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Africa can develop herself

COVID-19 has revealed several cracks in the globe-spanning agri-food system. Lockdowns have restricted trade flows, compromised access to essential inputs such as quality seed and increased vulnerabilities to external shocks. In Africa, this situation has been further exacerbated by the loss of earnings from migrant workers, due to unemployment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The loss of these payments, which are often substantially higher than all development assistance budgets together, with the lack of local employment and massive crop losses due to locust attacks, has been a heavy blow.

Over the years, many African countries have minimized the role of local food systems and sustainable family farming. Instead, various nations now deliberately prioritize the export-oriented production of industrial crops, especially as primary raw materials, to then draw upon the resulting foreign currency to meet primary food needs. In such agri-food systems that are geared towards exports and that extensively rely upon extractive farming practices, the steady degradation of natural capital and net outflows of nutrients have brought about a progressive loss of ecological resilience. COVID-19 has painfully revealed the weaknesses of this production model and illuminated how Africa's farmers are especially vulnerable to the vagaries of the international market. Indeed, multiple facets of today's farming model increase the risks of food system collapse and full-blown social crises.

Africa should take agricultural development into its own hands

The course of Africa's food systems needs to be properly charted. Food production in Africa requires investment in technological development, innovation tailored to local (agro-ecological, socio-economic) contexts, and a deliberate focus on smallholder agriculture. If Africa wants to gain a strong position, it must shed its image as a marginal continent where western nations can easily source low-cost primary produce and dump their (subsidized) farm surpluses. One of Africa's key assets is its young, dynamic and hard-working population, many of whom live outside of urban areas, inhabiting fertile farmland and with boundless natural resources at their fingertips. Hence, Africa's investments need to be tailored to smallholder family farming and to agri-food systems that are protective of human and environmental health.

It is high time to strengthen Africa's agricultural and food self-reliance, improve food and nutrition security and mitigate the environmental footprint of agriculture. In addition, well-educated Africans, like the many tens of thousands of agronomists, deserve more respect, better paying jobs and a "hand at the helm". They have unique insights into the relative strengths and weaknesses of local agriculture and are pre-eminently qualified to contribute to the formulation of a national agricultural policy, which should become the basis for investment plans. The experience of some Asian countries, e.g. China, Vietnam, Bangladesh or Indonesia, has shown how targeted investments, pro-poverty research and farmer empowerment can unlock sustainable economic growth while safeguarding the environment.

As such, agriculture in these countries was recognized as the "backbone of the economy", steady flows of safe and nutritious farm produce were generated, and large sectors of the population were lifted out of poverty. Due attention to farmer education, 'One Health', and an ecological intensification of agriculture have proved to be essential in this regard.

The COVID-19 pandemic now provides the momentum to shape such transitions, giving a new impetus to Africa's economic development. The traditional partners can act as co-financiers instead of direct benefactors. The ambitious youth - who all too often beckon to Europe - must be actively engaged. Their leadership is crucial to reduce hunger and malnutrition, build a dynamic agricultural sector and create a better future for millions of families. In addition to infrastructure investments, a migration pact could be considered to promote the return of skilled workers to Africa.

Setting sound priorities

Africa is a diverse continent with tremendous natural and human capital and endless possibilities. A flourishing agricultural sector (primarily geared to local and regional markets) can reduce the root causes of migration between rural areas, cities and Europe. Africa should not be further patronized by the North, for it can take matters into its own hands - with external technical and / or financial support, where and when demanded by the local experts. Let us stop pretending that westerners have all the expertise for African agriculture. Equal trade and tax relations between the EU and AU are essential preconditions for no longer misusing Africa just as a resource. Stable and fair world market prices for products such as coffee and cocoa can contribute to rural development and lift living standards of the rural poor. The role and responsibility of the African political class is central to this. In that context, it is also essential to take the recently launched "African Continental Free Trade Area (ACFTA)" as a serious starting point.

The UN Food Systems Summit 2021 can provide the right momentum for a new global agricultural policy based on regional self-reliance, equality and a preservation of Planetary Health. In Africa and across the globe, agriculture can and should become a regenerative force, with smallholder farmers as stewards of biodiversity and guardians of human health. The immense potential and socio-economic reach of Africa's agricultural and food system should not be overlooked, and the aforementioned transition must be tackled as a matter of priority.

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