

Africa and Asia's Food Security 'Tipping Point' & the Hope for Collaborative Solutions this World Food Day

In a year when the World Food Programme has been rightfully recognized in receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, the state of global food security is in the spotlight this World Food Day more than ever. For Africa and Asia in particular, the critical needs and challenges driving this renewed awareness are sadly only growing.

As if 2020 hadn't delivered enough heartbreak and grief, a barrel-full more made its way to Africa and Asia in July – and marked a troubling 'tipping point' for the two continents' collective efforts to deliver a safe, affordable and nutritious supply of food to those who need it most.

This particular unwelcomed arrival came in the form of new data detailing each region's food supply resiliency (or lack thereof) and toll taken on the populations of both. While the two continents regularly rank "1" and "2" globally in all the wrong categories on this front, the recently released United Nations (UN) annual *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World* only reaffirmed that positioning.

According to the report, the largest number of undernourished people (381 million) reside in Asia. However, Africa is actually growing in this category at the fastest rate and currently ranked second with 250 million.

The impact of COVID-19 has only exacerbated the larger landscape and challenges for the two. The UN estimates that an unimaginable three billion people cannot afford a healthy diet – and in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, this holds true for more than half of the population.

Tragically, the youth of the two regions are suffering in particular. The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) recently noted that an additional 6.7 million children under the age of five could suffer from wasting (a form of malnutrition) resulting from socio-economic fallout attributable to the pandemic. Among these young children, 80% would be from sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

Beyond the 'red flag' metrics, it's also been a tough year on the ground for the men and women who grow the nutritious food on which both continents' populations depend. Africa and Asia's smallholder farmers have had to contend with unprecedented swarms of locusts that have laid waste to tens of thousands of hectares of crops and vegetation. East Africa has felt the brunt of this, while growers in India and Pakistan continue to do their best to cope as well.

The locust swarms are only the latest invasive pests that farmers in Africa and Asia have faced in the field. The Fall Armyworm has had and continues to have a devastating effect on crop production in both parts of the world since first entering Africa in 2016 and then Asia two years later. According to 2018 estimates, Africa is losing over 17 million tons of corn annually due to this particular invasive pest. Meanwhile, over US\$880 million in annual losses are being realized by Southeast Asia farmers and through related corn import costs alone.

Adding insult to injury, impact from climate change, including an increased prevalence of droughts and floods in both regions, is wreaking havoc with farmers' ability to grow food – and in turn, their livelihood. As challenging as these weather events are, there's strong evidence they're only going to worsen. A McKinsey report released just last month noted that Asia is particularly vulnerable and suggested the region could experience labor shortages resulting in mind-boggling economic losses of up to US\$4.7 trillion annually.

Posing further threats to Africa and Asia food production are ongoing trade-restrictive developments taking place beyond the borders and control of both regions entirely.

Particularly worrisome is a movement within the European Parliament promoting the idea that no other country's farmers should use pesticides that are restricted or banned in the European Union – and using this idea to object to trade-facilitating Maximum Residue Limits (MRLs) set by the UN's World Health Organization / Food and Agriculture Organization (WHO/FAO) Codex Alimentarius for pesticides not available in Europe. This would effectively close off the European market to millions of farmers in Africa and Asia, threaten their livelihood, and make an already challenging task for these growers driving food security in the two continents that much tougher.

By objecting to these international standards, it threatens to take effective and regulated pesticides out of the hands of African and Asian farmers. Pesticides, along with quality seeds and fertilizers, are critically important agricultural inputs which these growers depend on to grow a variety of crops. In addition to driving trade, the crops grown in the two regions help provide the critical supply of affordable, nutritious food that is already in great peril. According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), smallholder farmers produce up to 80% of the food consumed in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia.

The reality is that pesticides and plant biotechnology have a role to play in enabling and empowering farmers in Africa, Asia and around the world to grow more food and realize better lives. Biotech crops are developed with improved traits such as increased yield, improved resistance to pests, and enhanced nutrition, among others. Meanwhile, pesticides are helping farmers produce more food on less land. Without pesticides, an estimated 40% of global rice and corn harvests could be lost every year while losses for fruits and vegetables could be as high as 50-90%.

While these plant science technologies are crucially important, they're only part of the shared solution needed. In the midst of these challenging times and indeed a food security 'tipping point' for Africa and Asia, it's important to remember: only a collaborative effort among stakeholders across the food value chain will turn the tide in addressing hunger, malnutrition, undernutrition, wasting and a host of other unacceptable outcomes that are plaguing the populations of the two continents.

In that spirit, an encouraging step forward was realized earlier this month when the leads for the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and CropLife International, the global voice for the crop protection and plant biotechnology industry, jointly signed a Letter of Intent to explore new partnerships.

This will allow the two to consider how best to work together in promoting rural development and transforming agri-food systems – and at a time when we desperately need more collaboration among the private, public and civil society sectors, this sends a strong signal that it's completely possible.

For Africa and Asia, this World Food Day presents an opportunity for groups up and down the food value chains of the two continents to recommit to engaging in impactful partnerships that help strengthen food supply resiliency, and working together with regional governments to provide sustainable and shared solutions. The stakes are simply too high to not act now.

The food security 'tipping point' for the two continents is at hand. While 2020 will be remembered for a slew of reasons we'd like to forget, let's work to ensure it's also the year food and agriculture stakeholders in Africa and Asia came together like never before in a collaborative spirit for a common cause.



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