

Africa has vast agricultural potential, so why are we due to import \$110 billion worth of food annually by 2025?

The African continent has the potential to feed itself and even have surplus food to export to other parts of the world. But instead, the continent imports \$35 billion worth of food and agricultural products every year, and if the current predictions hold, the import bill will rise to \$110 billion annually by 2025. So the question is: if the African continent has vast agricultural potential as we have been led to believe, why are we facing an astronomical food import bill?

By [Junior Sabena Mutabazi](#) 2 May 2017



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To say nothing of, I'm not the first or last person to ask this question. Indeed, a few days ago, the President of the African Development Bank (ADB), Akinwumi Adesina, made the following remarks while speaking at the Centre for Global Development in Washington DC: "Africa's annual food import bill of \$35 billion, estimated to rise to \$110 billion by 2025, weakens African economies, decimates its agriculture and exports jobs from the continent. Africa's annual food import bill of \$35 billion is just about the same amount it needs to close its power deficit."

Adesina added: "To rapidly support Africa to diversify its economies and revive its rural areas, we have prioritised agriculture. We are taking action. The Bank has committed \$24 billion towards agriculture in the next 10 years, with a sharp focus on food self-sufficiency and agricultural industrialisation." Clearly, the AfDB chief is very concerned, and so he should be. With the latest food crises in East Africa (South Sudan and Somalia), there is a strange feeling that we may be about to repeat the scenario of two years ago when the United Nations declared that nearly 2.5 million people in the Sahel belt were in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, particularly food. At the time, the UN and other organisations campaigned to raise more than \$2 billion to feed people from countries such as Sudan and the Central African Republic.

Reasons why Africa has not fulfilled its potential

But while the situation varies from one country to another - and you cannot point to a stand-alone reason to explain why many nations on the African continent have continuously struggled to guarantee food supply let alone export agricultural products beyond coffee and tea despite the potential to do so - generally speaking, there are interlinking factors that can help explain the inability for Africa to fulfil her potential.

For instance, in a 2011 report by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) *Why has Africa become a net food importer*, Rakotoarisoa et al. put forward five reasons they believe have hindered African countries the most from realising their full potential of self-sufficiency. They are: population growth, low and stagnating agricultural

productivity, policy distortions, weak institutions, and poor infrastructure.

Nonetheless, while some of the limitations pointed out above could indeed be somewhat challenging to deal with especially when you consider the continent's financial limitations, population growth, conflicts, climate change and so on, other challenges that have also played a major part like primitive agricultural methods, policy distortions, weak institutions, poor infrastructure, poor governance are all manageable problems that can be addressed swiftly with the little financial means available.

We can start by addressing the basics:

Encouraging agribusiness

A shift from primitive agricultural methods to more mechanised, technical and commercial-led principles is crucial today more than ever before. We must take the initiative and apply technology-led methods to improve the production cycle - including harvest, storage, processing, and export.

In fact, with the right technical assistance, agriculture production would improve if many practitioners saw it as not just a subsistence vocation but also a profit-generating one. Undeniably, there must be a change of perceptions, especially among young people that agriculture is a primitive economic activity that employs the less educated and/or rural population alone. More young people should be encouraged to explore the dividends of agribusiness.

Better intra-African trade

It is reasonable to argue that although trade among African countries has gradually improved over time, particularly as a result of more economic alliances such as the East African Community where members have open markets to allow free movement of people and goods/services, there remain significant challenges. Several countries have not fully embraced the idea of trading with one another despite the potential to fill existing gaps.

It is understood that although food crises continue to be reported in parts of Africa almost daily, in many other African countries they have food surplus and are willing and able to trade with other African countries at reasonable prices, provided that trade barriers and other obstacles, such as corruption, are eliminated. For instance, you may remember that in 2007, the Guardian newspaper reported that although Malawi had record harvests of corn that year, it did not necessarily guarantee good times for Malawian farmers (in terms of trade). Instead, the paper argued that farmers across the country were wondering where to sell their harvest.

With better intra-African trade frameworks in place, however, corn surplus from Malawi could have been easily sold in Zambia, Mozambique or Tanzania, or to other countries with food shortages. This move could have improved the livelihood farmers in Malawi while at the same time helping to tackle hunger in neighbouring Tanzania or Mozambique.

To conclude, while some factors are quite challenging to deal with (for instance drought conditions that have been exacerbated by climate change), there are many other man-made causes that continue to worsen Africa's food security despite the immense risks that can spring out of that insecurity. When you hear that the lives of 20 million Africans are at risk in the next five years, there must be concern followed by actions. Business should not go on as usual.