



**SUSTAINABLE FOOD
SECURITY
FOR ALL BY 2020**
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SUMMARY NOTE

- Panel Discussion:** The Future of Agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia:
W(h)ither the Small Farm?
- Panelist:** Dunstan Spencer, Managing Director of Dunstan Spencer and
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- Title:** Will They Survive? Prospects for Small Farmers in Sub-Saharan
Africa

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the Small Farmer is King

In most of Sub-Saharan Africa, over 96 percent of farmers are small, farming less than 5 hectares, usually with over two thirds having less than one hectare. Small-scale farms account for over 90 percent of agricultural production. Even in the mid- and high-altitude Savannah Woodlands of Kenya, Zambia, and Zimbabwe where the very visible “white” farmers are located, conspicuous large-scale maize farms (80 hectares or more), yielding 5–6 tons per hectare account for less than half of total maize production, and 99 percent of farmers are small scale, producing much lower yields (1.5 tons per hectare).

Poor Kings!

Small farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa are efficient, usually making good use of their resources and are certainly more efficient than many large farmers. However, the vast majority are very poor. The UN Statistics indicate that over two-thirds of the rural population in most Sub-Saharan Africa countries are in absolute poverty, subsisting on less than \$1.00 per day. What is even worse is that in many cases their situation has worsened over the last three decades. Sub-Saharan Africa is the only region where the annual growth of GDP per capita has been negative (average of -1.0 percent between 1975–99 compared to 6.0 percent for East Asia and the Pacific, and 2.3 percent for South Asia). And if that is not enough, the region is currently inflicted by major health problems with 8.7 percent of the adult population estimated as living with HIV/AIDS (compared with a world average of 1.1 percent), and with almost 13 million of the 16 million adult women living with HIV/AIDS being found in Africa, the vast majority in the rural areas. In 1998 tuberculosis cases were recorded at 121 per thousand compared to a world average of 63.

The agriculture of the vast majority of these small scale, food-insecure rural households is characterized by family economies with weak linkages to markets and little or no access to external inputs. They are usually farming degraded lands with complex and diverse farming systems. Furthermore, most small-scale farmers are far from services and roads, and consequently, from extension programs.

Modern Challenges

Small farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa are faced with a number of new challenges prominent among which are: (a) the decline in the world wide relative prices for traditional export commodities (cocoa, cocoa, cotton, oil palm, tea, etc.), compounded by increasing costs of inputs at the farm level due to structural adjustment programs that have removed subsidies and increased supply costs due to

deterioration of state maintained rural infrastructure, all of which have led to reductions in profit margins; and (b) trends towards globalization as a result of the Uruguay Round Agreement on Agriculture of the World Trade Organization, which in theory should give small farmers (like all others) access to lucrative world markets, but is likely to spell death for many small farmers who will lose much of the urban markets of their major cities to imported goods from other continents. Unless concerted steps are taken, the small farmer in Sub-Saharan Africa is doomed to a life of poverty, isolation and disease stuck in remote areas away from urban cities, while the able bodied members of their families move initially to provide cheap labor in the slums of run down cities in their countries, as a stepping stone to becoming the next generation of “boat people” heading for the “promised lands” of the West and East.

The Alternative

The agriculture of Sub-Saharan Africa, i.e. small farm agriculture is currently showing little signs of being able to compete in the globalized and liberalized economy. Global market share is constantly being eroded. To correct the situation, and prevent the vast majority of farmers from becoming unskilled laborers in the world economy, a strong coalition between national governments, the private sector, nongovernmental organizations and the international donor community is necessary in order to:

- Continue the on-going moves towards “good governance” and the entrenching of democratic processes that would empower the rural people so that their needs are given adequate attention in national policymaking. This is the bright spot in developments over the last decade, and must continue.
- Urgently take steps to make HIV/AIDS drugs freely and cheaply available, and take steps to control tuberculosis, malaria, and other killer diseases; so as to prevent a further decline in small farm labor productivity. Western countries must convince their multinational pharmaceutical companies to drastically reduce prices.
- Provide national governments with the means to invest in people-centered development, i.e. in education, health, and rural infrastructure (roads, irrigation systems, markets, postharvest machinery, etc.). We must not only reverse the declining trends, but increase investment several fold. Critical in this respect is debt relief. The donor community must put its money where its mouth is — less rhetoric and more action on the ground.
- Reverse the disgraceful downward trend in support to government research and extension systems, in order to generate and make more appropriate, sustainable technologies available to small farmers.
- Provide small farmers with reduced farm-gate costs, and increased access to fertilizers and credit, the two critical inputs for adoption of more modern production practices, including environmentally friendly and sustainable technologies that build on the strengths of traditional agricultural systems by maximizing the use of biological recycling.

With such concerted actions, among others, there is hope that small farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa can participate in the global economy by transforming their production practices either by more efficient production of traditional commodities in which they can retain their comparative advantage, or by diversifying into the “newer” commodities such as cut flowers, high value vegetable and livestock commodities where they face very stiff competition from other world producers.

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