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# AFRICA VIEWPOINT

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## Response to the Global Crisis: a New Agenda for Agriculture for Sustainable Development in Africa

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**Agriculture for development.** The current food crisis underlined the importance of agricultural policies and brought food security back to international attention. It emphasized the need to renew the commitment of governments to achieve the World Food Summit objectives and the Millennium Development Goals.

International bodies mobilized efforts to address the crisis with large financial contributions to food aid and support to agriculture in developing countries. The World Food Programme launched an emergency appeal for US\$ 755 million and reached US\$ 1.2 billion. The World Bank committed itself to almost doubling lending for agriculture in Africa, to an annual US\$ 800 million. FAO launched its Initiative on Soaring Food Prices (ISFP), covering 54 countries for a total amount of US\$ 23.8 million.

Given the importance of agriculture for the income of the rural poor, the presumption could be that rising international market prices would translate into higher prices at the level of farmers as well. Unfortunately, according to the analysis of the UN Special Rapporteur for Food Security, this assumption is only valid in limited contexts. The Special Rapporteur argues that the surge in prices is the result of policies that have undermined the agricultural sector in a number of developing countries over a period of 30 years. That resulted in a situation where smallholders are unable to benefit from the current increase in international markets prices.

This brief aims to highlight the interlinkages between poverty, agricultural practices, water, soil management, climate change and the urgent need for incorporating sustainable practices into the new "agriculture for development agenda" to transform it into an "agriculture for sustainable development agenda" which would be particularly relevant for African countries.

There are approximately 500 million smallholder households, totalling one and a half billion people, living on two hectares of land or less.<sup>1</sup> Even though higher food prices could be an opportunity for them to make their way out of poverty, unsustainable agriculture policies of the recent decades have already placed them among the ranks of the poorest and most food insecure. The key policy issues to be addressed by a new agriculture for development agenda will be how to overcome the unsustainable agricultural policy choices of the past and how to benefit smallholders, as well as the most vulnerable.

Much of today's agriculture is driven by western scientific ideas, policies of continued growth, distorted markets and high dependence on non-renewable natural resources. It also has a large environmental footprint and fails to take into account projected consumption patterns and long-term environmental hazards. This way of farming must change. Its unsustainable nature has been underscored by the current food crisis and by the fact that the rural poor, smallholders that account for most of the farming population, are greatly exposed to food insecurity.

The conclusions of the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development also underlines this, by stating that: "the way the world grows its food will have to change radically to better serve the poor and hungry if the world is to cope with a growing population and climate change while avoiding social breakdown and environmental collapse".

**The vicious cycle of poverty, unsustainable agricultural practices, lack of water and climate change.** Agriculture is the income base of many people in Africa who also greatly depend on natural resources, especially on soil and water, as well as on climatic conditions. Climate change affects both water availability and agriculture. By 2020, in Africa alone, 75 - 250 million people are projected to be exposed to increased water stress due to climate change. The area available for agriculture and the length of growing seasons are expected to decrease. Inefficient use of water alone reduces agriculture production and contributes to food shortages and hunger<sup>2</sup>. Climate change vulnerability adds greatly to the risks already borne by the poorest, not least due to their great dependence on water for agriculture.

However, agriculture is not only vulnerable to climate change, thereby placing the poorest of the world under even greater stress. It is also a large contributor to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. In 2005, agriculture accounted for 10-12% of total global anthropogenic GHG emissions and its share is predicted to grow<sup>3</sup>.

It is therefore important to address both adaptation and mitigation needs in future agriculture policies so as to ensure the sustainability of agriculture and the livelihoods of the World's poor who greatly depend on it. For this, account must be taken of the fact that both mitigation of, and adaptation to climate change have the same purpose: reducing its undesirable consequences. In agriculture, the same measures often have both adaptation and mitigation potential, as described further on.

\* The views expressed are purely those of the author and may not in any circumstances be regarded as stating an official position of the European Commission  
<sup>1</sup> Report of the Special Rapporteur

<sup>2</sup> CSD16 Chair's Summary

<sup>3</sup> WG III Contribution to the Fourth Assessment Report of the IPCC Summary for Policymakers and Technical Summary

**Policy Options to break the vicious cycle.** Agriculture is the livelihood basis of many who greatly depend on natural resources and climatic conditions. It is also the sector consuming the most water and contributing heavily to climate change, increasing the vulnerability of the many rural poor, who depend on it. In order to break the vicious cycle of poverty, agriculture, natural resource degradation, water usage and climate change, there is a need for new policy responses addressing all these elements in an interlinked and strategic way, both at international and regional levels.

In the long run, poverty and food security can only be addressed by fully taking into account the needs of future generations, agricultural sustainability, adequate land and water management practices and adaptation measures. To achieve this, policies and practices that can lead to win-win situations, benefiting poverty elimination, water availability, mitigation of and adaptation to climate change already exist.

Alongside policy options aiming to achieve food security, policies that need to be used to fully unlock the potential of agriculture for sustainable development are shown in the table below.

Policy options for the new agriculture for development agenda	Problem to be addressed: Poverty	Problem to be addressed: Water shortages	Problem to be addressed: Climate Change (adaptation)	Problem to be addressed: Climate Change (mitigation)
Increase of crop productivity	Great potential if targeting the rural poor	May contribute to water shortages	May be endangered by impacts of CC	May contribute to higher GHG emissions
Sustainable land management practices/IWRM	Long-term potential	With IWRM, great potential	Great potential	Potential
Increasing soil carbon levels	Great potential	Great potential	Great potential	Potential
Improving early warning systems	Potential		Great potential	
Methane as potential on-farm energy	Potential			Great Potential

*Source: Author's table based on various sources including FAO and IPCC*

### All stakeholders must participate in the change

- International experts from agricultural agencies need to participate regularly in international climate change negotiations and conversely climate change experts should take part in international discussions on food security. International initiatives, funds and programs for food security will need to address the sustainable elements of agriculture, focusing on “win-win” policy options that can tackle climate change and lead to food security at the same time. This is crucial to transform the new “agricultural for development agenda” into an agenda for “agriculture for sustainable development”.

- National governments in Africa will play a key role in implementing international programs and making sure that funds will reach the ones most in need. National-level policies for “agriculture for sustainable development” will also be essential in this regard. For example, adaptation strategies focusing on the agricultural sector should be included in national development strategies.
- African farmers will also play an important role in “agriculture for sustainable development”. It will be important to help them develop knowledge on sustainable agricultural, water and land management practices, as well as to provide incentives to pursue them. Microcredit, possible finance from adaptation funds and from Kyoto Protocol flexible mechanisms may be useful tools here.
- The role of agribusiness and global retailers in identifying solutions will have to be taken fully into account, especially by ensuring that food price rises will benefit smallholders. Private investment in agriculture in Africa is vital, and food processing companies and global retailers have a crucial function to fulfil by connecting farmers to high-value markets.

**Conclusions.** Agriculture is clearly at a turning point. Admittedly, mistakes of past policy decisions led to a situation where those farmers on whom world agriculture depends, suffer from hunger most. The problem can no longer be dealt with in isolation, focusing solely on productivity. Instead, it needs to be viewed as a substantial part of sustainable development, while looking at its interlinkages with environmental, development and social issues.

The vicious circle of poverty, unsustainable agricultural practices and natural resource degradation in Africa needs to be addressed in an interlinked way in order to achieve long-term food security in the region and to have a new agricultural agenda that is capable of benefiting the poorest populations while taking into account environmental concerns and the needs of future generations.

Policy alternatives already exist for this. Efficient water and land management, adaptation to climate change and the use of mitigation potential of climate change have a key role to play. Yet, the thinking of policymakers must drastically change and development, agriculture and environment experts and policies must be brought closer to each other, in order to benefit the ones most in need, by establishing a new “agriculture for sustainable development agenda”.

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