

1-1-1987

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Recommended Citation

Lucas, C. Payne (1987) "Africa: The Crisis In Agriculture," *New Directions*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <http://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol14/iss1/5>

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AFRICA

The Crisis In Agriculture

By C. Payne Lucas

Every day, for the past 20 years or so, the average African has eaten less than the day before.

That is one way of saying that per capita food production in Africa has declined about one percent annually over the past two decades. Although some of this gap is made up through food imports, the stark reality is that Africa has lost the ability to feed itself. While China and India — until recently afflicted by chronic famine — have achieved basic food self-sufficiency, Africa has steadily lost that capacity since the early 1960s. With freedom has come hunger.

The reasons are legion:

- Many African governments retained colonial policies which emphasized cash crop economies. Production of cotton and tobacco took precedence over basic food grains like sorghum and millet which African farmers had adapted to their difficult environment. Even where colonial governments had promoted food production, they tended to focus on a single crop. This left many countries vulnerable to such varied factors as weather, pests and world market prices.

- Low prices paid to farmers for their produce have reduced incentives to grow surplus food for market. Improved health services have spurred rapid population growth. An increasingly urbanized continent has created a large number of consumers who are not also producers. And new tastes for bread and rice have made



many countries dependent on imported wheat and other crops which cannot be cultivated widely in Africa.

- Liberation wars and civil strife have driven millions from their lands, creating a semi-permanent and dependent refugee population.

- Inadequate infrastructure and support services — feeder roads, extension personnel and credit for peasant farmers — conspire to limit production.

- Women farmers have been ignored as a factor in African agriculture. Yet women are responsible for at least half of the food and some cash crop production at the small-holder level.

- But most alarming is the visible erosion of Africa's fragile landscape. Drought has merely accentuated the effects of human exploitation of scarce natural resources. The Africa of the nomads, of the hunter-gatherers, of the small group practicing shifting cultivation on rain-leached soils must now sustain large, settled communities which are overusing, overgrazing and denuding the countryside.

As depressing as this all may seem to those of us observing from afar, there are good news.

The past quarter century, since the winds of change swept colonialism away from most of Africa, has been a period of transition, experimentation and learning. Governments have been trying various political systems to see which ones are most appropriate to Africa in its present stage of development. They also have been trying out several approaches to economic development. Inevitably, there have been false starts — much to the dismay of African friends and the knowing nods of its detractors. Yet both groups tend to forget that the United States, indeed most developed countries, went through prolonged, often violent, periods of political, social and economic trial and error.

We need, therefore, to view Africa's present problems in historical perspective. In my view, all things considered, most African nations have achieved significant progress in such important areas as public education and health care. Peoples and governments — especially the people — have remain-

extraordinarily resilient in the face of severe hardships. Africa is a continent of survivors, of cultures which have evolved under relatively harsh conditions. It is this tradition, more than any other, which gives me hope that Africa will survive this latest test of its endurance and adaptability.

The signs are already visible. Africa has learned several key lessons during the past 20-25 years of tinkering with agricultural policies. Like most of us, Africans have learned the hard way — by ignoring established truths and embracing untested panaceas. African agriculture is now swinging back to basics. Instead of relying totally on mechanization, cooperatives, large state-run farms and other exotic innovations, more and more African countries are turning to the individual peasant farmer as the natural and most efficient source of production.

Zimbabwe is an instructive case study. In spite of the government's emphasis on cooperatives, Zimbabwe — since independence in 1980 — has given both peasant and commercial farmers substantial incentive to grow food. Producer prices have been maintained at economic levels. Farm requisites such as seeds and fertilizers — and the credit to purchase them — have been made available. Feeder roads and storage facilities have been extended into the long-neglected African farming areas.

Zimbabwe has made it worthwhile being a farmer, and the farmers have responded by delivering for market — in 1984 — 400,000 tons of corn, an unexpected bonanza during the country's third year of drought. The government promptly cancelled orders for millions of dollars of imported grain. This year, with excellent rainfall throughout the country, Zimbabwean farmers are expected to market enough maize to replenish the national reserves and for export.

Other African countries in recent years have begun to overhaul their agricultural

policies in the light of hard experiences. However, it will require several years to counter the effects of governments' neglect of the peasant farming sector. It is one thing to pay incentive producer prices, but there are many interrelated actions that must also be taken to help Africa recover as quickly as possible from its agricultural crisis. Here is a minimum agenda of required action:

■ Africa needs improved, more drought-resistant crop varieties which are adaptable to shorter growing seasons and varied growing conditions. Agricultural research in Africa and dissemination of the results are poorly coordinated. There is no systematic effort in Africa to promote cross-fertilization of agricultural knowledge among African countries.

■ The African farmer can tell the weather on the basis of any number of obscure signs. But access to accurate soil moisture data and more precise foreknowledge of rainfall can greatly improve the farmers' ability to take maximum advantage of minimum precipitation. They can better time plowing, planting and application of fertilizers. Remote sensing satellites can beam this information down to receiving stations for routine radio broadcasts to farmers even in the remotest areas. Africa thus far has made only limited use of this technology. Pilot efforts in Niger and Kenya, for example, promise the day when few African farmers will lose a crop because they lacked basic weather information.

■ Notwithstanding Africa's recurrent droughts, the continent is well-watered. President [Kenneth] Kaunda of Zambia says that, he can hear the rivers singing to him, "catch me if you can," as they run off to the sea. Africa must catch that water — in dams, wells, boreholes, terracing and simple irrigation systems.

■ Rapid deforestation across large sections of Africa may well be the greatest threat to the continent's long-term prospects for feeding itself. Deforestation reduces the

ability of soil to hold moisture and increases erosion. Experts also believe that the loss of vegetation cover in the Sahel and in south-central Africa is affecting rainfall. Arresting this process will be extremely difficult, but is critical to progress on other fronts.

■ The main cause of deforestation is the need for fuel to keep millions of African home fires burning. Although woodfuel will long remain an important source of energy in rural Africa, alternative sources must be developed soon. Solar power can be employed to pump and heat water, cook meals and preserve food. But solar technology, still many years away, offers genuine hope in the long run that Africa can slow and eventually halt the degradation of its precious land base.

Obviously, there is much to do. Unless we prefer responding to one tragedy after another, we must provide a greater sustained level of financial assistance to development work in Africa. The main lessons have been learned. There is general agreement now within and without Africa that the basic building blocks of African development are conservation of land and water resources, applied agricultural research, and development of technologies such as solar energy and satellite remote sensing.

Equally important, there is a broader consensus that real development in Africa begins with the individual small farmer, in his or her village and on his or her plot of land. It would be wrong to romanticize the virtues of African farmers. But over the centuries, they have stood up to every challenge. □

C. Payne Lucas is the executive director of AF-RICARE. The above was excerpted from remarks he made at a conference on problems of world hunger and the law, "The Legal Face of the Hunger Problem," at the Howard School of Law in October. The two-day conference, sponsored by the law school and the university's Department of International Affairs, in cooperation with the university's Office of Satellite Communications and the American Society of International Law, brought together key national and international experts on world hunger.