

Can Africa feed itself?

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With the food import bill of Africa hovering around \$35bn per annum, can Africa feed itself?



Kate HoltAusAID via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

This question in the context of food security was on the front burner of a meeting of African journalists that was organised by Media for Environment, Science, Health and Agriculture (MESHA), a Kenyan-based organisation and the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), a leading research and advocacy think tank based in New Delhi, India.

The meeting was held under the theme: *The Crisis in African Agriculture*. The event brought together about 30 journalists from around Africa and India to discuss the fact that Africa has become a net importer of food particularly now when the continent was reportedly spending some \$35bn a year on food imports. Experts say this is more than what the continent receives in total overseas development assistance.

The import trap

"What has led to this state of affairs? Asked Richard Mahapatra, managing editor of Down To Earth, (CSE) publication.

"India is caught in this import trap too. African countries are actually entering the Indian crisis trap. We need commitments from our government to move out of this agricultural import trap.

"Climate change is already destroying all efforts to lift Africa from the food import trap. We need to interrogate issues around this and engage our policymakers." Aghan Daniel, a veteran Kenyan journalist, says the future state and role of agriculture in Africa is a critical discussion if we are to increase food production and enhance food security on this continent of one billion people.

The African media must tell it well

"Challenges that we face as African journalists, are the things that should spur us to do more. Is the crisis in agriculture in agriculture or in reporting agriculture.

"We have to tell it well, in a principled manner. We have to tell the story in a way that examines our home-grown solutions as well as others coming from outside." Aaron Yancho Kaah, a veteran Cameroon journalist said the African media must take a convincing and engaging standing on agricultural issues such as land, food import policies, climate change responses and others that can help the continent attain food security. "We must adopt a convincing and engaging stand on agricultural issues facing the continent," he said. "We must influence the thought process on all agricultural matters affecting Africa." Pan African values have been touted for promoting deeper economic integration among African states.

No serious commitment from policymakers

International agricultural organisations say Africa's annual food import bill of \$35bn, is estimated to rise to \$110bn by 2025. This, they say, will weaken African economies, slow agricultural production and export jobs from the continent.

Most of Africa's imports are made up of rice, maize and wheat and experts attributed the rising imports to rapid population growth, growing land scarcity, rising land prices, the migration of Africa's rural youth into non-farm employment in record numbers as well as the rise in urban-based investor farmers. At this meeting, a sharp focus on food self-sufficiency saw journalists lamenting the negative effects that huge food imports had on the continent.

"The biggest problem in agriculture is the policymaker," says Yancho Kaah. "There is no serious commitment from them to strategically transform the agricultural sector. They focus more on talking about free inputs to garner votes."

Uduak Amimo, a veteran Kenyan journalist and former BBC correspondent blames poor leadership and governance for the crisis in agriculture. "A lot of the crisis we see today in agriculture is due to poor leadership and governance at both the national, regional and international level," she says. "As journalists, we should be bold enough to dig deeper and examine the issues that are causing Africa to rely heavily on food imports and yet it is sitting on this sector with a vast potential."

Journalists must dig deeper

She further says changing tastes, copying western have worsened the situation. "We have strayed from our own indigenous diets. We have evolved and we are now eating everything western. As journalists, we need to understand these trends and make adequate preparations to cover Africa's agricultural issues comprehensively. "As African journalists, we have to be assertive and know our own standpoint when it comes to agricultural issues facing the continent.

Says Kiran Pandey, a media expert at CSE: "Journalists should desist from solely relying on official statements. You must go beyond hand-out journalism or even press releases." She says it was more important to also look at the plight and needs of smallholder farmers who bore the brunt of climate change and other related agricultural policies.

Africa has become a net food importer and has to grapple to find strategies to feed more people in future. This continent of more than one billion people has 65 percent of the world's arable lands that are yet to be cultivated. CSE researchers say if this land is cultivated it could feed over nine billion people.

African journalists can help Africa feed itself

Journalists can only inform and the bigger role to transform the continent largely lies in the hands of policy-makers, farmers, financial institutions, researchers, politicians and other critical stakeholders such as NGOs and international financiers.

They also firmly believe that the continent must break the food import chain and aim for self-sufficiency in food production. They all agreed that the media had a big role to play by enhancing the understanding of not only Africa's agricultural crisis but the vast untapped opportunities that could help it attain food security.

African journalists all agreed that the media needs to focus more on reporting: Research, innovation and technology facilitating growth of Africa's agri-sector, showing passion in reporting about Africa's agricultural sector; critically examining the barriers and opportunities in agriculture; engaging the media owners to cover critical agricultural issues; setting the agenda to propel the transformation of Africa's agricultural sector forward; media collaborations to cover critical and emerging agricultural issues; digging deeper to analyse the competing agendas; promoting the notion that 'agriculture is a lucrative business'; reporting in a convincing and engaging way to elicit interest in agri-matters among youth and the general public; promoting Pan-African values when reporting agricultural matters; media must take a firm stand on land issues; upgrade skills and strategies for covering agri matters; uncovering corruption and mismanagement stalling the agric sector; promoting good leadership, accountability and transparency in the sector.

There are no easy answers to the crisis in agriculture in Africa, but since food matters touch everyone, it can be argued that journalists, by using their pen critically and in a constructive way, can help Africa to feed itself.

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