

Africa

Countries across Africa experience food insecurity in different ways. The Horn of Africa is in the grip of a three-year drought and millions of Ethiopians, Sudanese and Somalis are experiencing chronic food shortages.

Africans within different nations also experience food insecurity differently. Somali refugees in northeast Kenya are more vulnerable to food insecurity than local people. Similarly, Zimbabweans who seek economic or political refuge in South Africa, along with immigrants from other nations, are food insecure due to the lack of support they are given and the discrimination they sometimes face by a population that also struggles to meet its food needs.

In the countries that enjoy political stability, unemployment levels are often high and wages low. So even if there is plenty of food on the shop shelves, people lack the means to buy it. Around 30% of Africa's 840 million people are undernourished.

There are several main issues behind food insecurity:

Land grabbing

An estimated 50 million hectares of land across Africa is leased under long-term contracts to nations such as China, South Korea, India and various Arab states, as well as multinational corporations and private investors from the EU and US. Most deals are done behind closed doors between the investors and our governments.

Land grabs result in the displacement of smallholder farmers, environmental destruction and water shortages. Promises of investment, employment creation and infrastructure development that are part of the deals, run the risk of being illusive or bring no immediate benefit to the food insecure.

HIV and AIDS

Food insecurity and HIV are closely linked. There are around 22.5 million people living with HIV in Sub-Saharan Africa, according to the United Nations. Most of those without access to treatment become incapacitated at some stage, and are unable to work the land to produce food. Even if they can access anti-retroviral treatment, they need to eat sufficient quantities of nutritious food in order for medication to be effective. For the most vulnerable, the choice might be purchasing food for themselves and their families, or purchasing medicines to keep them healthy.

High food prices

The escalation of food prices, combined with mass unemployment and under-employment, has been a major driver of food insecurity in many African countries. Food prices have been rising since mid-2010 due to increasing energy and crude oil prices, climate-related disasters and food price speculation on financial markets. The price of staple foods such as maize, wheat and sorghum, has increased by up to 90% between June 2010 and March 2011. This has caused people in several countries, including Mozambique, to protest against their governments for failing to keep the price of basic food items affordable.

Climate change

The impact of climate change has been severe across Africa. Since 2007, erratic weather patterns have ruined maize crops in Lesotho, Namibia, Mozambique, Swaziland, Zimbabwe and South Africa and led to increased food shortages across the region. Seventy-five percent of Africans live in rural areas, earning their livelihood from the land. Many people in urban or semi-urban areas also grow the food they eat. So when rains are erratic, crops fail and people are pushed nearer the brink of hunger.

Use of land for biofuels

Biofuel production had been hailed by its advocates as a solution to the world's energy crisis. But many people now agree that it has come at a price not worth paying: loss of land for food crops. Many African countries, including Tanzania, Malawi and Nigeria have converted smallholder farms into jatropha tree plantations for biochemical production.

Lack of Investment in Agriculture

Governments in Africa spend less than 7% of their national budgets on agriculture and donor aid to agriculture has fallen to 4% of the total sum given, a fraction of which is targeted at women. Yet research shows that investment and growth in agriculture can make huge inroads into poverty and should, therefore, be prioritised.

What can I and my church do?

Raise awareness

Most governments have developed – or have made commitments to develop – initiatives to address food security problems. Many people, particularly those who live in rural areas, do not have access to this information. Find out what schemes your government has and share the information across your networks. Look at these agricultural programmes and ask also how they could be improved.

Look at high-yield low-cost agricultural technologies that are taking root in Africa, such as conservation farming. Could this work for your community?

Research

Use the Churches' Week of Action on Food as an opportunity to do your own research. In most African countries, food security policies are formulated without the active participation of ordinary people. Consultants from outside the communities affected by food insecurity are often used. Write up your research and use it for awareness raising and lobbying.

Lobby for change

Churches need to engage governments more on the creation and monitoring of food security policies. Call for 10% of the nation's budget to be invested in agriculture. Ask for a meeting with your political representatives to talk about what this investment should look like. We all have the right to express our opinions and to be heard by our governments.

What can churches in other regions do?

Food insecurity in Africa is a result in part of trade arrangements between our governments and foreign governments or corporations. We need our land back for food production. We want you to join us in sending them a clear message: Hands Off Our Land!



Armin Paasch / EAA

Resources

Food and human rights

Human Rights Charters in country constitutions

Pan-African agricultural programmes

The Comprehensive African Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) – www.nepad-caadp.net

The African Union (AU) – www.au.int

Land grabbing

FAO –

<http://www.fao.org/docrep/011/ak241e/ak241e00.htm>

Oakland Institute – www.media.oaklandinstitute.org

Food First Information and Action Network (FIAN) – www.fian.org

Investment in smallholder agriculture

Action Aid (2010) – www.actionaid.org.uk/doc_lib/fertile_ground.pdf

Conservation agriculture

wwwFOUNDATIONSFORFARMING.org

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