FOOD CRISIS IN AFRICA

by

E. Ofori—Sarpong

ABSTRACT

In most cases the chronic food crisis in Africa has been ascribed to natural calamities such as drought. It is the primary objective of this paper to examine the political, economic and social factors which have and continue to militate against food production in Africa. The paper while accepting natural disasters have contributed to the food crisis makes it vividly clear that the policies of development by various African governments have contributed most greatly to Africa's food predicament.

INTRODUCTION

Droughts and famines have become strongly correlated with popular and academic analyses of Africa’s food problems particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. The subject has not been left entirely in the hands of climatologists, physical geographers, water experts and agronomists. More often than not, the causes of African famines are put down to natural and climatic factors and as a result most of the literature deals with 'impact' studies and tends to overlook the issue of causality.

There is a plethora of literature on the consequences of famine on the social, political, economic and ecological conditions of the Sudan—Sahelian societies (Daby and Church, 1973). It cannot be said anymore that the droughts of 1972 and 1983 have had serious repercussions particularly on the economies of drought-stricken West African states and other African states such as Ethiopia and Somalia and that the failure of their economies to pay their way can be partly put down to droughts. The purpose of this article is to examine the issue of diminishing food supply not primarily in terms of natural disaster.

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but in terms of political, economic and social factors. The present predicament of Africa’s food crisis has been contributed to by policies of development for the food-deficit areas of Africa. Policy prescriptions of technical and administrative recommendations inter-alia include the need for irrigation programmes, research into more weather-resistant crops and the introduction of high-yield varieties of seed. Aid donors have been urged to build grain banks and to put aside some proportion of their product to be sold to poorer nations at below world market prices. Such policies however desirable they might be do not reflect upon the political and economic arrangement which far more than changes in climate and rainfall, are at the base of human suffering and deprivation.

The distinction between drought and famine will have to be drawn. Drought is a natural climatic phenomenon involving the severe deficiency of rainfall over an extended period of time, which results in widespread crop failure and shortage of drinking water. Famine is in turn brought about whole chains of reaction better indexed as famine. Famine can be defined generally as the semi-starvation of mass people—a substantial proportion of the population of some sizeable area. It should be remembered that food shortages are not solely due to drought; they can be engendered by locusts, other pests, war, floods, diseases and secession. In Africa, political and economic decisions have conversed the problem of climatic unpredictability into an immensely human suffering.

The inadequacy of food production in most African countries dates back to 1950s and probably earlier. The decade 1960 to 1970 witnessed a virtual stagnation of most African agricultural food economies both in respect of own output per worker and per unit of land. The rate of growth of food production (about 2.5 percent a year) barely kept pace with population increase (3.0 percent a year). In the early 1980s malnutrition and undernourishment had become endemic in Africa. Africa therefore had become a net importer of food or starve off starvation years before the great drought of 1970s. Putting the food situation in its historical perspective, one can say that the occurrence of drought in Africa took place at a time when per capita production was already in the process of declining (Tables 1 and 2). Among all the regions (Table 1) it is in Africa where trends in food production are lagging behind in the 1970s. The index of per capita food production in 1972 in Africa was 120, while indices for Latin America and Far East were 149 and 140 respectively. In terms of per capita food production Africa has not made any significant progress compared with other regions. The index of per capita food production has been plummeting since 1970 and by 1982 had dropped to 89 (Table 1). Trends in total food production and food production per capita for some West African countries (Figure 4) are shown in Table 2. There are only two countries in the sub-regions, i.e. Ivory Coast and Mauritania in which per capita food production was higher in 1982 compared with 1961. Gambia, Ghana and Senegal had the most disastrous fall in per capita food production with less than 80 percent in 1982 as contrasted with the base year. In quite a number of countries which can be described as marginal,
Drought fall over and shortures indicated on many areas. It brought, they and maintained the production. (0 percent had become to save off productivity occurrence of was already (Table 1) its in the indices for of per capita with other values since production (Figure 1) are as, i.e., ivory that in 1982 astrological fall in reduced with as marginal.
the critical situation became worse as food shortages led to human starvation. The drought had a disastrous effect (Often-Sarpeng, 1983; Greene, 1974; West Africa, 13th August 1971; Marches Tropicoux, 19th October 1973). It is interesting to note that the food situation in countries which were not caught up in the drought for instance Nigeria, Zambia and Mozambique was better than the drought-stricken ones. After the severe drought, the food situation is still on the decline and F.A.O. continues to predict year out that Africa's food production will plummet in such a way that it cannot supply the food needs for its population. The prediction has been indicated by the food situation in most African countries between 1982 and 1984.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1: FOOD PRODUCTION AND FOOD ADEQUACY INDICES: AFRICA AND OTHER DEVELOPING REGIONS BASE 1969-71 = 100</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Food Production: Total</td>
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<td>Food Production: Per Capita</td>
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<td>Volume of imports:</td>
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<td>Latin America</td>
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<td>Food Production: Total</td>
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<td>Food Production: Per Capita</td>
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<td>Volume of imports:</td>
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<td>Volume of imports:</td>
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TABLE 2. FOOD PRODUCTION AND FOOD ADEQUACY INDICES OF SELECTED WEST AFRICAN COUNTRIES: BASE 1969–1971 = 100

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Food Production (Total)</th>
<th>Production (Per Capita)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benin</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gambia</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>116</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivory Coast</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberia</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mali</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauritania</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senegal</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burkina</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
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Source: FAO, 1983

AGRARIAN PARADOX

If the record of food production of independent Africa has been one of failure, it has also been one of booming success in the production of export crops. The performance of these two aspects of Africa's agriculture stands in sharp contrast to each other and can be described as Africa's agrarian paradox (Lelievre, 1979). A continent unable to provide its people with the bare minimum due has been able to record significant increases in its annual production of export crops. Since the 1950s when food production started showing signs of decline, the production of export crops has started rising steadily by about 4 percent a year (ECA, 1973). Countries which were on the brink of starvation were exporting items that no thousands of tonnes of export crops to American and European markets.

The agrarian paradox is not only widely in existence in the Sahelian drought-stricken countries but also in Eastern and Central Africa where climatic variability is at a smaller scale as compared with the Sahelian region. Mali provides the most striking instance and was one of the worst hit by the drought of 1970–1973. The production of the principal food crops fell heavily in the early 1970s. Maize...
production dropped by more than 33 percent between 1969—1972 while miller another import staple food crop showed no increase. During the same period the export sector showed a significant increase as cotton production attained a record level of 68,000 tonnes (an increase of about 90 percent over a six year period.) Groundnut production increased nearly 70 percent over a four year period. Rice production, mainly for export was 174,000 tonnes in 1972 (Hodgkinson 1974). While Mali’s export crops showed significant increases, those of Burkina Faso during the same period failed to show any increases but food crops, dropped precipitously during the same period (Ofon-Sarppong 1980; 1983). However, in late Burkina Faso is avidly exhibiting the agrarian paradox. At the time of independence Burkina Faso was producing about 2,000 tons of cotton annually but by 1977 the figure had multiplied about 20 times. During the same period the production of food crops such as millet, sorghum, maize and rice has stagnated.

Another country which found itself in a strikingly similar position as Mali in terms of the agrarian paradox was Tanzania. During the early 1970s food production fell off drastically and this was put down to adverse climatic conditions by the Government but which in actual fact was the result of the peasant resistance to the socialist programmes of Ujamaa villages. The foreign exchange of the country was wasted on food imports (Tanzania Sunday News, 17 Nov. 1974) as food production fell very low. Significantly, the export sector did no indicate any signs of decline. Between 1972 and 1973 Tanzania exported about 150,000 tonnes of cotton, more than 100,000 tonnes of coffee, about 250,000 tonnes of sisal and almost 28,000 tonnes of cashew nuts (Daily News of Tanzania, 30 June, 1974).

The above statistics should be reviewed with great caution since according to Barrington Moore (1966), statistics often tends to miss the major qualitative dimensions of socio-economic change. There is a wide range of variations from country to country with regard to agricultural performance and in some cases the validity of agrarian paradox may not apply. A classic example is Malawi where there was considerable success in both sectors.

According to lodhie (1975) the agrarian paradox is center to a political analysis of the problem of African hunger. The opponents of this paradox identify drought as the primary causal ingredient. This view to a large extent is incorrect. While one accepts the fact that drought has in some events particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, Africa’s failure to produce sufficient food cannot be blamed on drought. It can be said that if drought is solely responsible, why has it not affected export crops as well as food crops? And why is food scarcity so acute in countries where rainfall does not constitute a problem for instance Ghana. It can be said that besides drought, greater part of Africa’s problems of food production can be impinged on the dualistic structure of Africa’s agricultural economies.
DUALISTIC AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY

The concept of dualistic agricultural economy means the existence of large-scale capital-intensive production of a few export crops and a labour-intensive peasant sector which virtually supplies the bulk of the population's food requirements. This can be regarded as a legacy of colonialism as the economic interests of European powers led them to structure agricultural production in order to maximize their colonies' foreign exchange earning capacity. This dualistic concept again comes to the fore in discussions of Africa's continuing dependence on the West. Africa's export crops generally constitute a large proportion of its foreign exchange earnings as well as government revenues. For instance in Ghana, cocoa accounts for about 70 percent of its export earnings. The Ivory Coast derives more than 50 percent of its export earnings from cocoa and coffee, while Chad exports about 50 percent from cotton. Others include Malawi 60 percent, for tobacco and tea, Uganda 75 percent from coffee and cotton, and Kenya over 50 percent from coffee and tea.

The dualistic concept also lies at the heart of Africa's problem of inadequate food production. The significant achievement of the export sector has some adverse effect on the expense of impoverished peasant food producing sector. Decades of over-emphasis on export crops have benefitted the continent's food producing areas of adequate infrastructure and capital for development. Any attempt at improving the food self-sufficiency of Africa will require a complete structural transformation of the rural economy. In some countries, attempts to undermine the export sector would mean the displace of the powerful social groups which have a hand in the profitability of the export economy. The nature of Africa's infrastructure in such that they facilitate the transportation of export commodities from the hinterland to the ports, while neglecting the food producing areas. The agricultural extension services are geared towards the exporting sector thus enabling the cash-crop growing areas benefit from a wide range of agricultural inputs, such as fertilizers, pesticides and several varieties of high-yielding seeds. It should also be realized that irrigation schemes are always built to supply adequate water to the export crop areas with food producing regions being deprived of such facilities. It was since the middle of the 1970s that a number of African countries started to provide the food growing areas with irrigation facilities. For instance in Ghana it was in the 1970s that parts of the coastal and northern savannah belts were brought under irrigation for the cultivation of rice. Similar examples can be found in Nigeria where river basin development authorities have been established by the government to ensure adequate food production. However, these are yet to make any impact on food production in the country. As mentioned earlier, Mal's high rice production in 1976-1977 could be explained in terms of the irrigation schemes at Pegou and Moppi areas.
The peasant food-producing sector has suffered some setbacks due to over-concentration on the export sector. The technological lifestyle of African peasant food producers has not witnessed any improvement. The most common implements are the hoe and cutlass and even the use of bullock ploughs is still at rudimentary level. As a result of the backwardness in transportation system in the rural areas large amounts of perishable food often go rotten, while the urban centres are starved of food. This is a common feature in the African plains of Ghana today. In some rural areas even the most elemental facilities for food storage are non-existent, with the result that food scarcity becomes the order of the off-season.

LACK OF EFFICIENT MARKETING SYSTEM

The situation is also compounded by the absence of marketing agencies to assist in the transportation and purchase of food produce. The producers of cash crops depend upon governmental marketing boards. In Ghana, the buying of cocoa is the sole responsibility of Ghana Cocoa Marketing Board. With respect to food crops, marketing normally depends on laissez faire basis. In Ghana, the Food Distribution Corporation is one of the main agencies charged with the responsibility of buying and distributing food crops. The Corporation is now so plagued with immense problems that its efficiency leaves much to be desired. The export crops benefit tremendously from price stabilization and quality monitoring, while these are virtually unheard of in the food crop production. Most of the marketing systems for food items have proved inefficient in other African countries. It is expected that after 40 years of colonial rule and about 20 years of independence, the establishment of an efficient state-supervised marketing system for the basic food items should not be a remote possibility in most countries in Africa today.

OVER-CONCENTRATION ON EXPORT PRODUCTION

The impoverishment of the peasant food-production sector in African agriculture could be basically ascribed to the heavy over-concentration on export production to earn more foreign exchange. Historians have made it clear that all sorts of methods were used by the colonial administration to force the rural population to sustain the cash crop estates by providing labour. Other methods include head tax, and poll tax. In certain countries, the impoverishment of peasant production was a calculated attempt to forestall the small-scale peasant producer from entering into competition with the large estates.

The pattern of rural development in modern Africa is such that peasant production of food items for local production has been virtually sacrificed to the
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production of export crops. Secondly, the agricultural policies of most African states during and after colonial rule have been part and parcel of this bias towards export crop production instead of food crops. Market prices for food crops have been pegged at low levels. In northern Burkina Faso (Sahel zone) several farmers interviewed showed their willingness to increase cotton production in place of millet during the 1994 rainy season since they were aware that good prices would be obtained. Besides, more and more technical assistance had been made available to the farmers to increase cotton yields. The producer prices have been recently increased to induce the farmers to produce more cotton rather than foodcrops. Statistics of food production in Burkina Faso indicates no improvement despite the national effort at food self-sufficiency by all recent governments.

In Ghana, however, as a result of the serious food shortage which occurred in 1983, coupled with the government’s effort to make Ghana self-sufficient in food production, the government, in June 1985 increased the producer price of a Maize bag of Maize from $1.000 to $1.800. This is seen as an incentive not only to Maize farmers to increase their output but also to reduce the tendency of the farmers from shifting to the cultivation of tobacco and other cash crops (West Africa, 1983). It is true that most African countries pay lip service rather than a genuine attempt to food crop production. The implication of this is that the ineffectiveness of food production in the African country-side, a corollary of lack of good returns from cultivation has compelled the urban workers to pay more for imported food items.

PROBLEM OF LAND TENURE SYSTEM:

Another less visible obstacle to food production in Africa is the communal land tenure system. This system has been and is still discouraging eager young men who want to go into food production. Acquisition of land for farming under the present land tenure system is extremely difficult. In Ghana, many people usually acquire pieces of land on the ‘obuasi’ or ‘obuorm’ basis. Of the former, two thirds of the produce is for the land owner while in case of the latter half of the produce goes to him. This tenure system can be viewed as symbolising a prattine past which survived colonial influences. As long as rural land is legally held on communal basis and no individual has clear title, it is absolutely impossible to use this as a collateral security. Communal ownership forestalls the capital inflow into food-growing areas and is a bother on production. The only way to get around this problem is to dismantle and replace it with a system which recognises clear title deeds. Aligned with the problem of tenure system is the lack of credit facilities. In several African countries (e.g. Senegal, Zambia, Ghana, Mozambique, Senegal, Leome) despite national policies for improvement of credit to small farmers, these groups have benefited very little from advances in institutional
credit. Even in countries such as Ethiopia and Mozambique, which adopted radical agrarian changes, there was a concentration of institutional credit and public resources in the organised sector to the relative neglect of the traditional food sector operating at the level of the rural dwellers (Panthasamity, 1984).

Several approaches to agricultural development have been adopted by many African governments which largely tried to bypass peasant farmers in favour of new structures, such as state farms, settlement farms, community farms, co-operative farms etc. These new structures have been tried in Ghana where large down of public expenditure were absorbed without any significant returns during the years of Akeraham, Asaampong, Leemann and now Rawlings. However, like other African countries the neglected small-scale farmer meanwhile continues to account for over 90 percent of cash and food crop production.

The introduction of modern heavy farm machinery and capital intensive methods which have been adopted at great cost and are found to be unsuitable to local conditions has also contributed to negligible food production in Africa. Most African countries are victims of such modern programmes and policies. Ghana, for instance, has lost millions of Cedis as a result of the importation of some of these heavy machinery which were found to be unsuitable for the tropical environment.

ECOLOGICAL DEGRADATION

Another obvious factor which for a long time has militated and is still hampering food production in Africa is the wasteful destruction of vegetation through bush burning. Indiscriminate burning is a term applied to deliberate, uncontrolled and often purposeless burning of bush, grass etc. Bush burning as a means of clearing land for farming has been part and parcel of African agricultural practice. But today, the rate of indiscriminate burning is assuming an astronomical dimension. In 1983, waves of bush fires swept across West Africa affecting Ghana, Ivory Coast, Nigeria and Cameroon. Reports from the latter three countries showed that extensive damages were caused to food crops. It was estimated that in southern Ghana alone about 10,000 hectares of food crop farms were destroyed by indiscriminate burning. This deliberae practice is the single cause of fast ecological degradation thus reducing the productive capacity of African environment. Indiscriminate burning sets the frame for declining soil fertility, soil erosion and ultimately declining yields.

CONCLUSION

In the light of the foregoing analysis, one can prescribe some measures which will enable Africa to overcome the problems of food production.
must try to redress the imbalance between food and export crop production. This can be achieved by changing the agricultural pricing policies to give more incentive to food production and the introduction of free hold tenure in food crop areas. Other urgently needed measures include the development of adequate infrastructure for food-growing areas in the form of feeder roads, storage facilities, and institutional services to deal with distribution and marketing. Extension services should also be regarded as a matter of urgency in food producing regions. Last but not least, African governments must recognize indubitably farming as a national problem. Since this is a human problem which is influenced by ignorance, education of the people is the surest answer. Most of the efforts are the shifting of cultivars and hortens particularly in the savannah soils. There is a need to help the farmers to practice permanent cultivation which will reduce frequent land clearing using fire.

The food crisis in Africa has deeper roots and needs to be understood within the framework of interactions between social, political, economic, technological and institutional factors which have brought about rural underdevelopment. Solutions to food crises which are leading to investments in large scale projects and linked with agriculture are becoming counter-productive in Africa. The main African food crisis is more deeply rooted in the over-concentration on export crops which has led to the neglect of the traditional food sector and rural under-development, rather than the natural disaster such as drought.

REFERENCES

Daily News of Tanzania. 30th June, 1974.