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Back
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WEST AFRICA: How can West Africa become more food-secure?

Photo: Nicholas Reader/IRIN
Farmers planting sorghum and millet in southwestern Niger

DAKAR, 28 May 2008 (IRIN) - The global food and fuel price crisis presents a "strategic opportunity" to West African states to become more food-secure according to agricultural analysts, but they will only achieve this by committing 10 percent of state budgets to agriculture and better exploiting their comparative advantage.

In the face of on-average 45 percent cereal price rises since mid-2006, ECOWAS trade, finance and agriculture ministers met in Nigeria on 18 and 19 May to discuss a strategy to boost food security across the region.

"Each country needs to work to its own proven advantage," said Tshikala Tshibaka, senior policy officer at the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) who attended the meeting "And this idea is relatively new for the region."

And it will cost.

"This is a strategic opportunity for countries like Mali, Burkina Faso and Nigeria to decide if they want to become the bread-basket of the region, but it will take them some serious investment to get there," said John Staatz, professor of agriculture, food and resource economics at Michigan State University.

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Comparative advantage

Recognising that no country in the world is self-sufficient in food in today's globalised economy, Staatz estimates that the countries in the region with the strongest potential to seriously boost their self-sufficiency in some crops are Nigeria, which produces 57 percent of the region's grain, as well as Mali, Niger and Chad in the Sahel, each of which already meet approximately 70 percent of their individual food needs.

However, the region will never meet all of its cereal needs according to the FAO. "There is a lot of potential here to boost rice production but as a whole the region will need to import cereals well into the future," Tshibaka said.

The FAO divides the region into southern, central and northern agricultural belts. Rice production could be seriously boosted in the southern belts of Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea according to Tshibaka; while cassava, yams and plantains could be boosted in the middle belt which cuts across Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Cote d'Ivoire.

And in the northern belt - northern Ghana, southern Niger and Mali, as well as Mauritania and Senegal, dry cereals such as millet, sorghum and maize, and livestock production should be pushed, he told IRIN.

Photo: Nicholas Reader/IRIN
Traders at the Dawanau market in Kano, West Africa's largest food market

Change from within

For Tshibaka investing in agriculture must be driven from within the region, and major players such as Nigeria should step in to support production in smaller states.

"We can't rely on outside help. Nigeria needs to pave the way with investments, as do other African oil-producers - Libya, Angola and Gabon," he said.

Nothing will happen unless states commit at least 10 percent of their annual budgets to agriculture, according to Staatz. African leaders agreed to this in 2003 but so far only six out of 53 have managed it, and many still commit 5 percent or less.

This funding shortage leaves very little money left over to invest, meaning research facilities are starved and farmers lack seeds and fertilisers year to year.

However, on 19 May ECOWAS leaders reiterated their commitment to meet the 10 percent target. "West Africa is starting to mobilise itself," Ngaido said.

Boost regional trade

"Working to comparative advantage will involve leaders stressing regional interests over state interests," Staatz told IRIN.

As a start states such as Guinea and Liberia will have to remove emergency protective measures such as banning food exports that restrict food flows across the region, Staatz said.

"I empathise with political leaders for trying to protect their people's food security and for avoiding civilian unrest, but in the long-term if everyone follows these [protectionist] patterns and prevents food from flowing across borders, then we have a recipe for a crisis," Staatz said. "But West Africa has a long tradition of open trade, which should serve it well."

Under a regional trade policy leaders would harmonise production targets, develop common agricultural standards, manage shared resources such as the Niger River, and stand up for West African interests in international trade negotiations such as EU-Africa trade talks, according to Staatz and Steve Wiggins, research fellow at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in London. And ECOWAS and NEPAD would be the drivers.

Invest in what

The investment priorities for boosting production have been well-documented by specialists – producers need better access to markets with improved roads and transport, farmers need to access small-scale credit schemes so they can buy fertilisers and seeds, research institutes need more consistent funding, and states need to invest in better irrigation and water management systems, according to the ODI.

Wiggins is upbeat – he explained to IRIN the region is starting out in a stronger position than many think.

According to 2007 ODI research, 11 of the 30 countries with the highest global agricultural growth rates from 1991-2005, are in West Africa, and agricultural growth increased by four percent in Africa from 1981-2003, versus growth of two to three percent in southern and eastern Africa.

Cereal production in Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana, and root and tuber production in Benin, Ghana and Nigeria has increased five-fold since the 1960s. And yields have risen across the region, with the exception of Senegal, though at an average of one tonne per hectare, they are still relatively low.

The growth was fuelled by expanding cultivated areas, increased yields and better labour productivity according to Wiggins.

“Now we need to understand why some of these countries have done better than others so we can spread these lessons across the region,” Wiggins told IRIN. “But things are now moving.”

“...When it comes to funding agriculture we're seeing things shift at a very high level...”

International Investment

International investors are moving too. The World Bank announced in April it would double African agricultural production investments from US$450 million to US$800 million, while the African Development Bank will invest US$4.8 billion in fertilisers, research and infrastructure, its president announced on 15 May.

Agriculture is on the agenda of the Group of Eight leaders, is at the forefront of the UN Secretary General’s agenda and is the focus of the 2008 World Bank development strategy.

“When it comes to funding agriculture now we’re seeing things shift at a very high level,” said Tidiane Ngaido, research fellow from the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI).

And Staatz thinks given the potential crisis these leaders face, they know they have no choice.

“To make basic services in these countries sustainable, you need a growing economy. West African states have predominantly agrarian economies so they have no choice but to build up agriculture…otherwise they will just remain beggars waiting for a handout.”

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