and social cohesion.

Challenges and opportunities

The challenge of the global food crisis is not to meet only the immediate (short term) food needs of the already

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overburdened poor, hungry and vulnerable population, more importantly, sustainable medium and long-term strategies and approaches are needed to fight hunger, disease and poverty. International development approach to meet the food needs of the poor has generally been made from the perspective of food security – availability, access and affordability and not necessarily growing and eating own food per se. This position has been challenged by farmer organizations and the West Africa farmers' organization platform – Réseau des organisations des paysannes & de producteurs de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (ROPPA) in particular, has been calling for food sovereignty, whereby producers are able to meet their own food needs and not necessarily rely on external stocks and supply.

Traditionally, in many parts of Africa, it is a norm to have one's own food stock rather than depend on supplies from outside. This is the perspective of many today and the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) position of *eat what it produces and produce what it eats* corroborates the long-standing perspectives of producer organizations. Today, however, that critical lifeline of the traditional production system has been weakened due primarily to poor producer access to services including markets, under funding of the agriculture sector, and better incentives.

While the food crisis is an opportunity for advanced farmers both within and outside Africa mainly because they can position themselves to take advantage of higher producer prices, it is a matter of life and death for the majority of Africa's poor and vulnerable groups in particular, women and children. Already, hidden hunger of malnutrition is being reported in parts of Ethiopia and the majority of the middle income class is struggling, putting economic gains and prosperity, and natural resources at increased risk. Key natural resources and family capital in the form of productive animals are being sold to meet family food needs. Rural–urban migration has increased and increased migration to 'greener pastures' of Europe continues despite the death and mayhem it presents to our youthful population and leaders of tomorrow. The challenge is how to increase productivity through the retention of a dynamic and motivated market driven workforce through enterprise development.

Kaberuka, President of the AfDB, states *we are not dealing with a short term problem and the long term solution can only mean a different way of managing our agriculture*. This underpins the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA) advocacy of a paradigm shift in agricultural service delivery through research and development. We need to embrace innovation systems and value chain approach instead of continuing with about half-a-century-old linear research–extension–farmer approach. The environment is complex, the actors diverse and knowledge base extensive. All these must be organized in ways that impact food insecurity and poverty. Innovation systems whereby knowledge and actors are

organized around commodity and or sector value chains would have to be developed, tested, validated and disseminated to increase the scale and impact of new agricultural technologies and approaches in meeting the most critical millennium development goals of reduced hunger and poverty.

Short, medium and long term strategies

Given the complexity of the factors contributing to the rising food prices, there is need for a comprehensive approach. Various African governments have approached the issue of higher food prices and the ensuing food riots through policy interventions. In Cameroon, Senegal, Mali, Tanzania and other countries, reduction or elimination of taxes and duties on import of food grains is in place. Mauritania and Togo on the other hand enforce price controls while Chad increases food supply using stocks. The Mano River Union member States of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia cooperates in meeting the challenges and opportunities the food crisis presents.

ECOWAS responded through their Finance, Agriculture and Trade Ministers by assessing and strategizing sub-regional policy approach in mitigating the impact of the food crisis. ECOWAS resolved to ultimately create food self-sufficiency and enable the sub-region to *eat what it produces and produce what it eats*. The Ministers of Finance, Agriculture and Trade agreed to invest US\$ 4 billion between now and 2010 to primarily help small-holders who also suffer the effects of the global food prices. The sub-regional economic grouping through the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development, targets US\$ 100 million per year to support agricultural productivity. An ECOWAS Minister however admits that they have not paid as much attention to food security much earlier as they should have. Others are however of the opinion that attention was more focused on good governance at the expense of other sectors including agriculture.

The UN Food Summit in June 2008 in Rome attended by 181 nations and more than 40 Heads of State and Government announced firm financial commitments of US\$ 18.36 billion in addition to the US\$ 6.06 billion mobilized earlier in the year. The pledged funds target hard hit countries to enable them grow enough food for themselves in coming planting seasons and helping them to achieve continuing food security through investment in agriculture and research.

Response to the global food crisis must not be heavily tilted to the immediate short term food needs through the cheaper option of food aid for example, but must address the medium and long term challenges; and in Africa, the well-known issues of:

- access to quality seeds, fertilizers, and tools
- growth enhancement credit
- markets access and profitability

- water use efficiency and soil health
- good balance between smallholder agriculture and commercial agricultural enterprises
- sensitive issue of *safe land reform* to enable medium to large scale commercial farming for which, the African Union and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) are getting involved; and
- rural development in general – good roads to enhance market access; rural electrification to support cottage industry and attract private sector into rural areas; and other social services; are prerequisite for enhancing agricultural productivity, economic growth, and reducing hunger and poverty.

Within the context of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP) of the African Union's (AU) New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), FARA, Sub-Regional Research Organizations (SRO), National Agricultural Research Systems (NARS), and other stakeholders including investors, developed the Framework for African Agricultural Productivity (FAAP) to guide the implementation of CAADP Pillar IV on agricultural research technology dissemination and adoption. The FAAP aims to increase the scale of Africa's investment; catalyse productivity enhancing reforms in agricultural service delivery, training and education; and enhance harmonization of development partner interventions in African agriculture. Farmer and pastoralist empowerment and ownership of market-driven enterprises is a key benchmark of FAAP.

Further, FARA and stakeholders developed medium and long-term initiatives and projects to contribute to African food security and economic growth. The Sub-Saharan Africa Challenge Program (SSACP) for instance, proposes a paradigm shift from the 40 to 50-year-old linear research–extension–farmer technology transfer to innovation systems whereby knowledge on technologies, good practice and institutional innovations are tested, validated and delivered in ways that impact poverty, food insecurity and low incomes. The Dissemination of New Agricultural Technologies (DONATA), an AU–NEPAD flagship program promotes the rapid and wide scale adoption of high impact technologies such as NERICA rice, improved disease-resistant cassava varieties, high protein maize and sweet potato varieties, just to name a few. While the Regional Agricultural Information and Learning System (RAILS) improves African agricultural research and development actor's access, use and contribution to global knowledge including market information

to enhance productivity and regional and international trade, all these initiatives cannot however be viable if the innovation capacity of African agricultural research and development actors are not enhanced and hence, the project on Strengthening Capacity for African Agricultural Research and Development (SCARDA). SCARDA is strengthening capacity for agricultural innovation including indigenous knowledge and farmer innovation. To make that sustainable there is need to also strengthen Africa's capacity to build capacity with improvements in pedagogy to lay more emphasis on promoting learning and to improve the relevance of tertiary education curricula to meet the present and future human and institutional capacity requirement for agricultural development. These needs are addressed by the project for Building African Scientific and Institutional Capacity (BASIC). In addition, modern tools including biotechnology to advance African agriculture are critical to food insecurity in Africa. Adequate biosafety systems and capacity must however be in place to enable the safe application of biotechnology tools and products.

Conclusion

The global food crisis presents a risk especially to African smallholders and vulnerable poor rural and urban dwellers who in the short to medium term, are not likely to benefit from the higher food prices and market opportunities. The challenge is not only short-term measures to cushion the impact of the food crisis on vulnerable populations but more so, medium to long-term strategies and approaches that sustain agricultural productivity and economic gains. The Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP) of the African Union's (AU) New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) on improving soil health and efficient water management; infrastructure especially improving rural infrastructure and producer access to markets; food security and reducing hunger among Africa's poor and vulnerable; and technology and good practice generation and adoption to increase productivity and incomes of smallholders remains valid. Resources in all its form and dimension and appropriate institutional and knowledge base innovations and appropriate service delivery pathways and approaches are key fundamentals to advance and sustain the CAADP growth agenda and stemming the cycle of food shortage, hunger, malnutrition and even death especially, the vulnerable.