

Findings

Africa Region



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Linking Africa's Farms And Cities

As cities across Africa demand more abundant and affordable food supplies, local officials look for ways to improve systems that have always relied on personal relationships and cultural ties, not formal markets or government regulations.

The cities of Sub-Saharan Africa—some of the fastest growing in the world—face potentially serious dilemmas in supplying their populations with food. Over the past two decades, the continent's agricultural exports have declined while imports have risen sharply. Over the same period, food shortages and increasing prices have spawned strong political protests, notably in heavily urbanized countries such as Côte d'Ivoire and Zambia. Strengthening the connections between consumers in cities and the over 70 percent of Africans who depend on agriculture for their livelihood is considered by many experts to be one of the most important and formidable challenges facing Africa today.

In most parts of the continent, the link between farm and marketplace is neither direct or easily understood; distribution systems are frequently obtuse and inefficient, held together by personal relationships, private marketing networks and unregulated transactions. Rooted in tradition and controlled by cultural imperatives, existing marketing and distribution systems often fail to protect the interests of either producers or consumers. "At the end of the day," says Sarah Kuntua-Atta, a regional government official from Ghana, "neither the farmers who produce the food nor the people in the cities who buy it are getting a good deal."

Kuntua-Atta was one of several African delegates at a recent meeting of the World Union of Wholesale Markets in Valencia, Spain, who were "looking for ideas" about a broad range of issues: farm cooperatives, wholesale food markets and regulatory systems. There is much to learn, they say, from wholesale marketing systems that have proven successful in Europe and other developed regions. Adapting the ideas to Africa, however, will mean more than erecting buildings and writing new laws.

Kuntua-Atta has carefully examined the production side of the equation as part of her duties as chief executive for the Upper Denkyira District. The region produces plantains, yams, cassava and corn for Accra and other cities. Farmers in her region, she says, "often sell their produce at very low prices because the production of food is not treated as a major industry. At the big market centers in Accra, we find that consumers are paying many times what the farmers get. The change in price is too much to be accounted for by transportation costs." Ghana's situation is typical of Sub-Saharan Africa, she notes, adding that farmers should receive more not only to improve their lives but to protect their land and invest in better farming equipment and procedures. And, she adds wryly, "to pay higher taxes to the government," no small consideration in a country where 80 percent of the population works in agriculture.

She urges farmers to form associations or cooperatives, to negotiate prices and to sell when conditions are best. "A group with an educated leader should be able to get better prices in spite of transportation

and other costs," she says. The formation of such groups would also moderate seasonal cycles in prices, which work against farmers. "This is especially true with beans and corn. Cassava and yams are more perishable, but they could be treated differently too, by canning for instance, to even out the supply."

Such efforts have not been very successful in the past, she admits, since most farmers are illiterate and also may not trust each other. "Nevertheless, we need to make them appreciate its value," she contends.

Some associations exist, Kuntua-Atta says. A women's group processes *gari*, a flour-like product of cassava that is used in cooking. "We are trying to help them set up more *gari* processing plants. At present we have three. I will help them with a loan to buy the cassava and to set up the procedures for processing. If this works well, we will have many small *gari* processing factories all over the district."

In Walvis Bay, Namibia, Mayor Therisia Samaria faces another type of food shortage, one that is partly rooted in the country's former dominance by South Africa. Although it exports some products, like oranges and grapes, almost 85 percent of the nation's produce comes from South Africa. "Now, 10 years after independence, we have to start to build our own sector and to look for ways to supply ourselves." The country, she insists, has the potential to feed itself.

Echoing the words of Kuntua-Atta, she points out, "If the farmers could form associations, they could negotiate better prices. As it is now, the middle men are making most of the profits." Samaria finds particularly hard to accept the fact that "we export cattle on the hoof to South Africa, then import it back as beef." She believes the local government should provide the infrastructure "and empower people to do it themselves."

Walvis Bay has set up informal market malls for small, individual traders. Sellers pay for electricity and space, but are not taxed. Health inspectors visit the markets to ensure they are clean and well maintained. The city is exploring expanding the market, which now accommodates only traders, so that farmers could bring their produce directly there. "It is an empowering project," Samaria explains. "The city would provide the structure for people to bring in their produce, start their own businesses and improve the flow of food."

In Côte d'Ivoire, work has begun on just such a national network, with the goal of building as many as 14 wholesale markets and 30 collection centers. "Setting up a network of national markets appears to be one of the most positive alternatives for improving the distribution to, and provisioning of, the cities of Côte d'Ivoire," says Adou Kouadio, the country's minister for the promotion of domestic commerce. The government believes that developing internal trade through established markets is the first step toward self-sufficiency.

François André Morel, a French consultant who has worked on the European Union-supported project, adds that the objective goes beyond building modern facilities. "The idea," he says, "is to develop the ability to sell, to increase the capacity of trade, so that producers will say 'I want to grow more food because I know I can sell it.'" A wholesale market is a "perfect place to explain true economic liberty," Morel notes. "You oblige everybody to be in the same place. You oblige them to pay the same rent for their space. You oblige everybody to begin and stop at the same times. Then you have rules that make you free to present the best product and to be the most professional producer."

Currently, he says, much selling is "done by chance" because it is not clear who is the wholesaler and who is the retailer. For Morel, "it is important to know the owner of the merchandise at any point in the chain. In Africa, they say it is 'my cousin,' 'my sister,' etc." That can be a problem when it comes to seeking financing, since "it is hard to ask for a loan when you do not know how the money is flowing." Traditionally, he notes, such transparency was a difficult concept. "Africans prefer to deal between

individuals and to stay a little quiet about the conditions. Also, sellers are very specialized and afraid to let everybody know what type of things they sell and how many."

The first wholesale market built under the Côte d'Ivoire project auspices serves Bouake, a city of 1 million in the center of the country. After one year of operation, however, the market is only 60 percent occupied. Now run by a corporation that is 51 percent privately owned, the goal is to make the market fully private. Minister Kouadio acknowledges that it has been necessary for the market's operators "to develop the idea of wholesale sales and to join forces to work out a legal, regulatory and financial arsenal to accompany this new type of trade." Training programs have been set up to address "the misunderstandings among the public authorities, the private workers who are involved with managing public interests, and the private merchants," as well as to combat "the lack of understanding of economic and personal sensitivities."

Those sensitivities are key to achieving significant change, says Morel. Despite the new, modern buildings in Bouake, merchants continue to sell just outside on the street. "The architecture is beautiful, the regulations are good and the market prices are reasonable," he says, "but to some extent we failed in our human analysis. We arrived and said, 'you are wholesaler and you are retailer.' In fact, we are asking them to become part of a much more complex social and institutional structure."

Every country in West and Central Africa wants to have a market like that in Bouake, he says, but construction of buildings should not be the priority. "Start soft and light," he counsels. "Concentrate on getting the people with you. Get them involved, even if on a small scale." Morel noted that construction of the Bouake market represents a huge investment—several million dollars—so "we dare not change it." Rather than begin with a massive structure, he believes, it would have been better to "build simple and evolve."

Like Kuntua-Atta in Ghana and Samaria in Namibia, Morel believes that the solutions to food supply problems in Africa lie in fully understanding the often complex relationships among farmers, traders, sellers and consumers. They propose systems that incorporate local concerns and traditions, built on foundations that everyone involved will understand and use. Only then, they believe, will African cities be ready to adequately feed their citizens.

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