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Sub-Saharan Food Crisis Revisited

Food in Sub-Saharan Africa. By Art Hansen and Della E. McMillan (eds.) Boulder, CO Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1986, 410 pp., \$38.50 (cloth), \$14.95 (paper)

Reviewed by Francis Urban

Sub-Saharan Africa has changed in the past 25 years from a net exporter to a net importer of food and agricultural products. Farmers are poorer now, and most farming is at the subsistence level.

Meanwhile the region's population is increasing at an average annual rate of over 3 percent, adding about 15 million people each year. Agricultural land is marginal at best. The Sahel loses farmland to creeping desertification at a rate that may be as high as 8 million hectares per year, the result of overgrazing and overcultivation. Two serious famines devastated the region in 1973-74 and 1984-85. The region has a crushing foreign debt of nearly \$200 billion, beyond its capacity to repay, and servicing the debt can be done only at the expense of an already poor physical infrastructure.

One would think the region might rivet the attention of the international community. But such is not the case. A number of publications deal with individual countries or problems, but few scan larger horizons. Hence, this volume, dealing with the broad food problem in the region as a whole, is a welcome addition. One should probably read it with L. Timberbacker's *Africa in Crisis* (London 1985).

Food in Sub-Saharan Africa had its origin in the annual Spring Seminar on Africa and Food Issues, begun in 1983 at the University of Florida's Center for African Studies. It represents a multidisciplinary approach to dealing with such a large issue. Of 31 authors, 8 are agronomists or zoologists, 7 anthropologists, 5 economists, and 3 historians. Other disciplines include political science, meteorology, geography, forestry, and nutrition. Most of the authors are university professors; 6 are scientists with the World Bank, the Agency for Inter-

The papers include (1) "Overview Food in Sub-Saharan Africa" by Della E. McMillan and Art Hansen, (2) "Food as a Focus of National Regional Policies in Contemporary Africa" by S. K. B. Asante, (3) "The Political Economy of Food Issues" by René Lemarchand, (4) "Agricultural Development Ideas in Historical Perspective" by John M. Staatz and Carl K. Eicher, (5) "Social Science Perspectives on Food in Africa" by Sara Berry, (6) "The African Environment" by Charles Guthrie, (7) "Climate, Drought, and Famine in Africa" by Sharon E. Nicholson, (8) "Subsistence Strategies and Systems of Land Use in Africa" by Daniel McGee, (9) "Traditional Social Formations" by Ronald Cohen, (10) "Agriculture, Food, and the Colonial Period" by R. Hunt Davis, Jr., (11) "African Soils: Opportunities and Constraints" by Hugh Popenoe, (12) "Major Domesticated Food Crops" by Clifton Hiebsch and Stephen K. O'Hair, (13) "Livestock in the Economies of Sub-Saharan Africa" by James R. Simpson and Robert E. McDowell, (14) "Undomesticated Animals and Plants" by Michael E. McGlothlen, Paul Goldsmith, and Charles Fox, (15) "Postharvest Considerations in the Food Chain" by Robert P. Bates, (16) "Fuelwood" by Olivia Webley, (17) "Distribution of Resources and Products in Mossi Households" by Della E. McMillan, (18) "Meeting Human Nutritional Needs" by Patricia A. Wagner, (19) "The Role of International Agricultural Research Centers in Africa" by Donald L. Plucknett, Nigel J. H. Smith, and Robert W. Herdt, (20) "Farming Systems Research and Extension. An Approach to Solving Food Problems in Africa" by Louise O. Fresco and Susan V. Poats, (21) "Women Farmers and Food in Africa: Some Considerations and Suggested Solutions" by Anita Spring, and (22) "Prospects for Long-Term African Changes: Lagos Plan of Action Versus the Berg Report" by Robert S. Browne and Robert J. Cummings.

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national Development, or research institutions, and 4 are graduate students. All worked, or are currently working, in Africa. Only one of them is an African, S.K.B. Asante, a well-known Ghanaian political scientist.

In part one, political scientists and economists provide an overview of the problem at the level of policy and theory. Asante introduces the concept of food policy and discusses policy responses to food crises. He considers the overvaluation of national currencies as particularly detrimental to food production in Africa. Staatz and Eicher also review the evolution of agricultural development economics in the past four decades.

Part two discusses the environmental and human background of the African food problem. The authors are historians, anthropologists, and a meteorologist. Most of the discussion is introductory and general, useful to those who are not particularly familiar with Africa. Nicholson's paper, however, is of particular interest because she maintains that droughts are an inherent characteristic of the African environment; they occur at fairly predictable intervals and should, therefore, be included in the planning process.

Part three is again basic and technical, covering soils, major crops, livestock industry, and undomesticated animals and plants. The authors may be overemphasizing the importance of wild animals and plants as a source of food, since large parts of Africa are already overcrowded and land is increasingly scarce.

Part four deals with post-harvest technology, food distribution, nutrition, and fuelwood. It contains articles on subjects not often dealt with in economic and development literature. McMillan rightly questions the usefulness of the household concept as the basis for eco-

nomic planning and suggests that wider groupings, such as the tribe, should be the basic unit in some cases.

Part five discusses the ways Africans and international development agencies are searching for solutions to the African food crisis. It focuses on the role of international agricultural research centers, farming systems, research and extension, women in farming, and prospects for future changes. Its rather obvious conclusion is that Africans and their initiatives should be the basis for the solution of the African food crisis as well as for progress on the continent in general.

The book does not completely escape the problems of a conference proceedings. It lacks a clear focus and the articles are often uneven. The editors seem to expect too much from an interdisciplinary approach to the African food problem. But if this approach is chosen, the discussion should be enlarged to include topics such as the high rate of population growth, continuous civil unrests and wars, and resulting massive refugee movements within and among countries. Such conditions help create intractable food, medical, and political problems. A chapter tying the state of development of regional physical infrastructure to food production would also be welcome.

The stress on the colonial experience of Sub-Saharan Africa as a cause of current food crisis seems somewhat overdone, particularly in Davis' articles.

The book is extremely useful, even if the treatment of some topics is rather basic. All those interested in Africa and in economic development issues should examine it. Hansen and McMillan have done an excellent job editing the articles and presenting their overview. The extensive references section and suggested readings enhance the book's value as a guide to African and food issue studies.

In Earlier Issues

If the proposed annual sample census is limited to general-purpose sampling; even a national sample as large as 400,000 farms would not solve the problem of adequately sampling these 60 to 70 populations of specialized producers which require special-purpose sampling. Nor would it solve the problem of increasing the accuracy of State estimates of major crop and livestock items in those States in which the production of those items is geographically concentrated.

Charles Sarle
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