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Rural Neglect to Blame for Conflict in Kenya, Darfur

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NEWS

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Nairobi

As business and government leaders gathered in Davos this weekend, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown hoped to reignite interest in the Millennium Development Goals. Progress towards the goals in Africa remains uneven and disappointing.

There is growing recognition that too little has been done to harness the potential of agriculture and rural development in fighting extreme poverty on the continent. And there is growing appreciation that the conflicts of Darfur and, more recently, Kenya are as much the result of rural neglect and environmental degradation as they are the consequence of deep ethnic discord.

Agricultural productivity improvement has been a driving force of social and economic change in human societies for millennia.

Production of crops and livestock fulfilled household requirements for food, fuel, medicine and other essential consumables.

Surpluses and the income derived from them opened up opportunities for producers, processors and traders of agricultural products, as well as the emergence of specialist services. Agriculture served as the engine of development and economic growth.

THE MOST COMPELLING recent evidence of agriculture-led poverty reduction comes from Asia.

According to the Asian Development Bank, poverty declined from 50 per cent in the 1970s to 18 per cent in 2004, while hunger declined from 30 per cent to 16 per cent over the same period.

These successes are attributed largely to improved agricultural productivity as a consequence of technological change and market liberalisation.

Millions of households moved out of poverty through diversification of income away from rice to other crops, livestock and non-farm sources.

Asia's Green Revolution began in the 1960s with the dissemination of fertiliser-responsive, high-yielding varieties of rice and wheat. Improved access to fertiliser through state-supported subsidies, rural credit and improved infrastructure contributed to strong productivity growth in both crops.

ASIAN GOVERNMENTS SUPPORTED the uptake of new technology through research and extension, and intervened in the market through price support.

Malthusian predictions of starvation were proven wrong and Asia has emerged as a global economic powerhouse.

In Asia, this evolution from subsistence to market-oriented agriculture provided the foundation of a structural transformation - a dynamic process that leads to a relative decline of the agriculture sector and to a more diversified and productive economy.

But in most African countries, the majority of the population remains engaged in agriculture and at the very early stages of this transformation. They exhibit low agricultural productivity, limited growth of non-farm employment and high population growth rates.

IN CONTRAST TO ASIA, AGRICULTURAL productivity growth in Africa during the past 40 years has not kept pace with population. Cereal yields in East Asia have increased more than four-fold over this period, while in Africa they have stagnated at about 1.0 metric tonne per hectare. Poor infrastructure, high transport costs and low fertiliser use have all contributed to this, as well as inadequate institutional support and diverse ecological complexities.

But if Africa's farming families are helped to take the first steps out of chronic poverty, their societies can relatively quickly move towards a sustainable development, while reducing the risk of conflict.

In 2005, the government of Malawi responded to wide-spread famine in the country with a national scheme to subsidise improved seed and fertiliser.

Drawing on \$58 million from its national budget in 2005 and \$63 million in 2006, the programme reached most of Malawi's smallholder farmers,

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the bulk of whom are women.

Maize production doubled in the 2005/6 season and almost tripled in 2006/7. The surplus enabled the country to export maize to Zimbabwe last year and to contribute to World Food Programme procurements.

MALAWI'S EXPERIENCE demonstrates the feasibility of investing in food crops as a first step towards structural transformation and sustained economic growth.

In a country where agriculture employs 78 per cent of the labour force and provides livelihoods for over 10 million people, agricultural productivity growth will have a direct positive effect on the achievement of the MDGs.

The number of Malawians at risk of hunger decreased from five million in late 2005 to just over 500,000 in late 2007.

Beyond the most obvious impacts on reducing hunger, the maize surpluses reduced disease incidence and increased school attendance - all crucial to reaching the goals.

Communities also report higher economic activity in areas where growth has been most pronounced. With adequate food reserves and continuity of the subsidy scheme this year, Malawi is likely to avoid the normally catastrophic effects of the current floods in Southern Africa.

The World Bank has already acknowledged that agriculture has been neglected by governments and donors for over the past 20 years, despite the finding that gross domestic product (GDP) growth originating in agriculture is four times more effective in reducing poverty than GDP growth originating outside the sector.

The Bank's World Development Report 2008 warned that the agriculture sector "must be placed at the centre of the development agenda if the goals of halving extreme poverty and hunger by 2015 are to be realised."

A pro-poor African Green Revolution that improves agricultural productivity of smallholders provides a proven entry point for meeting this challenge.

With complementary investments in health, education, family planning and infrastructure, a holistic roadmap to achieving the MDGs in Africa is available.

Prime Minister Brown and his peers within the donor community now only need to apply it.

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