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“FOOD PRODUCTION OR FOOD AID? AN AFRICAN CHALLENGE”
(Willy H. Verheye: *Finance and Development*: December, 2000)
BY

* *Mrs. E .N. Egbuna.*

The article started with the assertion that food production in Africa was not keeping pace with rapidly growing needs of the people. Also, that despite the massive food aid programs in the 1970's which were considered temporary solutions to the extreme famines of those days, Africa food shortage appears to be worsening such that at the beginning of the millennium, Africa was even more dependent on food aid than it was 35 years ago.

Therefore, the paper attempted to highlight the reasons for this situation and suggest ways to address the problems.

The author pointed out the following facts about Africa:

- That though total food production in Africa in real terms had increased from an index of 100 in 1965 to 221 in 1998, it declined on per capita basis, from 100 to 86 over the same period (FAO, 1991).
- That Africa's land potential was still largely untapped (FAO, 1991).
- That many African countries that were food exporters have become net importers.
- Some Africa countries are becoming highly dependent on foreign aid while others have increasing food bills, which became a serious budgetary and political obstacle to growth and development.

He then questioned the relevance of the existing system of food aid which was initially introduced as a temporary solution and has now reached the approximately 80 million tons of cereals a year (WHO, 1996). The following were highlighted in the article as reasons for low food production levels in Africa:

- **Population Trends**

The Africa continent was experiencing population increase at the average rate of 3-4 percent a year and the number of people employed in agriculture had declined from 74 per cent in 1965 to 57 per cent in 1998. This was associated with the drift

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of young males from rural areas to urban and industrial centers. The situation was so bad that the population of rural areas where food produced remained reasonably stable but had not been able to meet the requirements of an increasing urban population.

- **Land Constraints**

The total available land in Africa was estimated at about 198 million hectares (FAO, 1965-98), some of which now still unexplored or only partially used. However, due to booming population along the main access roads to urban areas, land seems to be scarce. Again, the land tenure regulation, which was based on the usufruct principle that land could only be used but not individually owned, denied access to land to those who needed them even if more were physically available. Consequently, the availability of land in Africa was only a relative constraint since land was unlikely to become scarce except in and around major cities and in few densely populated countries.

- **Quality of lands**

Most Africa soils were highly weathered from relatively high rainfall, high temperature, and poor nutrients. Also, that African farmers did not allow the land to lie fallow for optimal length of time, as a result, the soil was less fertile and crop yield was low.

- **Shift from Subsistence to Market Economy**

Africa was traditionally associated with subsistent food production. However, with the rapid development of urban growth centers opportunities now exist for farmers to produce more in order to meet the needs of urban dwellers. But this shift from subsistence to market economy required a change in mentality, which must be supported by both technical and economic measures. The required change has to come by making farming an attractive employment option for the young people leaving school, establishing a system for marketing and pricing.

To achieve the goal of increased food production to meet the rapidly growing food needs of its population, the paper concluded with the following suggested solution:

- African countries must match their production goals with market demands
- They should adopt up to date farming practices so as to fully tap their natural production potentials
- African farmers should be guaranteed fair market prices
- Young people should have a better income opportunities so that they will not be tempted to migrate to the cities to add to the number of unemployed and contribute to social unrest.

COMMENTS AND CONCLUSION

The strength of the article lies on the simplicity of the analysis and the practical solutions to the problem of Africa's food production. The article also touched on various aspects of African agricultural system that militates against increase in food production level above the subsistence level. However, the author did not mention the serious effects of drought, flood, wars and conflicts as well as political instability, on food production in Africa. He also did not mention the impact of the politics of food aid. All these have very negative effects on food production levels in Africa, because in the past three decades, most Africa countries had been affected by one or more of the above-mentioned factors.

The article has a lot of lessons for Nigeria since all the issues highlighted are related to the Nigerian situation and as such the paper provides practical and realistic solutions to the Nigerian food problems. The most important lesson is the need to use appropriate farming and preservation technology. This is because Nigeria is blessed with oil and large food crops. Another lesson is the need to improve the current poor infrastructural facilities; this is because most food crops are highly priced not because of the cost of production but due to the high cost of transportation as a result of bad roads and lack of storage facilities.

Therefore, Nigeria should be more proactive in farm technological acquisition and proper infrastructure should be made available in the rural areas to discourage youths from migrating and also encourage the rural farmers to produce more.

Finally, the article clearly addressed the fact that African agriculture is at a turning point and the challenge is to raise agriculture above the subsistence level while reducing food bills that will lead to economic growth and development.