

https://dspace.org/

Noone can be left behind Building resilient food systems in Africa

Sifiso Ntombela

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/39012
DHET

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

No-one can be left behind

Building resilient food systems in Africa

By Sifiso Ntombela

Dr Sifiso Ntombela is chief economist of the National Agricultural Marketing Council (NAMC), responsible for trade research and economic modelling. He also provides economic and environmental policy commentary for uKhozi FM and Ligwalagwala FM. Dr Ntombela was director for strategic projects in the Department of Public Enterprises where he managed the country's biggest infrastructure programme in transport, energy and manufacturing sectors implemented by the State-Owned Companies. He has a PhD in agricultural economics from the University of Pretoria.

Africa has the natural resources and the policies required to tackle poverty and hunger – but these policies are not effectively implemented. Noting the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the continent's food systems and the innovations introduced to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, SIFISO NTOMBELA provides practical measures to improve food security, also arguing that exporting food can be a source of economic strength.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa is one of the largest and most important producers of agriculture and food products in Africa. The strategic and economic policy frameworks guiding investments and the growth trajectory are the National Development Plan (NDP) and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which provide a vision and pathway towards a resilient and sustainable food system by 2030. The country has also created the Agriculture and Agro-Processing Master Plan (AAMP), a social compact aimed at accelerating the implementation of the NDP goals by leveraging the private sector's skills, resources and knowledge. Moreover, the AAMP is designed to drive the sector's recovery from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the violent protests that occurred in July 2021 that impacted on key trade corridors linking the coastal and inland areas, and the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

The aforementioned policy frameworks are aligned to the African continental developmental agenda outlined in the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) and Africa Agenda 2063 – "The Africa We Want". From an agricultural perspective, South Africa's contribution to "T9he Africa We Want" includes investing in agricultural infrastructure, research and development, technology and expanding land under irrigation to increase productivity and food security. These goals are affirmed in the AAMP, which recognises that large tracts of land are underutilised or lying idle despite the high level of food insecurity.

The challenge of underutilised land amid high levels of poverty and food insecurity is not unique to South Africa. It is estimated that Africa holds 60% of the uncultivated arable land in the world, which suggests the continent has the potential to feed itself.

In essence, Africa has both the natural resources and policies required to tackle poverty and hunger. However, lack of policy implementation is holding back development on the continent. The African Union's CAADP Biennial Review report (2021) showed that only 20 out of 47 countries that provided reports were on track to achieving the goals and targets set out in the CAADP report, namely ending hunger, halving poverty and improving the resilience of livelihoods and agricultural production by 2030.

This article unpacks the underlying factors that constrain progress in addressing the food security and poverty problems in South Africa and the rest of Africa. It identifies measures that need to be implemented and prioritised to address these issues. Lastly, it puts forward some approaches ››

> **In the first six months of 2022, food prices have escalated by between 8% and 44% in various countries, depending on the type of commodity and demand levels. This has caused panic in the region.**



Photo credit: T. Samson, Flickr

and enablers required to scale-up the implementation of policies and programmes aimed at building resilient African food systems that leave no-one behind and help the country and the continent bring an end to hunger.

FOOD SYSTEM BOTTLENECKS IN AFRICA

South African agriculture has showed remarkable resilience in the past decade, even during the COVID-19 hard lockdown. The agricultural sector grew by 13.4% in 2020 and a further 8.3% in 2021 underpinned by good rains, improved partnerships between the private and public sectors to attract investments, and good policies and regulations. Both the short- and long-term growth in South Africa can be attributed to the agility of farmers to adapt to ever-changing domestic and global policies, technology and an innovative environment. Since the deregulation of South Africa's agricultural sector in 1996, it has gradually become an export-oriented sector generating more than 55% of its annual value-add from foreign earnings in 2021 (DALRRD, 2022). Roughly 90% of the country's food is produced by large commercial farmers who are responsible for the current food security and foreign earnings (NAMC, 2020). These large-scale farmers and agribusinesses dominated the entire agricultural and food value chains after deregulation, liberalisation and privatisation of state-operated marketing boards and the removal of food price controls and farm subsidies between 1994 and 1998.

Overall, the deregulation and privatisation of the agricultural sector resulted in positive growth with production doubling in volume over the past two decades and maintaining high employment of about 865,000 jobs at the farm level and roughly 235,000 jobs at the processing level. Though the aggregate picture is positive, food security at the household level and the exclusion of small-scale farmers have become problematic, contributing to the widening inequality gap in the country.

This dual problem of few large-scale farmers and many small-scale farmers coupled with the ageing infrastructure such as roads, ports and storage facilities are impacting on the sustainability of the sector and increasing its vulnerability to external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. The infrastructure deficit and exclusion of small-scale farmers in the formal food value chains is also found beyond the South African borders. The African Development Bank (AfDB, 2018) estimates that Africa requires US$360 billion (just over R6 trillion) to address the infrastructure deficit on the continent. This requires investments equivalent to 60% for energy infrastructure, 37% for transport and logistics, 2.5% for water infrastructure and about 1% for information and communication technologies infrastructure.

The effects of the aforementioned bottlenecks on South Africa and the continent's food systems were compounded by the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which began in February 2022. The conflict manifested in two ways, firstly, in the sharp rise in input prices, mainly for seeds, fertilisers and fuel, which consequently limited the ability to produce food, in particular for the small-scale and subsistence farmers who are resource poor. In countries such as South Africa,

Namibia, and other similar states, farmers purchase all their seeds and inputs directly from the market with minimal state support. Secondly, the conflict resulted in difficulties in importing essential commodities such as wheat, maize and sunflower oil because of the high shipping prices and delays as well as export bans by major agricultural exporting nations. These drove food prices higher, resulting in many citizens in Africa being unable to afford basic food.

In the first six months of 2022, food prices have escalated by between 8% and 44% in various countries, depending on the type of commodity and demand levels. This has caused panic amongst citizens in the region and raised concerns about the current food system in countries that are heavily dependent on imported products, particularly island economies such as the Seychelles, Mauritius and Madagascar. Even countries like South Africa, which is capable of producing food and is far more food secure than the rest of the continent, still relies on imports for palm oil, rice and wheat. The fluctuation of input prices, particularly for fuel, restricts access to food by the general population across the region. The impact of the conflict on the region is not uniform as some countries are impacted more than others depending on the extent of their trade with Russia and Ukraine.

SOLUTIONS FOR SCALING UP FOOD SYSTEMS AND FOOD SECURITY

Most African states, including South Africa, have committed themselves to achieving the SDGs and CAADP goals to end hunger by 2030 and halve poverty through investing in sustainable agricultural production systems and improving resilience to external shocks. The resources and skills capacity to achieve these developmental goals are dependent on the type and quality of partnerships that governments and the private sector form to attract investments, technology and innovation on the continent. This means leveraging on private sector partnerships to upscale the implementation of existing policies and programmes.

Many stakeholder consultations in South Africa have resulted in the development of NDP and AAMP economic frameworks and identified various game-changing solutions that could transform the food systems of South Africa and put the country on a trajectory to achieve the goals outlined in NDP 2030, AAMP 2030, the UNSDGs 2030 and the AU's Agenda 2063. Some of these solutions are not only relevant and applicable to South Africa but also to the rest of the continent. However, to fully implement these solutions, there is a need to recognise the weaknesses in the current food systems while building on the successes achieved to date.

Through the AAMP process, there is clarity and broad agreement on building new national food systems that contribute to improving the health and nutrition of all citizens; the livelihoods of those working in the food systems; and resilience in the face of climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, violent conflicts and other as yet unknown external shocks. The wellbeing of women and children and their inclusion in building strong and resilient food systems are equally important in ensuring the SDGs and AAMP objectives are met.

SOLUTIONS TO LEVERAGE ON PRIVATE SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS

1. *Maintain open trade and remove barriers*

Most countries in Africa depend on imported fertilisers, wheat, maize, sunflower and oil commodities for local consumption. Since the onset of COVID-19 and the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, an increasing number of countries in the world are implementing trade distorting measures, including export bans, to protect local production and consumption. It is recommended that African countries maintain open trade policies to advance intra-African trade and regional value chain integration and development, and to take advantage of opportunities created by the new African Continental Free Trade Area. Any trade distorting measures within the continent must be removed to allow fair trade and ensure availability and access to food for all.

2. *Support local production for local consumption*

Small-scale and subsistence producers should be comprehensively supported to ensure availability of food at community and household levels. If small-scale producers are supported through improving the local value chains, local economies would also benefit as less money would be spent on commuting to towns and cities to buy food. This will subsequently reduce the level of carbon emissions as transportation of food and persons will be reduced. The support provided to small-scale producers needs to be properly comprehensive as the allocation of farms or other relevant infrastructure without comprehensive support packages is detrimental.

Support for local food production will reduce reliance on imported food. Most countries on the continent rely on imported food products such as wheat and maize even though these countries have local foods and the indigenous knowledge needed to farm grains, fruits, vegetables and animals. It is important that national governments upscale expenditure on small-scale farmer support, prioritising women and youth, to produce traditional, indigenous and "smart foods" that address nutrition security and environmental concerns. This will ensure that food access and affordability are achieved at the household level in each country. ➤➤

The African Development Bank estimates that Africa requires US$360 billion (just over R6 trillion) to address the infrastructure deficit on the continent.



Photo credit: Flickr

3. *Strengthen biosecurity control to improve food safety, traceability*

Food safety is prioritised for food products that are imported and exported, while local food products from small-scale and subsistence farmers are neglected in this regard. Food safety standards should be improved throughout the value chain to ensure that only good quality food reaches communities. There is a need to invest in food safety and the same steps that are taken to ensure the safety of food for export need to be followed in the sale of food across all countries and regions in Africa. Furthermore, the traceability of animals is critical to safeguard animal disease outbreaks.

4. *Reintroduce agriculture in the school curriculum*

Governments, businesses and communities should establish and maintain an education curriculum for food security and nutrition from prenatal and early child development learning through basic education, tertiary and post-school education in order to produce, empower and maintain balanced and well-equipped citizens as valuable and productive members of the household, community, society and country. There is a critical need to reintroduce agriculture and other food production topics as a practical subject in schools. This way children will grow up knowing the importance of food production and the effect food has on their overall health and wellbeing, including their economic wellbeing. Governments could also consider opening training centres run by graduates to train communities on basic food production.

5. *Promote indigenous knowledge systems*

Inclusion of the indigenous and aquatic or "blue foods" (including marine and fresh-water wild-caught aquatic foods and aquaculture) in the food basket should also be considered. Further, household producers are no longer utilising traditional food preservation methods that ensured communities had food until the next harvest. Multi-stakeholder collaboration is required to:

a. Introduce consumer education about food preservation and reduction of waste and loss;
b. Undertake research and develop recipes at universities to promote the use of indigenous crops, fruits, vegetables and other local products;
c. Train, educate, research, promote and disseminate information about indigenous food systems and their nutritional benefits to contribute to the spread of knowledge that will benefit communities.

6. *Build resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stresses*

Governments, businesses and communities should build social infrastructure, relationships and networks to mitigate the effects of external threats. They should take note of the work done by civil society during the pandemic to channel resources to micro, small-scale and agricultural households in the rural areas and vulnerable communities in the townships and backyards, metro inner cities and informal settlements across Africa

7. *Balance exports and local production*

It is argued that a strong export-focused commercial sector leads to lower domestic food prices. Governments, businesses and communities should balance the interests of production and export against basic food security whilst producing an affordable nutritious food basket that strengthens the food system.

8. *Promote agri-tourism markets*

Agri-tourism markets should be used to improve food systems' sustainability and market access. This presents opportunities for diverse and dynamic markets and also creates sustainable jobs. Investments in this sub-sector would help citizens who struggle to afford food. The prime example here is the wine industry.

9. *Invest in on-farm and off-farm infrastructure and the informal sector*

Promote the co-existence of small-scale and subsistence farmers alongside large-scale commercial farmers by investing in required on-farm and off-farm infrastructure and market systems.

Observe the system of informal trade and how it operates. Equip traders with the necessary resources, infrastructure and market systems. During the COVID-19 hard lockdown, the role of informal traders in distributing food became critical and their importance in the food supply chain was evident in South Africa and other countries on the continent.

10. *Establish food and agricultural hubs and aggregators*

Africa has untapped resources (ie mines and arable land) that can be explored to increase production and industrial capacity to promote high-value agriculture and food exports. It is important and advisable that national governments, in line with CAADP and Malabo Declaration commitments, uphold the public spending of 10% on agriculture focusing on irrigation, storage, processing and post-harvest infrastructure. Public investments should de-risk and/or risk-share to incentivise increased private investments. Investments in local infrastructure must be pursued in partnership with the private sector and foreign investors to increase efficiency and alleviate pressure on the national fiscus.

Governments, businesses and communities should establish food and agricultural hubs in or near rural and peri-urban markets to absorb the produce of household and small-scale farmers. This will allow agribusinesses and agro-processors from villages to enter, recreate, reshape and redirect food production systems that are linked to inclusive, diverse, dynamic and prosperous factor and commodity markets.

Governments, businesses and communities should promote the establishment of aggregators in the villages, rural towns and townships to ensure sufficient throughput of the products and services of the desired quality from schools, community production centres, households and small-holder producers on a sustainable and reliable basis.

To successfully implement the above 10 interventions in South Africa and other countries on the continent there must be a conducive environment and policies to attract private investment and develop prerequisite skills and knowledge. Below, the article outlines some of the critical levers that will drive change in the continent's food systems.

LEVERS OF CHANGE AND SUCCESSFUL POLICIES

1. *Develop effective governance and leadership*

There is limited integration between continental, regional and national government spheres to fight hunger and malnutrition on the continent. A central structure is required to coordinate and monitor all food systems to avoid duplication of programmes aimed at fighting hunger. Coordination needs to extend beyond food security and nutrition as food systems involve a range of sectors. Coordination and collaboration between departments of health and agriculture, as well as with private sector partners and community organisations, is necessary to address hunger, poverty and malnutrition as well as unemployment and economic growth.

2. *Develop comprehensive and accurate farmer databases*

Databases of producers should be developed to ensure improved coordination in providing agricultural support and traceability of producers and products. National governments, businesses and communities should establish and maintain the farmer databases and production data.

3. *Invest in research and innovation*

There is a need to develop research on the possibility of intensifying production of crops such as sorghum, millet and other strategic grain reserves. Research should also be conducted on improving production, packaging and marketing of indigenous foods.

4. *Stakeholder collaboration*

To build inclusive, sustainable and competitive value chains, collaborative engagements among stakeholders are needed. These should include sharing of databases to help identify bottlenecks within the value chain and assist in building a business case for their resolution. They will also promote investment in research, learning and development.

5. *Financing*

Governments, businesses and communities should align public and private investments to enable small-scale producers and communities to access capital. Affordable financing schemes should be developed for farmers leveraging on available resources in the private sector as alternative platforms of funding. In this way farmers could access funds in the form of loans to supplement grant funding.

REFERENCES

AfDB (African Development Bank). 2018. Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa. Available at: https://www.afdb.org/en/topics-and-sectors/initiatives-partnerships/programme-for-infrastructure-development-in-africa-pida. Accessed 19 August 2022

AU (African Union). 2021. Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP). Biennial Review Report: 2015-2018. Available at: https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/41357-doc-CADDP_BR_2015-2018_ENGLISH.pdf. Accessed 20 August 2022

DALRRD (Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development). 2022. Agricultural Abstract. Government Printers. Pretoria, South Africa.

NAMC (National Agricultural Marketing Council). 2020. Statutory Measures for South African Agricultural Value Chains: Commodity Survey. Available at : https://www.namc.co.za/publications/. Accessed on 19 August 2022. NA