

New Study “Food, Jobs and Sustainability”: How Agriculture Can Drive Development in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Sub-Saharan Africa needs to develop in order to escape the trap of poverty and continuing population growth. African agriculture can drive this development – even if the continent is currently unable to feed its own populations. For this to happen, farmers must use modern methods to achieve better yields, and they must avoid repeating the mistakes that were made elsewhere as agricultural production intensified. If the region can then succeed in creating jobs in the agricultural processing sector in rural areas and gaining access to markets, an important development step will have been taken.

Although the agriculture of sub-Saharan Africa currently cannot feed the continent’s own populations, it has the potential to become the driving force for development in Africa. This may sound rather far-fetched given that the countries of sub-Saharan Africa – the focus of this study – have the lowest level of development and the highest population growth of any region in the world. In theory, however, the region has what it takes: enough land suitable for crop farming and animal husbandry, favourable climatic conditions and a large workforce. In addition, the governments of the 49 countries between the Sahel and the Cape of Good Hope as well as international donors have realised that the urgently needed development leap must begin in agriculture, a sector that has long been neglected.

However, there are major practical challenges to be overcome. The family smallholdings, which account for most agricultural production, are generally not very efficient, above all because they lack access to know-how and capital and do not have secure land rights. Food security is worsening amid climate change and conflicts. In addition, the facilities are lacking to process crops and livestock into commercial-grade, profitable food products and thereby create rural jobs.

Farmers in sub-Saharan Africa need to become more productive, and they need to do so as soon as possible. At the same time, they must take care to avoid making the mistakes that occurred when agricultural production in Europe and elsewhere intensified – from the over-use of fertiliser to the reduction in biodiversity. The employment of modern means together with the renouncement of outdated intermediate steps is referred to as “leapfrogging”. A classic example of leapfrogging is the use of the mobile phone. Africa was able to do without the costly and complex construction of a landline network and instead introduced modern means of communication straightaway. Mobile phones are now so widespread that they are in turn contributing to leapfrogging in African agriculture, with the result that experience and knowledge about new, intelligent farming methods and data-based information reach smallholders even in remote areas of the continent.

“Africa's agriculture must first be able to supply its populations using its own resources,” Reiner Klingholz, director of the Berlin Institute for Population and Development, explains. “But if it becomes possible to intensify agriculture sustainably and to build local value chains, sub-Saharan Africa, which is currently lagging significantly behind in terms of development, could catch up, not only in agriculture but in all economic and social areas.”

As the study shows, an increase in agricultural yields always took place at the beginning of development in both industrial and emerging countries. Through more efficient farming methods and machinery, fewer and fewer workers were needed over time to feed growing populations, while the emerging sectors of the economy in food production and industry increasingly offered employment. As overall economic development advanced, fertility rates declined. Sub-Saharan Africa must embark on this path as soon as possible if the progress made to date is not to be offset by continuing population growth.

The study not only describes ideas and approaches but also offers examples of good practice and promising projects. In Senegal, for example, a veterinarian has built a value chain for domestic milk. In Côte d'Ivoire, a women's cooperative is refining raw cocoa to produce the finest chocolate. In Nigeria, a company is developing high-tech agricultural aids that even farmers with less capital can afford. In Zambia, a project is using fish breeding and the cultivation of soybeans to diversify agriculture and make it more attractive for young people. In Malawi, maize farmers are once again learning to appreciate the advantages of crop rotation.

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You can download the study as a PDF free of charge under:

<https://www.berlin-institut.org/en/publications/studies-in-english/food-jobs-and-sustainability.html>

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us:

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