

WHY AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH WILL NOT FEED HUNGRY AFRICA

World Bank and African government officials are beginning to push for a major increase in Western donations for African government agricultural research. A World Bank official at a recent conference in Nairobi, for instance, called for a ten-fold increase in the number of agriculture researchers in Africa. The reason for this, say World Bank "development experts," is that research is the key to future African agriculture productivity. While agricultural research is indeed critically important, it is unlikely that lack of research is what has been causing Africa's farm problems. If those problems are to be addressed, development agencies should be looking at whether sufficient incentives exist for African farmers to boost output. To spend more money on research, therefore, is another example of foreign aid agencies throwing money at the wrong problem and neglecting things that could be done inexpensively but which would have a huge pay-off.

The United States, the World Bank, and other generous donors already have poured hundreds of millions of dollars into African government agricultural research, yet there has been no major breakthrough since the early 1960s. African government research efforts usually have been very poorly designed and poorly organized. Most of the funds seem to have been spent on salaries for government bureaucrats and development professionals. There is no indication that if funding were to increase ten-fold there would be any result but ten times as much waste. What Africa needs desperately is not more agricultural research but a change in agricultural policies.

The Green Revolution in Asia is often offered to justify massive increases in Western donations for African agricultural research. But there are far more differences than similarities between the African and Asian situations. In India, for example, much of the arable land was already being cultivated; research thus could increase yields. By contrast, in some African countries, such as the Sudan, over 80 percent of the arable land is idle. Africa's food needs thus could be met by bringing more of its available farm land into cultivation.

The factors that now deter African farmers from planting on more of the available land would also discourage them from utilizing new seed and fertilizer discoveries. African governments routinely pay farmers only a half or a third of what their crops would fetch on an

open market. Sometimes farmers are shot for trying to get a fair price for their crop by selling it on the black market. Other deterrents to farmers increasing output are such government policies as controls, state marketing monopolies, import substitution and subsidization of urbanization. These are the main causes of African agricultural disaster.

Food shortages, moreover, are not a uniform problem across Africa. Some African countries have crop surpluses. That they do so is much more closely correlated with their government economic policies than with such natural phenomena as the annual level of rainfall. A number of socialist countries, for example, seem to be suffering most. In Mozambique, the government outlaws private sector sale of seeds, fertilizer, and other materials needed for farming. Last year, however, these essential goods were not given to farmers in time for planting. The result: though Mozambique enjoyed plenty of rain, farm output was low and the country again suffers from massive hunger. In Ethiopia, tens of thousands of farmers are fleeing the country--not because of drought, but because the Marxist regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam is forcing them to abandon their productive private farms to work on inefficient government collectives. Most baffling is the World Bank's willingness to fund Ethiopia's very harmful resettlement program that undermines the country's agriculture. In Angola, the Marxist MPLA regime, as its Mozambican counterparts, failed to distribute seeds and fertilizers to farmers on time to plant last year; suffering is widespread. Many African governments, meanwhile, either prohibit or heavily tax importing foreign tractors--or even horse-drawn plows.

It is unclear why African governments would need funds for more agricultural research when these governments pursue policies that, in effect, sabotage productivity. More research will not change the economic imperatives that govern African agriculture. As long as governments refuse to pay market prices for farmers' crops, maintain seed and fertilizer monopolies, and constantly threaten the security of private property and investments, then agricultural research will do little or no good. World Bank experts know this already--or they should. Instead of encouraging bigger research bureaucracies, the World Bank ought to be spurring African governments to create incentives for farmers to produce as much as they can. Success stories for this abound, from Communist China since 1978 to India.

World Bank and Western nations are right to be concerned about hunger and undernourishment in Africa. If they are serious in wanting to do something about it, they should push policies that work.

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