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## **The Greatest Challenge Facing Agriculture Over the Next Five Years**

While there are conflicting opinions about the most important demands facing agriculture in the future, there surely is no shortage of global challenges. In the United States some would say that passing the latest farm bill in Congress is a priority. In Europe, regulating genetically modified organisms is a concern for many consumers. In India, not all people have access to clean drinking water. And in Africa, feeding the poor is a long-running issue. There are too many demands to list here and each one deserves the attention of agricultural interests. However, because of my experience working in East and West Africa and seeing the effects of extreme poverty first-hand I would argue that Africa is agriculture's greatest challenge over the next five years. First, the continent is home to many of the most impoverished nations on Earth, and Africa deserves the attention of agriculture in order to alleviate the high levels of food insecurity. Secondly, Africa represents an area ripe for the expansion of agribusiness – a potential boon to smallholder farmers, investors and U.S. exporters.

The World Bank recently reported that over 1.2 billion people lived in extreme poverty in 2010, defined as people living on less than \$1.25 per day. This figure includes roughly 400 million children. The World Bank also found that 78 percent of the extremely poor live in rural areas, and two-thirds rely on basic agricultural activities for their livelihoods (Olinto 2013). Based on these figures alone, there is no doubt that agriculture must play an important role to feed the poor.

Furthermore, the human need for food security cannot be ignored. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines food security as a condition “when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life,” (World Food Summit of 1996). The WHO and other organizations recognize several pillars of food security, such as ensuring food availability, food access and adequate food use for all. Understandably, by these standards there is a complex interrelationship between people’s level of food security and those “pillars” affected by a nation's economy, society, culture, and history. In Africa, the level of food security of impoverished households is very low by several measures. The Economic Intelligence Unit (of The Economist), for example, has created a food security index ranking country measures such as affordability, availability, quality and safety of food. African countries in particular consistently rank among the most food-insecure nations on the planet. This is not surprising given that 26 of the world's 35 poorest countries are located in Africa. In Niger, for example, the food security is negatively affected by high poverty, spotty access to agricultural financing, volatility of food production, marginal political stability, and poor agricultural infrastructure, among other factors.

Most people of conscience would agree that Africa’s food security is an important challenge for agriculture in the next five years. Many government, non-governmental, and commercial organizations are currently addressing different angles of Africa’s food security problem. For example, the U.S. Agency for International Development is supporting programs like Feed the Future and the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition. Programs like these provide direct investments in agricultural development, support private sector investment in African agriculture, fund scientific research of seed varieties, develop agricultural markets, facilitate access to those markets, train extension officers, and provide emergency food assistance. While many advances are made each year, there is plenty of room

for improvement.

There are not only altruistic reasons to support Africa. When the full potential of African agriculture is considered, the World Bank estimates that Africa can represent a \$1 trillion dollar industry by 2030 (World Bank 2013). To put that figure in perspective, the U.S. agribusiness sector represented a \$313 billion market in 2010 (World Bank 2013). The major challenges to developing the agricultural sector in Africa are numerous, but the World Bank summarizes three development priorities in particular: 1) expanding the agribusiness supply chain (upstream and downstream), 2) building commercial agriculture (as opposed to subsistence agriculture), and 3) linking smallholder farmers and small businesses to agricultural value chains (World Bank 2013). The role of private businesses, entrepreneurial smallholder farmers, and investors cannot be overemphasized. Since a majority of extremely poor Africans rely on agricultural activities for sustenance, it is vital to develop market opportunities for smallholder farmers, and women in particular, to sustain their livelihoods.

As Africa's agricultural economy grows, so does the world's. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the primary source of global food demand and trade will come from the income growth of consumers in developing nations that are expanding their diets and consuming more agricultural goods from abroad (Meade 2013). In fact, other developed countries are importing fewer U.S. agricultural goods, while developed countries are increasing consumption of U.S. goods as third-world citizens behave more like middle class shoppers (Meade 2013). U.S. agriculture benefits from this trend, and there is good reason to believe that growth in Africa will also contribute to the positive growth of the U.S. Agriculture sector. Africa remains one of the last untapped sources of agricultural growth in the world.

It will be interesting to see how this all plays out over the next few years. Efforts at developing African markets and business are already well underway in nations like Rwanda. Rwanda in particular aims to become the "Singapore of Africa" - a regional hub for business, trade, education and technology. Along the way, the nation has made great strides to liberalize the business sector, attract foreign investment, and develop export oriented agricultural sectors. The primary beneficiaries of this sort of strategy are smallholder farmers growing export quality coffee and tea, and entrepreneurial Africans who are savvy enough to market their goods and services to new markets that continue to expand internally and externally. The hope is that agriculture will continue to take an interest in Africa for all the reasons mentioned above. Not only is it the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to do.

## References

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