

An African Revolution

Extreme weather won't make life easier on the world's poorest continent. But smart policies are already cushioning the blow.

By Pedro Sanchez

Newsweek International

April 16, 2007 issue - It's no surprise to hear that climate change is already hitting tropical Africa hard, as floods swamp the east and droughts plague the south. Such changes are hard to cope with in rich places.

But keep reading: a burgeoning green revolution is already helping Africans adapt, enriching barren soil, training farmers and providing them with hardy hybrid seeds, and working with the private sector to help farmers enter the marketplace. And these programs are more effective and cheaper than previous efforts.

Ethiopia has doubled its grain-food production in the last 12 years and may double it again. Last year Malawi, whose neighbors suffered food shortages, harvested twice the maize of the previous year. The explanation? National policies based on good science, providing farmers with fertilizer to overcome the lack of nitrogen and phosphorous in their soils and specially bred seeds that are higher yield and more pest- and drought-resistant.

The Millennium Villages program, run by Columbia University, the Millennium Promise Alliance (a nonprofit antipoverty coalition) and the UN Development Program is replicating these results in 10 African countries. This represents a sea change from the old approach to helping Africa, which typically involves food aid or cash and aims at a single issue (water, say, or HIV) at a time. Helping Africans grow their food themselves is both more sustainable and cheaper: it costs a tenth the price of providing the food from outside.

But fighting global warming in Africa will take more work. Small-scale water-management techniques for irrigation, such as rainwater harvesting, are being introduced by research groups and NGOs. These groups are also helping farmers plant trees to boost their income, improve their soil's ability to hold water, and to protect it from erosion. And they're providing improved facilities for storing crop surpluses, as a buffer against sudden climate shocks.

Important as this is, the best way to protect Africans from extreme weather is to help them break free from poverty—to go from being subsistence farmers to small-scale entrepreneurs. This means teaching locals to produce a variety of high-value goods: vegetables, livestock, fruit and trees. It means training farmers in sound business practices, such as helping them form cereal banks to store and sell their crops when prices are high. And it means giving them access to microloans.

Smarter policies are cheaper than misguided ones, but they're still not free, which raises the question of money. So far, funding for Africa's green revolution has largely come from private philanthropies. The Open Society Institute and the Gates and Rockefeller foundations, as well as many individuals, have already committed more than \$200 million to the project. It is hoped that the public sector will follow (so far, only the Japanese government has stepped forward). More money will allow African governments to increase the number of new programs from the 78 villages where they're now being run to the approximately 100,000 villages that need them. The African green revolution has already taken off. But it's now up to the rich donor countries and local governments to make the gains stick and extend them throughout the continent.

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