What went wrong? Lessons from Malawi's food crisis

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Once again Malawi finds itself in a tight spot. A food crisis set off by erratic rains, rising food prices and economic hardships is slowly unfolding. Sadly and unexpectedly, Malawi has lost its hard-earned status as an agricultural success story. Many are now wondering what went wrong and whether there could be lessons for other African countries.

More than 1.63 million people, or 11% of the population, are facing severe food shortages, according to the World Food Programme, a UN relief agency. Malawi needs $30 million to the end of 2012 to cover the shortfall. Agriculture is the backbone of its economy: four in five people rely on it for income. Most farmers plant on small plots by hand with little irrigation, and therefore are vulnerable to recurring droughts, notes the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). Malawi is home to Africa's third-largest freshwater lake - Lake Malawi - yet less than 3% of the land is irrigated.

Malawi's current troubles might seem surprising. Yet to those who follow events in the Southern African nation, it is less an abrupt change in fortunes than a series of self-inflicted injuries unfolding in slow motion.

Increased farm subsidies

Back in 2004, president Bingu wa Mutharika, who died in office in early 2012, rode into power on a promise to increase farm subsidies as part of his Farm Input Subsidy Programme. Under the plan, the government gave subsidy vouchers to "smallholders to buy a small amount of fertilizer and seed so that they could replenish the soil nutrients, take advantage of improved seed varieties and at least achieve a liveable crop from their tiny farms," says *Africa Confidential*, a UK-based newsletter.

The results were instant. In 2005, a year after expanded subsidies kicked in, Malawi harvested a grain surplus of half a million tonnes. In subsequent years it exported grain to Lesotho and Swaziland, as well as 400 000 tonnes of maize to Zimbabwe. Food experts and advocacy groups took turns at international forums extolling Malawi as an example of Africa's "green revolution."

Ironically, even during the years of plenty, Malawi continued to import large quantities of wheat, maize and other cereals, says FAO, and isolated pockets of hunger remained. In pursuing subsidies, Mutharika defied donor critics who alleged that the programme was riddled with corruption, ran counter to the principles of free markets and was unsustainable. Indeed, by 2009 the government was spending 16% of its budget on subsidies.

Over time Mutharika became autocratic, amid charges of corruption and cronyism. In 2009 he spent more than $20 million on a long-range presidential jet. Worse, he started promoting his brother Peter, then foreign minister, as his successor, further alienating donors, on whom Malawi depends. When the donors abandoned him, the economy tanked and protesters took to the streets, leading to political instability.

Leadership is key

Rhoda Tumusiime, the head of agriculture at the African Union Commission, notes that while success in agriculture does not have many drivers, leadership is crucial.

"There must be a key political champion at head-of-state level to steer and champion a vision on agricultural revolution," she told the Economic Commission for Africa in an interview.

Mutharika not only had the political will, but tried to lead by example. And his anti-poverty policies attracted many advocates. The director of the New York-based Earth Institute at Columbia University, Jeffrey Sachs, who has worked closely with Malawian authorities to fight poverty, is among them.

"We should...remember a positive legacy of the late president Mutharika, because that legacy holds a key for Africa's future development and escape from poverty," Sachs wrote in an op-ed in the *New York Times*.

"Until his final two years, Mutharika had actually engineered an agriculture-led boom in Malawi, one that pointed a way for Africa to overcome its chronic hunger, food insecurity, and periodic extreme famines," said Sachs. He credited the late president for standing "bravely against the arrogance of an ill-informed foreign aid community back in 2005."

Food security equals national security

Second, while foreign aid is critical in feeding the hungry and reviving agriculture in Africa, food security requires the same seriousness and resources as national security, if not more. In fact, national security loses its legitimacy if thousands of citizens die not from enemy firepower but from starvation, or risk their lives crossing borders while fleeing from hunger.

And finally, Africa needs a strong food policy backed by resources. One tangible African Union response has been the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP), which requires countries that sign up to it to spend at least 10% of their national budgets on agriculture. CAADP itself has a very small budget, but it uses the little it has to strengthen agricultural institutions and build teams of skilled personnel who roam the continent sharing best practices with national authorities.

"There is no doubt that African agriculture needs strong local institutions to avoid the kind of bubble that we saw in Malawi, which was largely driven by external energy," Martin Bwalya, the head of CAADP, told Africa Renewal, alluding to Malawi's dependence on donors for its short-lived success.

CAADP, which is run by the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), the AU's development agency, recognizes that Africa needs institutions whose effectiveness and shelf life do not depend on the survival of individuals.

Mutharika tried to follow the path of subsidies and largely succeeded. Countries that have pursued Malawi's lead have "achieve[d] breakthroughs in farm yields and food production for the first time in their modern history," said Professor Sachs.

His successor, Joyce Banda, Africa's third female president, now has to formulate a new food policy, woo back the donors, stabilize the economy and again get agriculture back on track.

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