

Predetermined solutions often don't match the needs of sub-Saharan African farmers

Five weeks ago, we concluded an article on the loss of productive land in sub-Saharan Africa (<http://tinyurl.com/y9s376ag>) saying, "In the next column, we will examine other factors that have an impact on hunger and the lives of farmers and herders in Sub Saharan Africa." With members of Congress holding farm bill listening sessions in their districts and states, we delayed our follow-up to provide a review of the last four farm bills to show how US farm policy has created a situation that leaves farmers experiencing the fourth year of declining prices and declining federal support at the same time.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the prevalence of hunger has been stubbornly persistent over the last 50 years. While, with population growth, the percentage of those facing chronic hunger has declined, the absolute number of undernourished people has barely budged. With climate change disrupting agricultural production patterns, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that the number of hungry will increase.

On his visits to Senegal, Harwood had the opportunity to observe the large number of youths lining the roadways in Dakar selling everything from phone cards, to peanuts, to tangerines, and on and on the list could go. Each one was trying to eke out a living. No matter the time of day or night we were out on the streets of Dakar, these young and not so young sellers were approaching the cars that were creeping through the heavy traffic.

He asked his host, Ousmane Pame where they all came from and was told that they had moved to the city from their village because their family did not have the resources necessary to feed them. The radical population growth of Dakar and other major sub-Saharan cities was driven by rural poverty. But without a robust manufacturing sector, the majority of those moving to the city end up trying to sell enough to allow them to buy the food they needed.

Despite the optimism of a half century ago, manufacturing in sub-Saharan Africa has not developed quickly enough to employ more than a fraction of those seeking meaningful employment.

That seems to us, Daryll, Harwood, Ousmane, and a host of others, that the immediate need is to find ways to stanch the flow of youths from their home villages to major cities like Dakar. And to achieve that requires increased agricultural production.

With 70 percent of the population engaged in agricultural production, the direct transfer of Western agricultural practices to rural villages where farmers till small plots is not practical. That is not to say that there are not large agricultural enterprises in sub-Saharan Africa that produce products like sugar for domestic consumption and export; there are.

But with the extensive production practices that such operations require, the land that provides employment for a small number of workers could sustain a much larger number of families if that land were farmed by individual producers. The point is not to call for the break-up of such enterprises, but to make the point that the consolidation of land to enable the widespread adoption of Western-style agricultural practices would lead to more urban migration, not less.

As we have argued in the past, the first step in helping farmers increase their agricultural production is not to come into their villages with a predetermined set of solutions, but to sit down and listen to those directly engaged in farming. They know the land, the weather, and the challenges they face.

The responsibility of development specialists is to listen and then research the issues that farmers have identified. The specialists then can report their findings back to those who identified the issues that they face. It takes patience as farmers determine how they can use what they have heard to modify their production practices. While all farmers are inherently “risk takers,” most are hesitant to modify their production practices on the word of someone who has not worked their land.

But there are usually some who are willing to incorporate some of the new information in their farming practices. Meanwhile, everyone else is watching to see how it turns out. And season by season, whether we are talking about raising crops or animals, others will adopt those changes that have positive results.

Even more critical than the transfer of knowledge is the issue of access to land. In many sub-Saharan Africa countries, “land grabbing” by foreign investors displaces farmers from land they currently farm. In some cases, idle land that could be distributed to the country’s farmers, is made available to investors instead. Access to land is a key component of reducing the level of hunger and access to land by a country’s citizens should take preference over foreign, or even local, investors.

The challenges facing leaders and farmers in sub-Saharan Africa are significant, but finding ways to meaningfully respond to those challenges are critical if the number of hungry is to decline as the population continues to increase. Responding to the expressed needs of farmers, whether they be for knowledge or access to land, is a good place to start.

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Originally published in MidAmerica Farmer Grower, Vol. 37, No. 134, September 8, 2017

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