

Africa faces loss of productive agricultural land

In a New York Times article, “Loss of fertile land fuels ‘looming crisis’ across Africa” (<http://tinyurl.com/y9xdueys>) Jeffrey Gettleman describes the rising crisis in agriculture in Africa by looking at ongoing events in one region in Kenya. In doing so, he also identifies a number of factors that are responsible for what he calls a “looming crisis.”

More than any other continent, Africans are heavily dependent upon agriculture for basic employment. 70 percent of Africans earn their living by farming and/or herding so addressing the issues facing agriculture are critical to ensuring the health of Africa’s population.

Drought is a factor that farmers nearly everywhere face, some more than others. The same is true on the African continent where drought has a long history, often driving population migration. Unpredictable and irregular rainfall also challenges farmers.

Desertification in Africa—the encroachment of desert conditions on land that was once grazed or farmed—has often resulted from agricultural practices that were imposed by colonial governments who appropriated the best land for settlers, forcing the local population onto increasingly fragile lands. As the population has increased, the growing need for food and livelihood has resulted in cultivation and herding practices that have extended the area of desertification.

While climate change has made catastrophic weather events more likely, the effect on US farmers has been minimal. Though it is difficult to attribute any one severe event to climate change, the increase in the number of these events is consistent with the predictions of climate scientists.

In many areas in Africa, the effects of climate change are being felt with more frequent, severe, and widespread droughts placing pressure on farmers and herders alike. The need to obtain food for household use and sale has resulted in further land degradation and desertification. Over time, those affected by extended drought begin to migrate into neighboring areas increasing conflict and violence; the Gettleman article describes some of these conflicts in detail.

Between 2017 and the end of the century, climate change is predicted to bring about changes in weather patterns so that crops that are currently grown in a particular latitude, will shift to higher latitudes, driving additional migration. Some areas that once were too dry to grow crops may be in line for a wetter weather pattern, resulting in uncertain cross-border population shifts to take advantage of the moisture. The other factor predicted by climate scientists is more frequent and/or more severe weather events that often disrupt agricultural production.

Complicating the picture of increased pressure on fertile land by drought, desertification, and climate change—land for both livestock and crop production—is the projection that the population of Africa will increase from 1.3 billion people in 2017 to 2.5 billion in 2050.

Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest prevalence of hunger in the world where one out of four persons is undernourished. With an increasing population, the number and possibly the percentage of hungry people will increase over the next 33 years.

In the next column, we will examine other factors that have an impact on hunger and the lives of farmers and herders in Sub Saharan Africa.

Policy Pennings Column 883

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Dr. Harwood D. Schaffer: Adjunct Research Assistant Professor, Sociology Department, University of Tennessee and Director, Agricultural Policy Analysis Center. Dr. Daryll E. Ray: Emeritus Professor, Institute of Agriculture, University of Tennessee and Retired Director, Agricultural Policy Analysis Center.

Email: hdschaffer@utk.edu and dray@utk.edu; <http://www.agpolicy.org>.

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- Issues in African agriculture
 - Climate change, drought, and desertification
 - Encroachment on other cattle producer's land often violent
 - Overgrazing and over cropping
 - Population growth
 - Dividing up land into smaller and smaller parcels – land not keep up with birth rate and lengthening lifespans
 - Increasing affluence and more demand for meat
 - Urban sprawl
 - What to do about titles land obtained during colonial era from which people were expelled
 - Land being bought up by speculators, sometimes land that is not being used but is not offered to locals
 - Development of larger farms by private investors. Locals are being priced out of the market
 - Displacement of smallholders who have no industrial or service jobs to look forward to. All the young men selling phone cards, peanuts and many other items along all the clogged roadways
 - Land for wildlife vs land for cultivation
 - Some land available in some areas but would require deforestation exacerbating climate change, but not necessarily where the people who need the land live