

# Important wins were notched up for African agriculture in 2016

By [Calestous Juma](#)

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2016 was a big year for agriculture in Africa with some notable "wins" across the continent. One of the most important gains was the increased use of emerging technologies beyond the traditional use of mobile phones in agriculture. The range includes precision agriculture, sensors, satellites and drones.



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For example [FieldLook](#) is using satellite images in the Gezira irrigation scheme in Sudan to provide information about crop growth, humidity, and nutrient needs of plants. This is then conveyed to farmers using mobile phones.

In Nigeria drones are being used to map the potential for expanding rice cultivation. The UK-based [GrowMoreX Consultancy Company](#), for example, operates drone-based farming services. It conducted a survey of 3,000 hectares of land suitable for irrigated rice farming in New Bussa, Niger State. The area is 700km away from the capital Abuja. It has limited access to roads, electricity, clean water and other amenities.

Innovation gains in 2016 are just one aspect that was captured in a new study released by the [Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa \(AGRA\)](#) this year. The [2016 Africa Agriculture Status Report](#) also noted that African agriculture is finally taking root, showing how long-term policy commitments and funding were key to the sector's growth.

The gains reported in 2016 went hand in hand with overall growth in Africa over the last two decades. According to the AGRA report, “GDP per capita increased in Africa from an annual average of \$987 in 1995-2003, to \$1,154 in 2003-2008, and even higher to \$1,289 on 2008-2014.”

Many sectors such as communication, transportation, wholesale and construction contributed to the growth. But more remarkably, agricultural value addition grew by “5.2% in 2000-2014 compared to less than 3% (in) previous decades”. Manufacturing’s share of total value addition grew, while agriculture’s did not.

These trends are in line with historical patterns in Asia and other regions where productivity in agriculture was a key driver of long-term economic transformation. This shows that agriculture is more than just producing food. [It is a driver](#) for overall economic growth.

There have been some clear “wins” worth highlighting from the past year.

## Free trade area

2016 was a critical year in Africa’s negotiations to create a Continental Free Trade Area. This is scheduled to be finalised in 2017. The free trade area is expected to significantly expand Africa’s trade in agricultural products by building on current growth in the sector.

The talks are building the [Tripartite Free Trade Area](#). This is a proposed African free trade agreement between the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), Southern African Development Community (SADC) and East African Community (EAC). It has created a market of more than 620 million people in 26 countries valued at \$1.5 trillion.

The Continental Free Trade Area will cover more than a billion people in 54 countries with a combined GDP of over \$3.5 trillion. It is also expected to create opportunities for trade in agricultural machinery and associated services.

## Overcoming ecological hurdles

In many parts of Africa agriculture has been pursued at the expense of the environment. This has largely been due to the lack of training in new methods that take the environment into consideration. Such skills would reduce agriculture’s ecological footprint and make it more resilient to climate change.

An example of promoting ecological food production is an effort by Somalia to rebuild fisheries after decades of conflict. The [initiative](#), supported by Norway and the Food and Agriculture Organisation, includes new methods of drying and storing fish. This would reduce post-harvest losses.

To begin to address this, a programme was launched in which more than 200 young men and women will receive training and mentoring support in the handling and processing of [fish and fish products](#).

“Given the importance of fisheries and aquaculture in food security in Africa, other countries...can draw on the experiences of Somalia to develop national sectoral development plans and build partnerships to improve the sustainable intensification of their fisheries sector,” [a report](#) from the Food and Agriculture Organisation notes.

## Infrastructural wins

The AGRA report also highlighted the importance of investment in rural infrastructure – particularly transportation, energy, telecommunications and irrigation. It says a “10% decrease in rural transport cost can generate a 25% increase in the quantity of food traded.” This year in Kenya’s Rift Valley, [rural roads were](#) revamped. This reduced the cost of transporting food.

Transportation is only one aspect of infrastructure. Reliable energy is also key for the creation and growth of agro-

industries in rural and urban areas. More importantly, the use of renewable energy can help African countries generate energy more sustainably. A good example is [the launch of](#) East Africa's largest solar plant in Soroti, Uganda.

Similarly, irrigation is essential for crop production. Only about 4% per of African agriculture is irrigated, whereas the share is 45% in Asia and 18% for global agriculture. African countries are increasingly using solar power for irrigation. In 2016, for example, [Rwanda launched](#) a \$13 million solar-powered irrigation scheme in collaboration with the Japan International Cooperation Agency.

Another key highlight of the 2016 AGRA report is the importance of including nutrition in overall agricultural strategies. Nourishing people is just as important as feeding them. In 2016 Ghana launched a new project aimed at improving maternal and child nutrition by encouraging [the consumption of milk](#). In addition to improving nutrition, the project seeks to support income generation along the dairy value chain.

## Complex agricultural economies

Leaders need to upgrade their capacity to govern increasingly complex agricultural economies if they're to sustain the gains seen and reported in 2016. Modern agriculture involves decisions on topics such as the impact of climate change, nutrition, improved seed and agricultural inputs, emerging technologies, infrastructure, research and extension and financing.

Countries around the world have responded to the need for up-to-date information by creating [offices of science and technology advice](#) to complement the work of other presidential advisers. African presidents and prime ministers need to have similar knowledge support offices. Otherwise they risk making decisions that are not supported by the best possible available advice.

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