

Commentary

Who will feed Africa tomorrow?

By

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The above is an important question that needs debate and I can see the issue is beginning to attract attention in certain quarters. From the time I got involved in Rural Development work, nearly 2 decades ago, I did realize that in most of Africa, it was women who were toiling away for the sake of their families. The role of feeding families had changed. Men, instead of working to provide for their families' food security, were now bystanders and job seekers in towns, leaving their women folk to struggle to produce food from land they did not own, and without the requisite support such as extension knowledge, appropriate inputs or available credit to help prepare the land and plant in a timely manner.

What interested me in farmers then? My own professional discipline is food and nutritional sciences. I was curious to understand where food came from and who truly produced it. I remember as I grew up that my family did not have much land. Yet we hardly ever went hungry unless it was a FAMINE situation and I recall two such ones as I grew up. Extension workers would arrive in uniform, Khaki, and on a well maintained bicycle. In our village, it was a man, well respected in the village, and would go straight to the farm with my mother (as my dad was working away from home), and after discussions in the farm, he would leave right away or accept an invitation into the house for some refreshments.

All this seems to have changed. Extension workers hardly visit and even if they did, they want to come in a vehicle, not on a bicycle. Now farmers know more than some extension workers do. Worse still, given the structural adjustment programs of the 1980s, some countries no longer have a functioning public extension system. Farmers have been left unto themselves. Land issues are fairly emotive in Africa.

Getting land demarcated for tenure purposes, and developing a clear land policy to ensure proper usage, are actions many countries find difficult to undertake. As I do my work in western Kenya, I come across young men who say they cannot afford to get married because family land is unavailable to them;" **my dad has refused to apportion me my piece; how can I marry without land? What will I feed my wife and children?"** With slow growth of the economy, jobs are difficult to come by. With expanding populations and thus shrinking family sizes (despite serious family planning efforts), one has every right to worry about the future of Africa's food security. If Africa cannot feed itself today, who will feed the continent in the future? Everyone needs food. I have spent the past two decades arguing that most of Africa's food security depended on the sweat of women, toiling away on wasted land, without adequate inputs, and serious weather variability? I have done this in my writings, in my speeches, to policy makers and using whatever platform I could find, including the Kenyan Parliament where I served for 5 years between 2003 and 2007.

Finally, it seems that someone is listening. Not only do donors now demand to see how women are being supported in agricultural programs, Data must now be disaggregated along gender lines. We shall wait to see the impact of change in attitude and actions on this aspect.

Kenya's constitutional reforms already provide tremendous space for women in all spheres and at all levels. Clearly farming is hard work. To be able to feed the continent, a paradigm shift is needed. With everyone looking for a better life, farming needs to be undertaken as a business. Many people we call farmers just cultivate their land because they happen to have it; they also do not have much alternative.

They strive to educate their children so they can keep them off farming, which in most cases is frowned upon. Other "farmers" could easily leave such land to go fallow, and still survive because they probably have alternative sources of income.

This is where the youth come in. The last census (2009) indicated that over 70 % of Kenya's population was 30 years and below. This is a huge youth population. The situation appears to be the same all over Africa. Most of these youth idle away or operate within the informal sector. To stem rural to urban exodus of young people in Africa, farming needs to be made attractive. Young men have untapped energy, and right now, agriculture still holds the biggest potential for employment especially when one views it from a value chain perspective. The continent is crying out for restoration of its dignity. We want to say "**enough to begging for food**". What is needed is a campaign to popularize agriculture/farming and to provide incentives for young people, and to ensure the right information, inputs and affordable credit facilities are available in a timely fashion and that markets are assured for what farmers grow. Lastly, there is need to explain why African farmers, poor and impoverished should not be afforded subsidized inputs. Let us get young people into serious farming, as this is a strategy whose time has come, but let us all engage them in national and global discussions that affect them.

It is only by ensuring a robust food security system that Africans can enjoy good nutrition throughout the lifecycle. It can be done.