

New approaches and sustainable partnerships will enhance food security in Africa

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Africa will this year continue to be home to some of the fastest-growing cities thanks to the continent's large young population seeking jobs and improved livelihoods. However, a key challenge associated with rapidly urbanising populations is a chronic food insecurity problem that is aggravated by a lack of sufficient property rights, agricultural investment and policy and regulatory uncertainty leading to rising food prices despite access to land and willing producers to cultivate it.



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Achieving sustainable food security through urban agriculture

Achieving sustainable food security for both the urban and rural citizens remains an important priority for governments across the continent. Crucially, food security depends not only on a tricky balance between availability and affordability but also on coordinated partnerships between the various stakeholders in the agricultural sector. Also, it is increasingly becoming important to explore newer and more innovative approaches to successful farming. Urban agriculture is one of the techniques considered to be on the cusp of advancements within the sector, and one that can contribute towards the provision of sustainable access to nutritious food.

The practice involves the growing of farm produce near or around urban cities in the form of gardens provides organic produce to the local community. According to a report published by The Sustainable Development Goals Centre for Africa this year, the continent has 65% of the world's arable land, with food demand in Africa expected to rise by over 60% by 2050 due to population growth. Simple shifts can result in better efficiencies and environmentally friendly produce that are less prone to climatic changes, and which ultimately has a positive influence on production yields.

Community gardens and what is commonly known as co-op's (cooperatives) can also play a key role in supplementing household budgets, and more importantly, can introduce a wider range of vitamins and minerals into the consumer's diet.

Enabling Africa's youth

A healthy and diverse diet, comprising of fresh produce, is imperative for a strong body and mind and is also essential for enabling Africa's youthful population to grow into the workforce capable of driving Africa's economic growth. With half the

population being under the age of 25, and 72 percent of these young people seeking employment, agriculture can be a key contributor to economic development. These statistics are only set to grow, with over 330 million young Africans set to enter the job market in the next 20 years. One of the challenges has been attracting young people into the sector and positioning it as an attractive and lucrative career option.

Modernisation of farming methods

In coping with the food demands of increasing populations, nations such as Nigeria have shifted towards a more intensified and commercialised production system. This shift from the traditional sense of farming has included increased irrigation and modernisation of systems, as well as the use of genetically modified seed and fertiliser inputs. In another case study, Zambia, which had a net deficit in maize production a mere decade ago, is now considered a maize exporter with a surplus of grains, all due to an uptake of technology in its farming methods.

Research and development

Another area of opportunity for greater investment in alleviating the vulnerability of crops and livestock, which many nations on the continent need to invest in, is production research. Countries such as Morocco invest heavily in research and development, and new technologies that will assist in increasing yields and quality of production.

South Africa, for its part, has the most developed and profitable agricultural sector on the continent. Commercial farms are mainly large-scale, capital intensive and export oriented, accounting for approximately 90 percent of the total agricultural production and covering approximately 86 percent of the country's cropland. However, South Africa's agricultural sector is also taking strain from insufficient investment into agricultural infrastructure, research and development, as well as education and training programmes particularly for farmers that are starting out.

New approaches and partnerships must be encouraged

What is clear is that while Africa has leapfrogged within industries such as financial payments and telecommunications, the continent is yet to flex its muscle in providing grains and proteins that will feed not only its citizens but also those in other parts of the world. If agriculture is to improve its contribution to economic development and the achievement of sustainable and secure food supply systems on the continent, key stakeholders have to be much more coordinated in their partnerships, not only within countries but also within the various regions of the continent. Ultimately, new approaches and partnerships among the many, but disconnected stakeholders, must be encouraged and strengthened if we are to curb hunger and malnourishment in Africa.

These comments were delivered at an Agriculture & Food Security panel discussion recently hosted by Absa, the Oliver & Adelaide Tambo Foundation as well as the University of Fort Hare.

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