

Can rice crisis be turned into opportunity for Africa?

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The news spotlight on the world rice crisis has mostly focused on Asia where the cost of this staple food recently topped \$700 per tonne, but it is Africa that is showing the greatest strain with riots and demonstrations worrying several governments.

Many Africans well remember that so-called 'rice riots' were adjudged the trigger for civil war in Liberia. Recent riots in Abidjan, the capital of Cote d'Ivoire and in Ouagadougou, the capital of landlocked Burkina Faso, are blamed entirely on the shortage of cereals, particularly rice. Cameroon, Senegal and Mauritania have seen similar violent expressions of public discontent with rising prices. Unless political leaders take urgent remedial action, the robust economic recovery previously witnessed in Africa could be comprised.

Around 40 percent of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)'s demand for rice is met by imports, costing about \$2 billion in 2006. Marketable crop surpluses in SSA represent less than one third of total output. To capitalize on the improving incentive for rice production, smallholder farmers need help in raising productivity and increasing the domestic supply of rice.

Africa's potentials for enhanced production are multiple and include availability of modern rice technologies, large tracts of land and underutilized water resources. For instance, NERICA[®] rice varieties combine high yield, short duration, resistance to pests and diseases and acceptable taste. FAO states 98% of the 200 million ha of wetlands are available for rice cultivation. Recent Africa Rice Center studies show that local rice production is competitive in Benin, Guinea, Mali, Nigeria and Senegal even without the recent price hikes. Washington DC-based IFPRI pinpoints that investing in rice holds the greatest potential for contributing to growth and poverty reduction in West Africa because of the largely unexploited production opportunity and the high consumer demand.

Rather than being a threat, the increasing rice price is a unique historical opportunity to use latent potential for production and break from decades of policy bias against agriculture which accounts for 35% of SSA GDP and 75% of employment. Too often, policymakers have knee-jerk reactions such as ill-advised price controls that risk pricing smallholders out of the market and into further deprivation.

Regional collaboration to capitalize on the improving incentives for rice sector development in the short- and longer terms is needed. The following is what I propose to SSA governments.

In the short-run governments should employ well-targeted safety net programs for the poorest urban (and rural) consumers and vigorously support smallholder rice producers to raise their productivity and marketed surpluses. Temporary reductions in levies on imported rice and Government's procurement of locally produced rice at subsidized prices that can be sold at selected points to the poorest will facilitate access to this staple food. Access by Africa's 31 million small rice farmers to proven improved rice varieties such as NERICA[®] could be expanded, along with provision of subsidies on fertilizers and accelerated rehabilitation of existing irrigation schemes.

Governments should also endeavor to coordinate their policy initiatives in favor of locally-produced rice. Benin was the leading export market for Thailand with more than 800,000 tonnes of rice in 2007 despite consuming less than 100,000 tonnes per annum. Of course, neighboring Nigeria which maintains a much higher border tariff ends up being the final destination of most of that volume of rice. To stimulate domestic rice production effectively, a common subregional or regional strategy is needed.

Additionally, governments should quickly sensitize powerful urban interest groups such as consumer groups and rice importers to their long-term best interests in supporting domestic rice production and reducing dependence on imports. Rice importers should be given appropriate tax incentives to foster their investment in domestic rice production capacity, especially in post-harvest rice processing and value-addition activities. Entrepreneurs at all levels need similar encouragement to step up production of quality rice seed.

In the medium to long term, SSA governments should step up investment in water-control technologies for lowland rice production and reduce import duties on low-cost, small-scale machinery for land preparation and harvest and post-harvest activities. Governments and donors must also invest in building rice research and extension capacity.

For the long-run, governments need strategies for sustained investment in new irrigation schemes to raise the share of irrigated rice in domestic production from less than 10% on average presently to more than 50%. Africa urgently needs to build its capacity to train rice scientists, technicians and change agents from government, NGOs or the private sector to interact with farmers in technology adaptation and dissemination that will contribute to increased rice harvests in the long run and also acknowledge that most rice farmers are women. More strategic research is needed at continental level, e.g. to develop rice varieties resistant to major pests and diseases and robust enough to withstand the vagaries of climate change such as erratic drought spells, extreme temperatures and flooding.

Africa has already demonstrated a capability to double rice production in a much shorter time than did Asia during its Green Revolution. Production in West Africa went from 2.76 million tonnes (milled rice equivalent) in 1985 to 5.75 million tonnes in 2005. Strong government support in Uganda and Nigeria has produced returns that show the continent can yet beat not only the current crisis but the cumulative 10-year crisis that some experts predict will cripple world cereal supplies.

Evolution of rice consumption and production in Sub-Saharan Africa (million of metric tonnes)

