

Towards a food-secure Africa

By [Raphael Obonyo](#) 12 Feb 2018

Development experts and political leaders agree that Africa's enormous agricultural potential, if tapped, can feed the continent and spur socio-economic growth.

In its 2016–2025 strategy for agricultural transformation in Africa, the African Development Bank (AfDB) advises governments to empower smallholder farmers to sustainably and profitably produce more food and achieve a food-secure continent. That means strengthening the bargaining power of small-scale farmers and giving them access to improved soil that will increase yields, fertiliser and markets to enhance their incomes and well-being.



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At a ministerial roundtable in the margins of the 2016 Korea-Africa Economic Cooperation Conference in Seoul, South Korea, AfDB's president Akinwumi Adesina said, "To achieve food sufficiency and turn the continent into a net food exporter, Africa must empower smallholder farmers, who constitute 70% of the population and produce 80% of the food consumed in the continent."

Ambitious talk

Bukar Tijani, the assistant director-general and regional representative for Africa at the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), reinforces that "the key to Africa's food security lies in the smallholder farmer."

Africa is home to more than half of the world's unused arable land, but the continent remains food insecure with millions of people experiencing chronic hunger and facing famine, according to the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), an organisation that provides support to small-scale farmers, in its [Africa Agriculture Status Report 2017](#).

In addition to helping smallholder farmers, governments and other stakeholders need to look at ways of empowering youth with knowledge, skills and other resources. According to Agnes Kalibata, the president of AGRA, it is important to "invest in modern technologies and give the youth and women more resources to venture into productive agriculture."



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For Alex Awiti, the director at the East African Institute, a policy research organisation, the key to food security is to develop policies and strategies that address the needs of smallholder farmers. Agricultural policies are not in short supply on the continent; the problem has always been the implementation of policies. "Improving agricultural productivity is a complex public policy problem - it is influenced by a number of complex socio-economic and political factors," says Awiti.

Factors inhibiting smallholder farmers include the ineffective application of fertilisers. Farmers do not use fertiliser deep placement (FDP), which increases yield. In addition, good-quality seeds and fertilisers are often difficult to come by and unaffordable to smallholder farmers even when they can be found. All of this often leads to low agricultural productivity.

"Fertiliser use in smallholder farms in Africa is 13 to 20 kilogrammes per hectare. This is about a tenth of the global average," explains Awiti.

Large-scale farms

Despite the obvious socio-economic benefits of investing in small-scale farming, African governments prefer to focus on large-scale commercial farms, due to the perceived difficulty of dealing with tens of thousands of smallholder farmers.

Awiti says that a lack of fertilisers, a weak value chain and production losses during storage and distribution stages destroy agricultural economies and demotivate smallholder farmers who lack basic storage and processing facilities and technical knowledge. When smallholder farmers can produce more without fear that their yields will be wasted, the agricultural sector will grow.

"Many smallholder farmers in Ghana farm on poor and degraded soils and lack access to affordable and appropriate inputs including quality seeds, fertilisers and pesticides," says Kofi Yeboah, a young Ghanaian entrepreneur. These farmers are now calling on their government to subsidise the prohibitive costs of fertilisers.

A small group of Ghanaian companies import fertilisers to the country and further negotiate with the government to set prices. Farmers in remote areas complain that fertilisers do not reach them.

In South Africa, smallholder farmers do not have adequate access to research and extension services, says Mabine Seab, who advocates for the empowerment of farmers. Worse, they lack strong negotiation skills and information about prices. As a result, this means that South African smallholder farmers do not receive optimal earnings for their produce. Even when farmers have the right information regarding prices, they are unable to access the big markets and are therefore compelled to sell their produce to middlemen who own distributive networks and make most of the profit.

"Small-scale farmers and the youth do not receive necessary funding and support from government and financial institutions due partly to high risks associated with farming," says Seabe, adding that government has been slow to enact land reform and redistribution policies. Land reforms are a difficult issue: only Zimbabwe has implemented them, and it was a politically and racially charged undertaking.

Maputo declaration

Ethiopia is facing food shortages caused by drought. Meanwhile, over 20% of the total crop yield in Ethiopia is lost to poor post-harvest handling (PHL). To address this problem in Ethiopia, Shayashone, a nonprofit organisation dealing in agricultural logistics, strategy and business model development, among other things, is supporting smallholder farmers with storage technology. Yared Sasa, the head of the organisation, says: "Farmers need adequate new technology and capacity building to mitigate crop damage during storage by pests."

Shayashone has partnered with Cooperatives for Change (C4C), a nonprofit international development organisation from the Netherlands, to promote in Ethiopia's Oromia region the use of an improved storage bag created by the PICS (Purdue Improved Crop Storage) project.

Despite multiple constraints faced by African small-scale farmers, government investment in agriculture has doubled since 2010, the Brookings Institution, a US-based nonprofit public policy organisation, reported this year. But such investments

still less than 2% of national budgets—far below the 10% threshold African leaders agreed to invest in the sector in their Maputo Declaration in 2003. In 2017, 14 years after the Maputo Declaration, most countries have not yet met the 10% target. The few that have met the target include Ethiopia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali and Namibia.

Tijani of FAO advises African governments and other investors in agriculture to raise awareness among the youth of the benefits of agriculture and how its value chains work. Young people should not engage in farming only for lack of better opportunities. They need to be aware that it is a gainful occupation, he says, adding, “African youth can be powerful drivers of change to lift themselves and others out of poverty, hunger and malnutrition.” Unfortunately, many don’t consider agriculture a potentially lucrative venture.

About 200 million Africans are between the ages of 15 and 24, and these young people are an untapped reservoir for spurring growth in the agri-food sector. Governments should give them property rights, farming and digital technologies, and other value-chain opportunities, says Awiti. “This will place them at the nerve centre of agricultural e-commerce.”

The Tanzanian model

Yara International, an organisation fighting famine globally, helped create the Southern Agricultural Corridor of Tanzania (SAGCOT), an ambitious government-led public-private initiative aiming to revitalize 300,000 square kilometres of arable land. The initiative is expected to boost the incomes of thousands of farmers.

Over the last decade, the Tanzanian government has encouraged investment in commercial rice, sugar and maize farming and processing facilities. “This created ready markets for produce, as government targets, supports and links rice farmers to the market,” says James Craske, Yara’s country manager in Kenya.

Already the anticipated increase in productivity has triggered a demand for more fertilisers. To meet such demand, Yara set up a \$26m fertiliser terminal in the capital, Dar es Salaam, even as the organisation and Tanzania’s government is working with local banks to provide financing for farmers. The model will create thousands of new jobs and raise incomes for millions of farmers.



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The Tanzanian model addresses food insecurity, youth unemployment and socio-economic exclusions. It can potentially spur rural development. However, the model has been criticized for destroying state-owned mangroves that provided food security for many citizens.

Head of the Africa Progress Panel and former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan believes that Africa can close the productivity gap in the agriculture value chain. “Africa’s smallholder farmers are more than capable of feeding the continent as long as they make use of the latest agronomic practices in combination with appropriately adapted seeds and fertilisers to boost their crop yield.”

The question remains: How far and how quickly are African governments willing to go to empower smallholder farmers to achieve the goal of a food-secure continent?

Read the [original article](#) on [Africa Renewal](#).

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