



New Sustainable Development Trends Reports Show Mix of Promise and Danger for Agriculture and Food Security

Higher food prices, climate change and land degradation could put brakes on anti-poverty efforts in coming years

New York, 5 May – Efforts to reduce poverty and improve food security are hampered by declining support for agriculture in developing countries, long considered the hallmark of countries that have successfully managed to reduce poverty, along with unequal access to land, land degradation and climate change, according to two new reports issued by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

The reports, “Trends in Sustainable Development,” and “Trends in Sustainable Development – Africa,” highlight many of the key trends – and dispel often-held incorrect ideas – on a number of issues that are impacting the global food crisis, including agriculture, rural development, land, desertification and drought, that are essential to current discussions over what needs to be done to ensure a long-term supply of food to feed everyone.

Strong economic growth in agriculture, the report shows, is four times more effective in benefiting the poorest half of the population than growth in other sectors. Some developing countries, according to the report, are posting impressive gains in agricultural production and exports. But even though higher food prices are a boon to many farmers, the report found that those producing at subsistence level, without modern inputs and access to markets, can expect to benefit very little.

The report on Africa stresses that despite the strong growth of African economies since the start of this century, sub-Saharan Africa was still not on track to meet the poverty-reduction targets of the Millennium Development Goals.

“These reports clearly show the recent neglect of agriculture in donor and government spending priorities,” says Sha Zukang, UN Under-Secretary-General for the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. “Raising agricultural productivity through environmentally sustainable action will be key to feeding a growing world population with rising incomes and changing dietary preferences.”

The launch of the reports is timed to coincide with the opening of the 16th session of the Commission on Sustainable Development, which will take place from 5-16 May. The session is the start of a two-year cycle that will culminate in intergovernmental policy decisions on these issues next year.

Among the issues that the reports illustrate:

- » **Public spending on agriculture is falling** – Public spending on agriculture relative to GDP has fallen in all regions except Asia over the past generation, with the drop in Latin America the most dramatic, although there has been a slight recovery over the last decade.
- » **Foreign assistance for agriculture is at low levels** – External assistance to agriculture, in real terms, has been on the decline since the 1980s, with multilateral assistance falling much more than bilateral agriculture aid. Agriculture accounted for 16 per cent of bilateral assistance in 1980; in 2003 it was only 4 per cent.
- » **More regions are becoming food importers** – Latin American agricultural exports have been booming since the mid 1990s but East Asia, Oceania and sub-Saharan Africa have become net food importers. Northern Africa and West Asia continue to import food.
- » **Tariffs and non-tariff barriers hurt developing countries** – Markets for value-added exports from developing countries are limited due to tariff escalation and non-tariff barriers like technical standards, which many producers in developing countries are unable to meet.
- » **Agricultural productivity growth in the poorest countries is low** – The Least Developed Countries suffer lower agricultural productivity than other developing countries, often less than what is needed to offset falling or volatile commodity prices.

- » **“Green Revolution” agricultural productivity has slowed** – Global fertilizer use grew from 23 kg per hectare to 92 kg from 1961 to 2002 and the share of irrigated land increased from 12 to 19 per cent during that time. But yield growth has slowed and problems of water degradation, salinization and biodiversity loss have increased. An estimated 22 per cent of all cropland, pasture, forest and woodland have been degraded since the 1950s.
- » **Developing countries gaining in agricultural trade** – Although developed countries still dominate, exports of processed products by middle-income countries grew at double-digit rates between 1985 and 2004.
- » **Informal credit prevalent in rural regions** – Access to credit usually aids poverty reduction efforts but informal lenders still provide the bulk of loans to rural households.
- » **Non-farm income rising in rural areas** – Up to 42 per cent of rural household income comes from non-farm activities and the share is rising. Rural poverty rates have declined, but poverty is still far more prevalent in rural areas than urban.
- » **No roads, no economic opportunities** – Rural road infrastructure is woefully inadequate, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, with the result that many farmers are isolated from outside markets.
- » **Land distribution still highly unequal in some regions** – High levels of unequal land distribution, which is often correlated to sub-optimal farm productivity, remains a problem in Latin America, but in Africa less inequality has not led to high agricultural productivity.
- » **Forest cover still on decline** – About 1.3 million square hectares of forest cover have been lost between 1990 and 2005 with the largest net losses taking place in Indonesia and Brazil and the highest rates of loss in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean. China has experienced a recovery in forested areas.
- » **Two billion live in drylands** – About 40 per cent of the earth’s land surface is drylands; one third of the world’s population lives in the drylands, most in developing countries.
- » **Drylands have the lowest GDP per capita and the highest infant mortality rates** – Although there may not be a cause and effect relationship, this suggests that dryland populations are especially vulnerable to further land degradation and declines in ecosystem services.
- » **Drought-caused deaths and losses** – Deaths caused by droughts are concentrated in developing countries, while absolute economic losses are largest in developed regions – such as the toll droughts have taken in Australia. In a number of developing countries, drought wiped out significantly more than 5 per cent of the previous year’s GDP.
- » **Agriculture main source of employment in Africa** – About 20 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa’s GDP is generated by agriculture. In many countries, agriculture is the main source of employment. In at least twenty countries, more than 70 per cent of the labor force works in agriculture.
- » **African exports up sharply** – A decades-long trend of steady decline of Africa’s share of world exports has been reversed since 1998.
- » **Asia is rising as Africa’s trade partner** – More than a quarter of African exports were headed to Asia in 2005, compared to only 9 per cent in 1990 and 14 per cent in 2000. The volume of trade between Africa and Asia is now almost on par with Africa’s exports to the United States and the European Union, Africa’s traditional trading partners.
- » **Food production not keeping up** – Food production in most of sub-Saharan Africa has not kept pace with the population increase over the past four decades.

More information on CSD-16, including the full press kit, can be found at:

<http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/csd/review.htm>

CSD-16 will be webcast live at www.un.org/webcast.

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