

## Food security in Africa: an agriculturalist's perception

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### Abstract

The level of food security in Africa is mainly dependent on climate, poverty, national security, infrastructure and efficiency of production. Efforts at improving food security have been aimed at providing food aid which has been a disincentive to commercial producers and detracted from the real need for their development. Aid in the form of cash to the destitute will be a far greater incentive to local development, production and consequently food security. The role of commercial producers in food security has been underplayed and will contribute the major input to the three dimensions of food security, namely food supply at national and local levels, stability in supply and providing physical and economic access to food. Efforts by government who have social objectives have been ineffective at bringing subsistence farmers into commercial production. Only a few subsistence farmers want to commercialise and this will only be brought about through companies with commercial objectives. These companies will identify those with the necessary entrepreneurial spirit and assist them to settle on land with effective supports systems. The initial pilot projects indicate that with correct selection procedures based particularly on entrepreneurial spirit these emerging commercial farmers can compete extremely well with established commercial farmers. The efforts by the FAO in appreciating the realities of aid and its effect in Africa and consequently changing direction back towards rehabilitation and development is acknowledged.

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### Introduction

Food security has been investigated, designed and implemented by organizations such as the FAO as far back as 1945 (Internet website [www.fao.org](http://www.fao.org)). Every aspect of food security has been discussed at length and is available extensively in the literature. In Africa, food security is influenced mainly by poor or variable climates, political instability, poverty, low productivity and a lack of infrastructure. In this paper the viewpoint of an agriculturalist is put forward to hopefully add something of value to this literature and also question some of the processes involved in the huge effort being put into resolving under-nutrition particularly in Africa. Particular emphasis is given to the role of commercial producers in providing food security.

The author supports the concern of international bodies that "frequent and recurring emergency situations are making increasing demands on international development aid (for food assistance) and are absorbing large amounts of resources that might otherwise be available for development purposes" (Muehlhoff & Herens, 1997). This raises the question of whether the intervention of supplying food to ensure food security is sustainable.

From the layman's point of view food security is a personal problem. It can be resolved by either growing the food or buying it.

If adequate food is grown for the family this is classified as subsistence farming. If a person wants to buy food the situation becomes more complex. It means income has to be generated for food purchases. It is known that this income will not come from subsistence farming in the southern African region as subsistence farmers only create 3% of their income from farm produce (Tapson, 1990). Thus the income must come from jobs in urban areas. This income is remitted to the people in the rural areas who buy food. At this stage there are two requirements to accessing food. The first is that the road and transport infrastructure must be available to bring the food to the rural areas and secondly; the price of that food must

be reasonable. The only way this food can be provided at a reasonable price is through improved efficiencies related to commercial production or through low cost imports.

The principles are simple:

### **Grow It**

Not everyone wants to grow his own food. However, in a country such as Uganda where 90% of the people live in rural areas (Paterson, 2000a) and live “off the land”, there is little under-nutrition and growing your own food is an acceptable option. Luckily, Uganda has an excellent climate and soils but crop yields in the subsistence sector are dropping (Bekunda 2000) while the population is growing. This situation is not sustainable. People are moving to the urban areas and will need to be supplied with food that can only come from commercial farmers.

In many sub Saharan countries the climate is not anything as suitable to a subsistence existence as Uganda, Cameroon or the highlands of Kenya and Ethiopia. South Africa has an average of 400 mm of rain while Uganda has 1200 mm. The place of subsistence farming in South Africa is only in the higher rainfall areas and where the population pressure is relatively low. In Zambia a subsistence existence is possible because of the good climate and low population pressure. In Zimbabwe and South Africa there are huge movements away from the rural subsistence sectors to urban areas in which case it is not a matter of growing it, but buying it.

### **Buy It**

In order for people to buy food, the food must be at an affordable price and must be accessible. Accessibility implies that infrastructure such as roads, transport systems and market places must be present. The development of this infrastructure is one of the few interventions that is the responsibility of government. An affordable price will only be brought about by effective commercial production or imports.

The conclusion for “Grow It”, or “Buy It” is that in Africa, with an increasing urban population that cannot feed itself, nor be supplied by the limited area of subsistence farmers, there will be a need for preserving the present commercial farmers and developing more of them.

### **Subsistence and Commercial Farmers**

The efforts of Government and NGO’s towards providing food security appear to be directed mainly at household food security. In addition to this, the efforts are towards “Grow it” rather than “Buy it”. The FAO has put enormous effort into consideration of National Food Security, but recently this is biased towards providing food aid in times of need rather than developing the commercial sector. In fact, reference to the commercial sector is obvious by its absence in the literature. Is this possibly a reaction to the fact that the African colonials brought about National Food Security through the development of the commercial sector and this is now unacceptable in Africa? Throughout Africa efforts are being made by local government and others to encourage subsistence farmers to become commercial producers. President Museveni of Uganda, referring to “modernizing” Uganda stated, “In agriculture we must get rid of the present subsistence economy through specialization and monetization” (Museveni, 1997). Even with Museveni’s excellent principles of privatization there has been very little move from subsistence to commercial production over the last 13 years. In South Africa, after 6 years of independence and great effort and expenditure on the rural sector, there has been no commercialization of production from the rural sector. Still 86% of the agricultural land is commercially run basically by whites and 14% is in the subsistence sector comprised basically by blacks (Development Bank of Southern Africa, 1991). Why have the efforts to bring the subsistence sector into commercial production failed?

At a recent All Africa Farm Management conference held in Kampala, a summary of the conclusions (Paterson, 2000a) may be of help in answering this question.

#### **1. The need for industrialization (urban jobs)**

The subsistence sector is very capable of producing desirable products to meet household food security. With urbanization there is a need for larger commercial producers to meet the needs of this increasing urban sector (National Food Security). The normal pressures of supply, demand and price settings shall bring about the commercialization needed for this urban demand. Unfortunately without

industrialization to create urban jobs and wealth the urbanites will not be able to afford food and the price message needed to bring about commercialization, will not occur.

## 2. Government policy and the needs of the people

In principle, government policy is committed to privatization and there are many instances of this occurring in Uganda. It is questionable whether the subsistence farmers want to be commercial producers. Most people appear to be committed to household food security alone. Possibly it is necessary to identify the few percent of the subsistence producers who have an entrepreneurial spirit and really want to farm commercially. Then, direct all efforts at these committed producers.

## 3. Do subsistence farmers want to commercialise?

It appears to be accepted by most African governments that this is so. From experiences in Africa only a very small percentage wants to farm commercially, maybe as little as four percent of subsistence farmers. Most of them would rather have a good job in industry.

Where the climate and soils in parts of Africa are excellent for providing household food security, why should more than a few people want to commercialize? For those who do, what challenges are they faced with? There are potentially massive financial constraints and risks in this move.

## 4. Commercialization and entrepreneurial spirit

Commercialization can only be brought about in the presence of a business spirit amongst the people. If this spirit does exist, how many have it? The Minister of Agriculture stated that 80% of the people of Uganda want to “eat and sleep” and only 5% want to “eat, sell and sleep”. However, it is also clear that unless people are exposed to business they cannot be expected to have an entrepreneurial spirit.

## The South African Situation

South Africa has been a net exporter of food products due to a large commercial sector (Table 1).

**Table 1** Land utilization in South Africa (Development Bank of Southern Africa)

	Area (mil. ha)	%
Commercial Sector: Arable	14.2	
Grazing	72.0	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>86.2</b>	<b>70.5</b>
Developing Sector: Arable	2.5	
Grazing	11.9	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>14.4</b>	<b>11.8</b>
Natural Conservation	11.8	9.7
Forestry	1.4	1.1
Other	8.4	6.9
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>122.2</b>	<b>100%</b>

This has ensured national food security not only for South Africa, but has also added security to the southern African region. However, the commercial sector which covers 70.5% of South Africa, is basically owned by whites, and the developing (subsistence) sector is 11.8%, basically settled by blacks. This is an unacceptable situation in Africa. To ensure rural stability it is believed that at least 30% of the commercial sector will need to be settled by black farmers. As mentioned earlier, this transition has not taken place at all during the first six years of independence. There are a number of reasons for this.

Firstly, it has been assumed that there are subsistence and commercial farmers, and attempts have been made to take subsistence farmers and put them onto commercial farms. The majority of these did not want to farm, did not ask to farm, they merely asked for somewhere to live and hopefully subsist. Obviously these schemes collapsed.

Secondly, government organisations like the Department of Land Affairs and the Department of Agriculture were given the responsibility of bringing these changes about. Government is not a commercial business, it is a social one, and the settling of people on commercial farms is a commercial event and should be left to commercial organizations. Until this occurs black commercial farmers will not be settled. Of more importance is the realization that there are more than two groups of farmers, there is a third one which are those presently in the subsistence sector who have an entrepreneurial spirit and want to farm. These emerging commercial farmers are a vitally important part of the process of land reform, rural stability and the continued production of food for national food stability. Without them South Africa will destabilize and food production will drop and the present food security will be endangered. All efforts should be directed at this relatively small group of entrepreneurs. With the present 45 000 commercial producers the 30% required will amount to 15 000. In a population of 45 million people 15 000 entrepreneurial spirited agricultural people can be found.

In one of the provinces on the Eastern seaboard of South Africa, in a test case, as described by Paterson *et al.* (2001), two entrepreneurial minded Zulus were evaluated. In their first year of farming, they made a return on capital invested in livestock of 37% versus the local commercial farmers who achieved only 3.7% (Paterson, 2000b). The main reason for their success being, that they were not locked into the agricultural paradigms of their white commercial counterparts who had large machinery and labour costs.

- The first principle coming out of this test case is that with little biological training, but good entrepreneurial spirit these emerging farmers can compete well in the commercial sector if land is made available. They can then contribute to the National Food Security.
- The second principle is that settling large numbers of subsistence people on small pieces of land, like the government is doing, will result in rural slums and eventual nutritional insecurity. This predicted result was constantly confirmed to the author by many leaders in Africa over many years and is fully expected to happen in South Africa as well.

## Discussion

**Dimensions of Food Security** (Ref. Internet website. [www.sdnpk.org/link/htm](http://www.sdnpk.org/link/htm)).

There are three dimensions to food security.

- First of all the supply of food at national and local levels, through national/local production and imports.
- Secondly, there is a need for stability in supply from one year to the next and within years.
- Thirdly, each household should have physical and economic access to food.

If commercial food supply is to form the basis of food security in Africa, how does it fit in with these three dimensions?

- Firstly, Africa has a climate and soils that have the potential to produce far more food than could be consumed by the population for the next century if the food is produced commercially. However, this will not ensure household food security unless the infrastructure of roads, transport, markets and storage is in place.
- Secondly, commercial producers are far better at contending with variable climates than subsistence producers so this will add stability within the year. Stability between years will always have to depend on the infrastructure of storage facilities and the possibility of imports.
- Thirdly, household access to food, both physically and economically, will depend on the previously mentioned infrastructures but more importantly, will depend on the development of jobs to provide the wealth to be able to buy food. “The efficient commercial production of food lowers the price of food which in turn increases the salaries of the consumers. It also benefits the poor more than the wealthy because the poor spend more of their disposable income on food than the wealthy” (Schuh, 2000).

## The role of aid to Africa

Recently, a statement was made regarding food aid (Schuh, 2000): “This is a popular concept in developed countries due to the need to get rid of their surpluses. In developing countries it has a strong disincentive effect to produce crops especially if the food aid is sold into the local markets, reducing prices”.

It is for this reason the author has stated previously that “Food aid is the biggest sin in Africa” (Paterson, 1999).

The paternalism of the colonialists and foreign aid donors has installed an attitude of dependency and perceived entitlement into the people of Africa which will probably take many generations to change.

Food security is a personal problem which all of our fore-fathers had to face. Why has that incentive to survive and overcome been taken away from the people of Africa?

The efforts of the FAO to move back a step and look more to rehabilitation and development rather than alleviating the symptoms of food insecurity through relief aid (Muehloff & Herens, 1997) is commendable. Hopefully this move will eventually result in true commercial producers emerging with the majority of rural people employed in the town and either living there or remitting money to the rural areas.

It has been stated that providing aid in the form of cash to those who need emergency relief is the answer to their problems rather than providing food and shelter (Sen, 1991). If there is money to be made, businessmen will be there immediately to provide all the goods and services. But if aid is in the form of goods and services, then the businessmen will be chased away and locally produced food will be exported.

In one of the terrible droughts in Ethiopia all the food in the drought stricken areas was sold in Addis Ababa because the locals were too poor to buy it!

## Conclusions

- There is international concern that aid destined for development has increasingly and insidiously been directed to food supply in crisis situations.
- This has led to dependency particularly amongst those whose hunger is due to endemic deprivation.
- It is questioned whether this intervention is sustainable or desirable.
- Simply put, food security must be a personal problem resolved by growing food or buying it.
- In some areas of Africa subsistence farmers can grow their own food, but the majority will need to buy it and therefore will need jobs for this.
- Efficient commercial producers will need to supply the food for sale at a reasonable price.
- Infrastructure in terms of roads, transport, storage and markets will have to be developed to ensure access to the food.
- The role of the commercial sector in ensuring food security at both national and household level has been underplayed.
- Efforts at developing subsistence farmers into commercial farmers have not been effective because it is directed by government with social objectives.
- The selection process of these emerging farmers and their settlement must be done by commercial companies with commercial objectives.
- Only a few subsistence producers want to farm commercially.
- If selected on their entrepreneurial spirit and given adequate support these emerging farmers will be able to compete effectively even with limited training in agriculture.
- National security in Southern Africa will depend on settling many of these emerging farmers successfully.
- This will not add to food security in terms of the quantity of food, but will prevent the food insecurity that comes with national instability.
- The development of commercial producers will contribute the major input to the three dimensions of food security, namely food supply at national and local levels, stability in supply and providing physical and economic access to food.
- It is stated that “food aid is the biggest sin in Africa” because it is a disincentive for the commercial producer.
- Aid, in the form of cash to the destitute will be a far greater incentive to local development and production than food aid.
- The efforts by the FAO to appreciate the realities of aid and change direction back towards rehabilitation and development is acknowledged.

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