

What it will take to make Africa more food secure



A cassava garden. Experts say Africa should continue prioritising discussions about improving fertiliser manufacturing and trade. PHOTO/FILE

The Sustainable Food and Agricultural Systems work stream of the Business 20, a G20 engagement group, has endorsed three principles that it argues will contribute to the building of sustainable food systems and agriculture. The principles are increased trade, resilient supply chains, and sustainable agricultural practices. Agricultural economist **Wandile Sihlobo** explains these three principles and how African countries can put them to good use.

What is global food security? How does it differ from food poverty?

Global food security is more comprehensive, seeking to address the challenges of access to food, nutrition, sustainability and affordability. The broad ambition of global food security is to ensure countries, especially the G20 members, work collaboratively on initiatives that reduce global poverty levels. This reduction of poverty must be material at both national and at household level.

Achieving this goal will demand that each country's domestic agricultural policy enables increases in food production, prioritises environmentally friendly production approaches, and eases trade friction. This will enable countries that cannot produce enough food to import it, and most importantly, do so affordably. Also, countries should ease the global logistics friction, removing tariffs and ensuring a flow of agricultural products is smooth. This also includes the removal of export bans in certain cases. For example, in 2023, India banned the exports of rice and that caused a surge in global food prices.

It is for this reason that I have

championed the approach of "achieving food security through trade". Such an approach is essential in an environment characterised by trade friction, which generally increases transaction costs for all. Ultimately, the goal of improving global food security seeks to improve the living standards for all, with the focus on the poor regions of the world, mainly Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

How can increased trade, resilient supply chains and sustainable agricultural practices enhance food security?

These interventions are at the heart of easing costs. If trade friction (tariffs, non-tariff barriers and export bans) are eased, we are able to lower the transaction costs of getting the goods from the production areas to the consumption points affordably.

Resilient supply chains also mean that food can be produced, processed and transferred to consumption points with less friction even in times of natural disasters and conflicts.

Sustainable agricultural practices are at the core of the food system. Still, this does not mean a move away from improved seed cultivars and genetics, and elimination of agro-chemicals and

other inputs. It mainly refers to using them better.

I have noted a troubling trend of activism that seeks to eliminate agricultural inputs, a path that would lead to lower agricultural productivity and output, and eventually worsen hunger. The key should be safe and optimal use of these inputs.

In the recent farm protests in the European Union, the EU's regulatory approach to sustainable farming practices was one of the issues farmers raised as the major risk. They cited the EU's Green Deal, which aimed to accelerate the reduction of the use of inputs, such as pesticides, fertilisers and certain other chemicals, that are critical for increased production.

In my view, the G20 should guard against activist moves that are dangerous to global food security.

What specific policies should countries, especially African nations, put in place to ensure the success of these principles?

South Africa and the African Union, which are both G20 members, should push for three broad interventions in agriculture to achieve the three G20 principles

and boost food production that could benefit the African continent.

Climate-smart farming

First, there should be a strong call for sharing knowledge on climate-smart agricultural practices. These are new innovations and ways of farming that minimise the damage to crops caused by climate-related disasters like drought and heatwaves. This is important because Africa is very vulnerable to natural disasters.

Trade reform

Second, Africa must push for a reform of the global trading system, and to improve food security in Africa through trade. South Africa already enjoys deeper access to agricultural trade with several G20 economies through lower tariffs and some tariff free access.

African countries whose agriculture is less productive, with generally lower or poor crop yields, may not benefit as much in the short term from open trade. They will, however, benefit in the long run.

Improve access to fertilisers

Third, Africa should continue prioritising discussions about improving fertiliser manufacturing and trade. Sub-Saharan African countries have poor fertiliser access and usage. Yet, greater fertiliser adoption is a key input to increased food production and therefore a reduction in food insecurity. Access to affordable finance is also a challenge for African agriculture.