

## What does the future hold for Africa's farmers?

Smallholder farmers, lack of equipment and meager harvests: Africa's agricultural sector is wide seen as not being ready to face the future. Modernisation can help increase production but that easier said than done.

By Daniel Pelz <sup>1</sup> Feb 2017



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If Africa is to be able to feed its growing population, it must increase food production by 60 percent in the next 15 years. Estimates say that the African population will double by 2050, from the present 1.2 to 2.4 billion people.

Africa's agricultural sector is not yet ready for this challenge. Productivity even fell in the last ten years, say Elsie Kanza. Her grandfather used to grow coffee on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. Kanza herself chairs the Africa section at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. Many highly qualified young Africans are like Kanza, they don't want to work in agriculture and prefer the city to country life. The average age of smallholders in Africa is 65. "We have an industry dominated by aging, traditionally oriented poor smallholder farmers and the outlook for future farmers is bleak," Kanza said at the AGCO-Africa Summit in Berlin. This was the sixth such meeting organised on the margins of the German "Green Week" industrial fair, by AGCO, a US builder of agricultural equipment.

### Low yield due to lack of equipment

What can be done? German Agriculture Minister Christian Schmidt said at the opening of the conference that Africa's agribusiness potential was "very big." The conservative politician added that the continent's agrarian sector needs ecological and sustainable development. Agriculture, he said "is still one of the biggest employers and also a main area of innovation and schooling."

The German government, which this year holds the G20 presidency, intends to promote the increase of investments in Africa, including in the agricultural sector. Investments are sorely needed: around 60 percent of the total African population work in agriculture. But they fail to thrive. Most are smallholder farmers. 80 percent work the land with their bare hands. Yields are accordingly very low. Gary Collar, vice president of

AGCO, said that adequate products have to be developed for these farmers. "A 600 PS tractor will not transform Africa. They need 70 to 100 PS tractors," Collar said.

According to non-governmental organisations, AGCO and two other enterprises dominate half the global market for agricultural equipment. AGCO wants to specialise in the production of equipment that suits African needs. It sees here lucrative opportunities on the continent.

### **No modernisation at any cost**

South African agricultural expert Lungisile Ntsebeza warns that the continent's agrarian sector should not be modernised at any cost. It is important to prevent a concentration of a handful of corporations in the African market, he says. "We must use technology, we must use research to boost farming. But the vision of building and promoting small-scale farming should be the guide, not large-scale farming," said Ntsebeza, a teacher at the University of Cape Town.

Smallholders need money to acquire new technologies. But many farmers have a hard time accessing credits. "They do not own the land they till. And we have not developed a financing model to replace land as collateral," said Theo de Jager of the Pan-African Farmers Organization.

That is why many experts are calling for smallholders to join cooperatives. This would give them more purchasing power to buy equipment. They would also be in a better position to negotiate, enabling them to sell their produce at a fair price and defend their interests.

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