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Obama's Fantastic Boring Idea

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF
KALANGERA, Malawi

The farm fields here are cemeteries of cornstalks: a severe drought has left them brown, withered and dead. Normally, a failed crop like that signifies starvation.

Then television cameras arrive and transmit images of famished children into American and European living rooms. Emergency food shipments are rushed in at huge expense.

Yet there is a better way, and it's unfolding here in rural Malawi, in southern Africa. Instead of shipping food after the fact, the United States aid agency, U.S.A.I.D., has been working with local farmers to promote new crops and methods so that farmers don't have to worry about starving in the first place.

Jonas Kabudula is a local farmer whose corn crop completely failed, and he said that normally he and his family would now be starving. But, with the help of a U.S.A.I.D. program, he and other farmers also planted chilies, a nontraditional crop that doesn't need much rain.

"Other crops wither, and the chilies survive," Kabudula told me. What's more, each bag of chilies is worth about five bags of corn, so he and other villagers have been able to sell the chilies and buy all the food they need.

"If it weren't for the chilies," said another farmer, Staford Phereni, "we would have no food."

President Obama has made agriculture a focus of his foreign aid programs with mixed results. On the plus side, these initiatives are smart, cost-effective and potentially transformative. On the negative side, they're boring. At a time when there's a vigorous political debate in America about foreign aid, outreach to African farmers doesn't wow Congress or the American people.

But if it's boring, it's also succeeding. I'm on my annual win-a-trip journey with a university student — this year, it's Jordan Schermerhorn of Rice University — and we have seen fields here being irrigated for the first time, powered by foot pedal treadle pumps (resembling elliptical machines from an American gym).

Some of the farmers are trading up from foot power. Evelyn Kadzamira, a barefoot entrepreneur, showed off a \$110 gas pump that she purchased with help from her village savings and loan association. She waters her crops with it and plans to soon start renting it out to others as well.

U.S.A.I.D. can work with only a tiny minority of farmers. But agricultural innovations can go viral, and that's how Kadzamira got started.

“We saw others irrigate last year and were successful, while we didn't irrigate and went hungry,” she said. “So, this year, we decided to irrigate.”

The backdrop is that for half a century, agriculture has been one of Africa's failures. Agricultural yields in Africa are only one-third of the global average, and they have risen much more slowly than in the rest of the world. As a result, Africa's share of global agricultural trade has fallen from 8 percent in 1960 to around 3 percent today, according to the International Food Policy Research Institute.

Only 3.5 percent of African crop land is irrigated, compared to 39 percent in South Asia, according to the United Nations. Asia applies almost 20 times as much fertilizer as Africa. And plant scientists have developed few crop varieties tailored for Africa.

The upshot is that about 47 percent of children under 5 years old in Malawi are stunted from malnutrition.

Yet now there are signs that African agriculture is poised to surge, despite warnings from climate scientists of weather changes linked to rising carbon emissions. The improved prospects reflect growing efforts to place agriculture at the center of efforts to fight poverty.

Malawi itself has also made progress by defying global experts and subsidizing fertilizer. This went against international advice — African governments have been pressured to cut subsidies of all kinds — but more fertilizer use led to huge increases in harvests, and Malawi has become a net corn exporter.

Another challenge for farmers has been poor storage: Up to 40 percent of the corn crop is lost after harvest because of rodents, insects and moisture. So CARE, the international aid group, is showing farmers how to construct mini-silos — made of mud, and resting on stilts — that reduce spoilage to about 5 percent.

In Kasungu, in northern Malawi, a woman named Viknesi Chimbonga showed me two of these new mud silos that she has built. These allow her to store her corn for months and sell it in the “hungry season” just before the next harvest, when prices are five times higher. Chimbonga never went to school at all, but she is planning to use the profits to send her son to university. He would be the first student from her village to go.

So, sure, there's no less glamorous kind of foreign aid than chilies, irrigation pumps and mud silos. But if this kind of assistance can help end famine and emergency aid, and if it can send kids to college, then let's celebrate boring aid!

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