

Securing Africa's Food Sovereignty

Ahunna Eziakonwa

Regional Bureau for Africa, New York

Article DOI: 10.48028/iiprds/ijarppads.v6.i1.02

Abstract

The war in Ukraine laid bare a vexing and persistent structural vulnerability in most African countries.⁸ The continent, with 60 percent of the world's unused arable land, cannot feed itself because of low yields, poor farm management practices, and distortions in agricultural markets. Consequently, the continent is overly dependent on food and fertilizer imports to feed its people. Africa's farmers find it increasingly difficult to enhance productivity, create jobs, and boost wealth in the agricultural sector. The Ukraine crisis should be a wake-up call. African countries must embrace a food systems approach to scale-up food production, overhaul farm management practices, and improve food marketing to move beyond food security and attain food sovereignty. This will not only ensure the availability of affordable food, but it will also help countries attain a number of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including: SDG #2 zero hunger, SDG #3 good health and wellbeing, SDG #5 gender equality, SDG #8 decent work and economic growth, and SDG #10 reduced inequalities.

Keywords: *Securing, Africa, Food, Sovereignty*

Corresponding Author: Ahunna Eziakonwa

First Published: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/food-security-strengthening-africas-food-systems/>

Background to the Study

Food sovereignty speaks to the ability of a country to feed itself. In Africa, this must involve increasing production and ensuring that farming systems are more resilient to price and environmental shocks. The 2006 Abuja Declaration of African agriculture ministers called for an increase in Africa's average fertilizer application rates from 20 kg/ha to 50 kg/ha to boost production. Africa's average application rates are still at 2006 levels, while the global average is slightly over 130 kg/ha. While it is evident that fertilizers are not the proverbial silver bullet, it is clear that better farming practices could be a crucial first step in Africa's journey towards food sovereignty. Recent UNDP research suggests that meeting the 2006 Abuja target could more than double Africa's food production in a couple of years.

In order to accomplish this, Africa does not need to be overly dependent on fertilizer imports from Ukraine and Russia. The continent produces sufficient potash and ammonia to sustain a thriving fertilizer industry. In addition, existing fertilizer blending facilities (in 19 African countries) and manufacturing plants (in 10 African countries) operate well below capacity. Concerted investments in infrastructure, technology, and skills, including through public-private partnerships, could boost fertilizer production. Leveraging the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) could also widen and deepen Africa's market and facilitate the availability of affordable fertilizer across Africa. In Nigeria, for example, if fertilizer-producing plants were working at full capacity (Dangote's full capacity is 3 million tons and Indorama's 1.4 million tons), the country could meet its own 1.5 million tons of fertilizer consumption, while also meeting the rest of the region's needs.

A Case for Food Sovereignty

Food sovereignty in Africa is not just about production and trade. It is also about resilience and ensuring that the continent's food production is not held hostage by natural and market shocks. The use of technology, fertilizer, and improved farm management practices could revolutionize Africa's food sector. In addition, African countries must take steps to reverse their dependence on food aid and food imports. Free or cheap food imports have made local food production in Africa less competitive and, in turn, shifted consumer preferences away from local brands to foreign ones. As a result, Africa is now the most food-import-dependent region in the world, dedicating more than 13 percent of its import expenditure to buying food and agricultural commodities. This contributes to overall fiscal stress.

Revolutionizing food production in Africa will improve the continent's development prospects and build resilience. Using fertilizers produced in Africa and fully integrating research from Africa's agricultural research institutes could help the continent attain food sovereignty by minimizing imports. This would make Africa's food markets more resilient during global shocks and prevent the pass-through of global price shocks into domestic inflation. It would also have the added benefit of relieving stress on scarce foreign exchange earnings. Assuming Africa had adhered to the 2006 Abuja Declaration

and gradually increased fertilizer application rates from 20 kg to 50 kg per hectare between 2010 and 2020, food production could have grown cumulatively by 209 percent instead of just 24 percent. Such an increase would have had a salutary impact on reducing hunger and addressing malnourishment. The increased agricultural productivity would also significantly impact women and girls, helping Africa make more progress on SDG 5 regarding gender equality. Research by the Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that women comprise 43 percent of the agricultural labor-force in developing countries and are mainly concentrated in harvesting and weeding. Boosting food production could therefore also contribute to decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), especially for women and girls.

Policy Options

Some African countries are already improving food production and attaining food sovereignty. Malawi's 2006-2010 agricultural development program, which has been described as "pro-poor," increased yields, raised incomes, and made the crops more resilient to drought. Ethiopia's 2005 productive safety net policy program (PSNP) targeted households and communities that are chronically food insecure and offered insurance, as well as investment in public goods such as soil and water conservation.

Despite progress in a few countries, Africa needs coordinated policy changes and sustained action to increase food production, improve distribution, ensure affordability, and reduce dependency. African leaders should prioritize incentives to increase domestic and regional food supply. This will include using appropriate inputs to boost and scale up production to cater to national and regional markets. An important goal in this context is the full operationalization of the AfCFTA to facilitate the free movement of labor, inputs, and food across the one-Africa market. From a policy perspective, Africa must **shift the narrative from food supply to developing resilient food systems**. Africa's default must no longer be only trying to address food availability. Policies must focus on ensuring that the entire continental food value chain is robust, profitable, and leaves no one (and no community) behind.

Africa's development partners also have a critical role to play. While temporary aid is needed, the primary need is to **fully support programs that de-risk and boost critical investments in Africa's food sector**. This will facilitate financial and technical resources to modernize food production, storage, and marketing in Africa. Africa's development partners can also promote efforts to maximize regional food trade, by **reducing disincentives and inefficiencies in global markets, such as dumping, subsidies, and tariff structures that would disadvantage or discourage domestic production in African countries**.

Conclusion

Africa has a long history of food dependency, a legacy of food-aid policies and low domestic productive capacity. As a result, much of its food is imported, implying that any major global shock can lead to severe trade disruptions, increased hunger, and pass-

through inflation, eroding both household and public budgets. Africa's food sovereignty pathway involves enhancing agricultural productivity by improving farm management techniques. UNDP analysis shows that Africa could easily produce the fertilizer inputs it needs, and that meeting the 2006 Abuja Declaration targets would boost food supply, while positively impacting the SDGs. Ensuring Africa's food sovereignty, implying increased availability and affordability is key to the continent's own economic sovereignty, sustainable development, and achieving the SDGs.

Reference

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/food-security-strengthening-africas-food-systems/>