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## Africa Can Feed the World . . .

*African agriculture is held back by Western scientific illiterates whose well-paid jobs involve frightening people about biotechnology.*

By [GILBERT ARAP BOR](#) - *Kapseret, Kenya*

The world now has seven billion people in it, but population growth won't stop there. Demographers at the U.N. Population Fund said the big milestone came on Oct. 31, when a Philippine mother gave the world its seven billionth human life. In Kenya, the Daily Nation newspaper highlighted a Kenyan mother and her newborn, also born on the last day of October at Kenyatta National Hospital. That same hospital also delivered five other babies that day.

By the 2020s, the world's population is expected to pass eight billion. By the 2040s, it will top nine billion. That's like adding two Chinas between now and the middle of the century, as Robert L. Thompson of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs put it recently.

The greatest challenge of our time will be to figure out how we're going to put food in all of these mouths. Over the next four decades, farmers everywhere will have to boost their production by a total of 70%.

African agriculture must play a major role in any viable solution, and here in Kenya, we understand the dilemma firsthand. Kenya's population is growing quickly, and almost everywhere I go, I see the effects of a population surge. In cities such as Nairobi, Mombasa, Nakurua, Kisumu, Eldoret and Thika, the streets are so crowded that it's getting hard to walk down them. Our urban slums are mushrooming. On the outskirts of cities, real-estate developers are chewing up coffee and tea plantations, turning them into residential estates. What used to be little market centers along the highways have turned into big towns.

Thankfully, Kenya is beginning to take positive steps. Last year, our government approved the commercial planting of genetically modified crops, becoming the fourth African country to do so after Burkina Faso, Egypt and South Africa. This will give our farmers access to one of the world's most important hunger-fighting tools. We can also draw upon tremendous resources in human capital, from the scientific expertise at the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute to the business know-how of the Kenya Seed Company.

Yet every African nation must do more. The continent holds tremendous agricultural potential, if only because its farming is so woefully unproductive right now. On my visits to the United States, I've witnessed many of the technologies and practices that could represent a bright future for Africa: genetically modified seeds, minimum tillage, conservation agriculture, irrigation, post-harvest storage. These are some of the practices that contribute to sustainable farming and food security.

Africa could also better feed itself by easing access to its markets and by promoting high-value crops. Such changes would need to be accompanied by improvements to the overall business environment in several African countries, namely improved property rights, more independent courts and greater accountability among government officials. The rest of the world could also make it easier for African farmers to enter their markets and link their products to global trade. Until these changes come about, Africa will continue to lag. Many farmers remain wedded to primitive forms of agriculture that were hardly adequate in the 20th century, to say nothing of the 21st.

Then again, many of them have no choice. Their governments currently follow the woefully misguided example of European countries that refuse to accept biotechnology, including genetically modified crops. This stance has been richly fed for more than two decades now by activists and lobbyists, who oppose modern agriculture on the incorrect premise that engineering a tomato seed to be more pest-resistant or a corn seed to yield more crops makes the tomato or corn dangerous to human health.

The result is that the billions in aid that Europe sends to Africa every year do nothing to encourage the use of agricultural technology, and often discourage or prevent it. Africa's farmers and their would-be customers are being held hostage by scientific illiterates whose well-paid jobs involve raising money by frightening people about biotechnology.

The U.S.-based advocacy group, Truth about Trade and Technology, which supports free trade and agricultural technology, recently calculated that farmers around the world have planted more than three billion acres of genetically modified crops. These acres have been mostly in North and South America, but genetically modified food is now also feeding mouths in Australia, India, the Philippines, South Africa and elsewhere.

This is a remarkable achievement, but until more of Africa starts applying science and technology to agriculture, it's an incomplete one. Western charities and politicians who claim to want to help Africans could do no better than to get out of the way of this.

At a recent conference in Britain, Dr. Felix M'mobyi of the African Biotechnology Stakeholders Forum put the matter bluntly. "The affluent West has the luxury of choice in the type of technology they use to grow food crops, yet their influence and sensitivities are denying many in the developing world access to such technologies which could lead to a more plentiful food supply. . . . This kind of hypocrisy and arrogance comes with the luxury of a full stomach."

The challenge of our new century is to fill everyone's stomachs, and African farmers can help. European leadership in this area would be tremendously helpful, but first Europe must get over its irrational position on the technology that is feeding and will continue to feed the world.

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