


ZERO HUNGER BY 2030? HOW WEST AFRICA CAN MEET THE CHALLENGE

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When the Millennium Development Goals expire in 2015, governments are likely to set themselves a challenge no less ambitious than eradicating hunger and extreme poverty by 2030. West Africa has the potential to match this ambition and spearhead the global fight against hunger.

But to some, this may seem like a romantic view. On paper, most West African countries have made major inroads over the last decade, with Benin, Ghana, Mali and Niger managing to reduce under-nutrition rates by more than 50%. However, this progress has come in the midst of a demographic boom, so that despite this progress, some 36 million West Africans remain under-nourished today.

And in a region where 60% of people live on less than a dollar a day, it does not take much for millions more to be left hungry. Extreme weather events such as droughts and floods have become a near annual occurrence in the Sahel, wiping out the income and productive capacity of the region's smallholders and herders as recently as 2012, and triggering deprivation, starvation and migration across wide swathes of Mali, Niger and even coastal states such as Senegal and Burkina Faso. Meanwhile Benin faced flooding-related food insecurity in 2010 and 2012, while acute food shortages hit Togo in 2005 and 2008.

The perilous situation of food security in West Africa is not down to neglect.

Since the 2007-2008 food crisis, the fifteen-strong Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has accelerated efforts to get its regional agricultural policy, ECOWAP, up and running, and has established priority actions for its member states, such as increasing the production of rice, maize and other staple crops.

Nor has West Africa escaped the attention of the international community. The region was recently selected by the G20 to pilot a system of integrated humanitarian food stocks, while five West African countries – Burkina Faso, Ghana and the Ivory Coast in 2012, and Nigeria and Benin in 2013 – have been among the first nine to sign up for the G8's 'New Alliance', a series of public-private reinvestment plans aimed at lifting 50 million people out of poverty.

But despite the flurry of eye-catching initiatives, too little has been done to build the resilience – to climate shocks, to market uncertainties – that West African food systems urgently need. This failure is visible in the ongoing difficulty faced by millions of smallholders and herders to secure access to land, water, inputs and markets.

Many existing programmes are on the right track, but are inconsistently targeted, executed and monitored, over-reliant on development aid, and too frequently work at cross purposes with other piecemeal initiatives.

It is particularly worrying that the New Alliance frameworks drawn up by the G8, Western agribusiness and African governments – without consulting local farmers – appear to be introducing new objectives such as freeing up land markets for large-scale investment, rather than slotting into the ECOWAP strategies that are barely off the ground.

What West African countries need are national and regional food security strategies that identify the objectives which all subsequent initiatives must serve. The right to food, a human right protected under international law, can provide the compass that West African countries need to put them squarely on the path to ending hunger.

The power of human rights to provide this direction is already visible at the regional level. Arriving at the same conclusions as a 2001 decision of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, the Court of Justice of the ECOWAS ruled last year that Nigeria violated the right to food of the Ogoni people by failing to protect their land from environmental damage in the Niger delta.

Cases like this one help to recall the responsibility of Governments to secure the conditions for their citizens to grow or to access food – over and above the interests of multinational investors and resource extractors.

West African states must transfer this accountability to the national level, and build a whole apparatus around the right to food. The starting point is to write it into law. No West African state has yet adopted framework laws explicitly recognizing the right to food, although legislation is now in process in Nigeria, and stand-alone constitutional protection has been granted to the right to food in the Ivory Coast and Niger.

But there have been signs of progress in adopting policies that realize the right to food by working coherently across different policy areas to empower the most food insecure populations.

Senegal's 2004 agro-forestry-pastoral laws gave legal recognition to producer organizations, guaranteed funding for rural social protection schemes, and established a broad-based governing council to coordinate state and regional efforts. Similar potential can be seen in Mali's 2006 agricultural framework law, which mandated a range of measures 'contributing to the availability and accessibility of a wide range of food products across the whole territory'. Niger is currently attempting to replace emergency safety nets with standing social protection schemes to protect the poor from high food prices.

The key is to bring these efforts together into coherent, binding multi-year frameworks with a clear allocation of responsibilities and strong accountability mechanisms, as is outlined in the Right to Food Guidelines adopted by FAO Member States in 2004.

Only by treating food as a human right, and putting this at the heart of their strategies, can States ensure that the actions set in motion will transcend different aid cycles, different governments, and different policy areas. Rather than adding to the myriad initiatives for food security in West Africa, a right to food approach can help to filter out the unhelpful ones, and to force the remaining policies into coherence.

Only then will West Africa be able to build on the food security activism of recent years and make lasting inroads against hunger.