

## How can Africa feed itself?

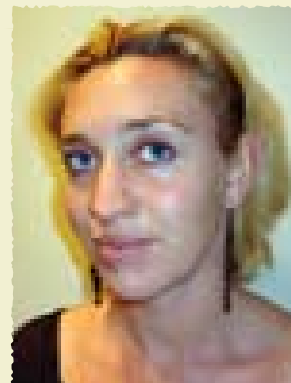
Of the over one billion undernourished people in the world today, 265 million live in sub-Saharan Africa. Three-quarters of the hungry live in rural areas and include farming families. A significant number of African countries depend on basic food imports to meet their consumption needs. However, not everyone can afford to buy food, and the recent food-price hikes deepened this problem even more. In fact, just over half of the sub-Saharan population lives on less than US\$1.25 per day, which will not go far to meet all their livelihood needs.

Food sovereignty is based on the idea that people have the right to choose what to produce and what to eat. But how to translate this into good policy priorities and practices is not simple. On this page, two women professionals working towards improving African food and agriculture programmes provide their views on necessary priorities.



Photo: Nico Bakker

**“Traditional food crops are healthier, cheaper and locally available”**



**Petra Bakewell-Stone**, independent consultant, Tanzania.

“Food sovereignty for African farmers is being threatened by industrial agriculture and the global trade in food products. Industrialised food products are cheap and trade undermines traditional rural livelihoods, as they are often produced and processed far away. Also, food bases and consumer trends are becoming much narrower; the food security of Kenyans, for example, is largely dependent on a single grain, maize. Industrial agriculture is based on commercial seeds, agrochemicals and high water consumption, which increases the vulnerability of African societies to climate change, crop failure and livestock disease. All of this can put smallholders at risk. What complicates the situation even more is the increase in highly processed foods. Chosen for their convenience and their ‘modern’ appeal, ‘fast foods’ are not only nutrient-poor and expensive, but the methods for producing them are polluting and wasteful.

“It is ironic that in a region so richly endowed with a high diversity of plants (at least 1000 of which can be eaten as green leafy vegetables), per capita consumption of fruit and vegetables is declining. Traditional diets of grains and vegetables are giving way to those high in fat and sugar. As the main producers and preparers of food, women are disproportionately affected by the ‘nutrition transition’. This explains why they are so concerned with defining their own systems of food and agriculture. In traditional African culture, there is great emphasis placed

on food for self-sufficiency, seed saving and food stores, but traditional methods of preserving food are being lost. For example, preserving millet, pulses and vegetables by smoking or sun drying, is a declining technique.

“In order to avoid marginalising smallholder farmers, the role of traditional vegetables and staples needs to be more strongly advocated. There are many traditional crops which receive only minor attention in research, while being locally known for their high nutritional values and environmental suitability. These indigenous foods contribute to self-reliance and sustainable livelihoods, as they are relatively easy to grow and require minimal external inputs. Some even improve soil fertility through nitrogen fixation, such as pigeon peas, cowpeas, green gram and bambara groundnuts. Growing food crops that are adapted to the harsh and often dry environment of Africa is crucial to solving the food crisis. Besides, communities need to start producing for their own consumption rather than for export, and to take a more active role in guiding policies to that effect.

“We can be proud of our traditional food crops and local customs, and this should be reflected in our food and in our farming education at school. We should also organise gatherings of farmers, breeders, fisher folk and artisans in order to share knowledge and experiences. The ‘Slow Food’ movement is already gaining recognition around the world, including African countries like Tanzania. Slow Food campaigns emphasise the benefits of locally produced, traditional foods – they are healthier, cheaper and locally available.”

For this contribution, Petra Bakewell-Stone (dadapatra@hotmail.com) collaborated with Freda Chale from RESEWO, a Tanzanian organisation that advocates low-cost food production, for example through traditional varieties and organic manure. Other activities include collecting recipes and seeds. See the Networking page for more information on the Slow Food movement.

**“African farmers can compete—but need more of the right public investments”**



**Karen Brooks**, World Bank, Washington DC.

“African farmers are capable of producing enough food to meet the growing needs of African consumers. They already do so for many products, such as cassava, millet, sorghum, sweet potatoes and most of their maize. These foods are the backbone of most African diets. Only wheat (two-thirds of consumption) and rice (half) is imported in significant amounts for regional consumption. According to the FAO, the

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African continent imported about US\$ 3 billion more food than it exported in 2006, and this rose during the price spike of 2008 and early 2009.

“For successful production and commercialisation in growing regional markets, African producers need to be competitive in production but also pay lower transport costs. Yields of staple grains are low, but African small-scale farmers are competitive up to the farm gate. They compensate by low costs of labour and low use of purchased inputs. Low fertilizer use can however result in the mining of soil nutrients, since many farmers do not apply dung or plant residues as organic matter to improve the land they use for growing staple crops. Costs may therefore appear low in the short run, but production processes that lead to soil degradation are not sustainable. And low returns to labour keep farmers in poverty even if they are efficient producers.

“It is when their products leave the farm that many African farmers lose competitiveness – through high transport costs, loss to insects and spoilage and poor organisation of processing and retailing. Prosperous urban consumers switch to bread, pasta and other processed products that are less time-consuming to prepare than traditional cereals, and better packaged. Many traditional African staples suffer from lack of attention from research and food industries.

“In some cases, however, consumers prefer local products. For example, local beer competes successfully with imports in much of the region. Also, some locally produced fruits and vegetables need little processing and women in particular earn cash from them.

“African farmers, especially women smallholders, need public support from agricultural research and extension services, and access to seed and fertilizers. Climate change and environmental degradation create needs for drought-tolerant and pest-resistant varieties. Equally fundamental is access to land, which needs to be documented and registered. Massive investments are also needed in infrastructure, especially roads, power, water storage, irrigation and post-harvest facilities.

“This is an ambitious and capital-intensive agenda, but African governments and development partners are moving ahead to invest in the sector that employs about three-quarters of citizens. African governments have committed to spending approximately ten percent of their national budgets on needed public investments in agriculture and rural development. The international community, including the G8, has pledged additional resources, most recently committing US\$ 20 billion over three years at the July summit. The World Bank has more than doubled its new lending for African agriculture in the past year. These are promising steps that will help those who will really make the difference: African farmers, a majority of whom are women and who produce the food and take it to market.”

Karen Brooks is the sector manager for Agriculture and Rural Development in the African Region at the World Bank.

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