

The East African

Farmers are key to climate change but poor policy is locking them out

By SCOLA KAMAU

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Agricultural productivity across Africa has plummeted greatly as a result of climate change, pointing to future food crises on the continent.

According to the Worldwatch Institute, a New York-based environment research organisation, there is an urgent need for sweeping policy changes on the continent to combat worsening weather patterns.

Africa's major focus is on adaptation, ignoring other factors, hence the sluggish progress in combating climate change.

Tree planting is a preferred initiative with the recent heads of state proposal to plant a Great Green Wall 7,100 kilometres long and 15km wide through the Sahara from Senegal to Djibouti and the World Wide Billion Tree Planting Initiative, facilitated by the United Nations Environment Programme.

Launched in 2006, the latter saw more than 7.4 billion trees planted towards a target of 12 billion trees.

According to the 2011 State of the World Report by Worldwatch Institute, such initiatives only solve part of the problem.

“Tree planting is important but the reality is that only 10 to 20 per cent of planted trees survive more than two to three years, particularly in dry conditions,” says the report.

According to the report, the continent needs substantial financial resources, information systems, technical capacity, the right policies and institutions to successfully address the challenges of adaptation to climate change.

These adaptation policies should also address gender, equity, capacity building and distribution issues and build on local knowledge and emerging research and technologies while supporting farmers to diversify and build resilience under institutional and climate uncertainty.

Further, governments, policymakers, non-governmental organisations and donors who seek to curb hunger and poverty by combating climate change should support these key players in Africa's agricultural sector.

According to the World Agroforestry Centre, more than a third of greenhouse gas emissions in Africa come from the land-use and forestry sectors, with 10 to 12 per cent of these from agriculture. This indicates farmers can play a vital role in combating climate change.

“We need the world’s influencers of agricultural development to commit to long-standing support for farmers, who make up 80 per cent of the population in Africa,” said Worldwatch Institute president Christopher Flavin.

World Vegetable Centre’s Regional Centre for Africa (Tanzania) reckons that farmers’ input and participation in the research process is required.

“Bringing farmers and researchers together and making sure they continue to learn from one another brings out the strengths and weaknesses of the entire project,” said Abdou Tenkouano, director of the centre.

But the International Food Policy Research Institute argues that regardless of how much is injected into a project, past mistakes will recur escalating the impacts of climate change.

Unless funds to gauge the extent of success in such past initiatives are set aside, IFPC recommends researchers should look back at old records and try to draw up some picture of whether “there are discernible trends.

“This helps to determine the next take on climate change,” reads a statement from IFPC.

Although funding for agricultural development by governments, international lenders and foundations has gone up in recent years, it is not enough to support the 925 million people who are undernourished.

Much of the more recently pledged funding is yet to be raised. The fund is used to feed the hungry rather than heal the source of hunger such as climate change.

Since the mid 1980s, agriculture’s share of global development aid has fallen from over 16 per cent to just four per cent according to the report.

“The international community has been neglecting entire segments of the food system in its efforts to reduce hunger and poverty,” said Danielle Nierenberg, co-director of Worldwatch’s Nourishing the Planet project.

Climate change threatens food security with an estimated 33 per cent of African children currently facing hunger and malnutrition, which could affect 42 million children by 2025 according to the report.

Since 2006, Uganda through Developing Innovations in School Cultivation (DISC) programme has been integrating indigenous vegetable gardens, nutrition information, and food preparation into school curricula to teach children how to grow local crop varieties that will help combat food shortages and revitalize the country’s culinary traditions.

Over 1,000 children have been trained through this initiative, anticipated to change their notion on agriculture.

“They no longer see agriculture as a last resort but an investment and a way for biodiversity preservation,” reads a statement posted on DISC’s website.