World Food Crisis (Part IV: African Partnerships)

By ACSH Staff — August 28, 2008

As I suggested in my previous three blog entries this week, as the need for global agricultural expansion continues, Africa is going to be the obvious place where others will seek for food security or that donors will see the obvious potential for food production expansion.

There is the potential in African agriculture to contribute both to food security for African countries and to food security for their non-African partner countries. African leaders will have to decide to what extent they are willing to allow others to be deeply involved in their domestic food production and on what terms. It is a virtual certainty that enterprises from outside the continent, both public and private, will be seeking access to African lands, for profit and food security. Let's review the pros and cons of a few of the major institutions involved in this complex process.

Sources of Change

The Gates and Buffett Foundations:

They are doing good work in contributing to the fight against AIDS. Work on agriculture for improved seeds and fertilizer is of enormous benefit, but these are short-term help. One should not underestimate the importance of this work, of course, since we cannot get to long run change without first addressing short run problems -- the many billions that they are giving are welcome -- but they are insufficient for the needed infrastructure: roads, rail, irrigation, energy, and long-term research.

Environmental groups and NGOs:

At the Kyoto discussions on climate change, it was proposed to allow firms to buy carbon offsets by funding reforestation in Africa and the developing world. This was opposed by the Greens, who argued that it was simply a license to pollute. In the next round of climate change discussions, reforestation in Africa has to be back on the agenda.

Possibly, to keep the Greens happy, if that is possible, rules designating reforestation a carbon offset might require a significantly higher ratio than a one to one offset. This could be justified on the basis that reforestation in Africa would be good PR for whomever uses it for a carbon offset. Minimum conditions would require that the local population have unrestricted access to the forest and be able to use it for a variety of traditional services other than logging. In addition, the offset would have to include funding for local infrastructure and improved farming so that low and falling yields do not force the farmers to chop down the forest in desperation to create more low-yield agricultural land.

Brazil:

Brazil offers real possibilities for help on fundamental issues such as bringing under cultivation
tropical soil with nutrient deficiencies or (more important) a very low pH due to aluminum (and sometimes boron) toxicity. Such soils have previously had their pH raised by liming, but this is expensive and short-term. Brazil has developed a variety of crops that will grow in low-pH soils of the sort common and largely uncultivated in Africa. Brazil has already established research relations with Nigeria (where much of the population of Northeast Brazil originated) and is working on a similar relationship with Tanzania.

Brazil, as one of the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) nations that are seen to be driving the global economy, should be interested in providing technical assistance throughout the tropical African region. The potential return to a small monetary investment could be substantial, both diplomatically and for food output for Africa. Brazil has also been a pioneer in biofuel, which might be also helpful - if there is potential for biofuel from crops like jatroba, which will grow where food crops won't. This latter is a tricky subject and would need to be explored further before any commitments are made (removing land from food cultivation for biofuel production could simply drive food prices higher).

Donors and lenders:

U.S., Europe, Japan, the World Bank, and others should consider a substantial increase in aid with more concentration on research. More African scientists need to be trained in Africa and abroad, and there should be more funding for African agro-scientists and African universities.

The most difficult question is how countries seeking food security should be allowed to invest in African agriculture. Broadly speaking, there are two types (or at least two among many). There are those oil-rich countries with limited agricultural capability that are now investing in places like Pakistan and Ukraine. Their investment can be helpful, particularly in infrastructure, but if they are seeking food security, we must ask what can be offered or guaranteed them in return without compromising African food security?

For decades after World War II, an essential element of advancement in African and other developing countries was technology transfer from developed countries (the U.S. and Europe). The world has changed for the better. Today, as noted above, countries such as Brazil and China have as much to offer African agriculture as do the countries whose scientists initiated the Green Revolution. Let us add that Indian scientists at IRRI (International Rice Research Institute) emerged early in the process to provide critical scientific advancements. Meanwhile, some of the most important work in higher-yielding hybrid rice (both conventionally bred and transgenic) is taking place in China.

The most important actions, which need to be taken immediately to have results that can take hold in the short-term, are (1) to overcome the NGO obstacles to the use of agricultural technologies (i.e., transgenic plant breeding) that already exist and (2) to rethink our biofuels policies. In other words, we need policies guided by scientific and technological knowledge and not by romantic fantasy and ideology. Tomorrow, an epilogue about one such fantasy: the idea of making the whole world vegetarian.
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