

African food systems



Africa is still battling with hunger and malnutrition. While there are reasons for hope, accelerated transformation depends on curbing predatory behaviour and ensuring that change comes from the continent itself.



The Africa Food Systems Summit in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and the Africa Climate Summit in Nairobi, Kenya, which both took place earlier this month, highlighted that Africa is off track to end hunger and achieve sustainable food systems. While at the global level some food security metrics have improved, largely driven by China's economic boom over the past several years, most of the African continent is still grappling with some of the same issues from decades ago – recently aggravated by climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts, and the price and supply disruptions that have followed. Ethiopia, Nigeria, Somalia and South Sudan are currently facing severe hunger due to extreme weather events, conflicts and chronic diseases, while many other nations are on the brink of famine.

The dysfunctionality of African food systems, here understood as their incapacity to deliver nutritious, sustainable and affordable diets, is inextricably linked to poverty. The factors leading up to this condition are complex and intricate, involving historical trade imbalances and a development discourse imported from countries whose context had little connection with the African reality and did not always work to Africa's advantage. Analogously, some international organizations and funders still promote agricultural development strategies for Africa without involving local actors and neglecting context specificities. These strategies often involve the sole pursuit of higher yields for export commodities and

do not consider the impacts that they may have on people and the environment or how natural resources could be better used. In the best-case scenario, countries might miss an opportunity to invest in more diverse, nutritious, resilient and inclusive food systems; in the worst-case scenario, countries may experience environmental degradation, the dismantling of social structures, the displacement of smallholders and the perpetuation of the cycle of hunger.

Solutions to the food system crisis must be plural, reflecting the diversity of food actors – private and public, large and small – and responding to the need for their collective engagement. Yet, every solution should be tailored to local challenges and opportunities, guided by a shared vision. Closing the yield gap is important to reduce import dependency. But has yield increase reduced widespread hunger and ensured food sovereignty? What policies should be in place to ensure that the economic gains of agricultural intensification are widely distributed? Should greater yields be obtained through green revolution technologies, or could these technologies be combined with agroecological practices and more cooperative production systems? Should focus only be placed on export and cash crops, or also on local species?

During the Africa Food Systems Summit, several strategies for improving food security

were discussed, such as sustainable food procurement programmes, empowerment of women, farmer education, more localized food systems, innovation, measures to increase resilience and climate-proof agriculture, technological development and youth entrepreneurship, among others. Many countries have already adopted the [Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme](#) and seek greater unity and collaboration to use resources more efficiently and gain leverage in international negotiations. Successful initiatives are being taken forward by organizations, many of which involve sizeable investments in smallholder farming and women.

All of this certainly sends a message of hope, but change must be accelerated. Two realizations are key for that to happen: change must come from within, and predatory behaviour must be curbed. The first relates to the fact that food security solutions must be culturally appropriate, sensitive to the demands of people on the ground and in line with Africa's new reality of population growth, urbanization, technologies and entrepreneurial forces. Apart from scaling up successful projects, it is important to work with local institutions and to internalize nutrition goals into local policies and decision-making. The second concerns individual agents as well as market and governance structures at the macro level that tend to perpetuate a condition of poverty. Examples include disadvantageous trade agreements and the recent inflow of ultra-processed foods onto the continent, associated with unhealthy diets and a rise in non-communicable diseases. Although this isn't unique to Africa, countries with more bargaining power, stricter regulations and consumer protection mechanisms are less vulnerable and better equipped to implement compensatory measures.

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