

FAO Newsroom

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Soaring food prices put further pressure on African agriculture

Director-General addresses the FAO Regional Conference for Africa

19 June 2008, Nairobi/Rome – Food insecurity has been exacerbated in Africa by the current rapid rise in food prices together with challenges such as climate change, greater demand for food products in emerging economies, agricultural production used for biofuels, rapid population and urbanization as well as transboundary animal and plant diseases, said FAO Director-General Jacques Diouf today at the 25th FAO Regional Conference for Africa.

Agricultural imports have increased more rapidly than exports in the last 30 years, Dr Diouf said, with Africa becoming a net importer of agricultural commodities, 87 percent of which were food products in 2005.

The region's agricultural exports grew by an annual 2.3 percent from 1996, but its exports as a proportion of global trade fell dramatically from 8 percent in the 1970s to only 1.3 percent in 2005.

Despite the efforts that have been made, African agriculture still faces many constraints, being undercapitalized, inefficient and uncompetitive, FAO's Director-General said.

However, he expressed his conviction that with political will and good governance, Africa can change its agriculture and succeed in feeding its population. Such political will was already expressed in the Maputo Declaration of 2003 by which African Governments had undertaken to allocate at least 10 percent of their budgets to agriculture and rural development. Currently, the African Union's report on the implementation of that commitment indicates that only one country in five has reached or exceeded the 10 percent level.

Dr. Diouf noted that the problem of food insecurity is a political issue - a matter of priorities in the face of the most fundamental of human needs. The decisions made by governments determine the allocation of resources.

Dependence on agriculture

Agriculture continues to play a predominant role in the national economies of sub-Saharan Africa, accounting for 17 percent of GDP, 57 percent of employment and 11 percent of export earnings. However, in the past 20 years, grain production in Africa rose only by 2.6 percent per year, leading to a rapid increase in imports (3.5 percent per year) to meet requirements.

Livestock and fish production in the region did not keep pace with population needs. The rate of growth of production for cattle was 1.4 percent, 2.5 percent for sheep, and 4.3 percent for goats. Regarding fish production, Africa's output has remained stagnant over

the last ten years, with declining availability per inhabitant. Consumption of fishery and aquaculture products fell from 8.8 kilos per capita in 1990 to about 7.8 kilos in 2001.

Among some of the major factors inhibiting overall agricultural development:

- Water control, with as much as 93 percent of arable land dependent on unpredictable rainfall, a high risk of drought and only 4 percent of available water reserves used for irrigation, compared to 14 percent in Asia.
- Land, with only 14 percent of Africa's 184 million hectares of arable land under cultivation and some 21 million hectares in a state of accelerated degradation.
- Fertilizers, with Africa using only 23 kilos of fertilizer per hectare of arable land compared to 151 kilos in Asia. Fertilizer use is even lower in sub-Saharan Africa, at only 9 kilos per hectare.
- Scarcity of seeds, with access to improved seeds constrained by high costs and limited supplies on the local market.

FAO initiative on soaring food prices

Dr. Diouf said that the unprecedented hike in food prices, which rose 52 percent between 2007 and 2008, has had severe economic, social and political consequences. Urgent measures are needed to offset the negative impacts and to rapidly boost food production in the most affected countries. In response to the dramatic situation, last December FAO launched an initiative to support the low-income food-deficit countries by facilitating poor farmers' access to inputs.

Dr. Diouf stressed that FAO will continue its mission of providing technical support to Member Nations for the formulation and implementation of policies, strategies and programmes in order to overcome the challenge of food insecurity in the world.

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