

Project to help Africa farm its savannahs

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Uganda and Kenya are among eight African countries that will pilot a savannah cultivation programme that seeks to double agricultural production. The pilot phase of the programme dubbed "Transformation of the African Savannah Initiative" begins in November and targets some two million hectares of savannah.



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The programme will initially be rolled out in Ghana before it is replicated in the other countries - Guinea, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Zambia and Mozambique - including Kenya and Uganda. The land will be used to grow maize and soybean, and produce livestock.

The African Development Bank (AfDB) has partnered with some of the largest agricultural research organisations from South America including Brazilian Research Corporation, the Agricultural Corporation of Brazil and the Argentine Association of Zero-tillage who will work closely with universities and national research systems on the initiative.

Leveraging on the continent's savannahs

AfDB president Akinwumi Adesina said the programme will leverage on the continent's savannahs which remain largely underutilised and "are better than Brazil's" where a similar programme has helped the country tap into its agricultural wealth.

"The savannahs of Africa cover a mind-boggling 600 million hectares of which 400 million hectares are cultivable, but just 10 percent is utilised," said Adesina.

"Africa must learn from experiences that have worked elsewhere. We must ensure that small, medium-scale and large-scale commercial farmers co-exist in a way that allows opportunities for all."

Statistics from the Ministry of Agriculture noted that the value of Brazil's crops jumped by about 369 percent from \$23bn to \$108bn between 1996 and 2006, while its beef exports increased tenfold as the country adopted mass savannah cultivation. In less than 30 years, the country transformed itself from a net food importer into one of the world's largest food baskets. "In the 1970s, Brazil was suffering a lot, like Africa today. We imported two-thirds of what we consumed," said former Minister of Agriculture Dr Alysson Paulinelli. "Today, Brazil exports \$100bn in food items."

Rising food imports

According to the AfDB, Africa's food imports stand at \$35bn with the figure expected to rise to \$110bn by 2025, if the continent fails to improve the productivity and global competitiveness of its agribusiness and agriculture sectors.

At least 233 million people were estimated to be hungry or undernourished in sub-Saharan Africa - the second highest after Asia - as at 2014 by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation.

Africa's food challenge is further compounded by the need to feed its rapidly growing population which is expected to double to 2.4bn by 2050. Favourably, the Africa Agriculture Status report 2017 by the Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa notes that the continent's food market is growing rapidly with opportunities in the sector estimated to be worth more than \$1 trillion every year by 2030, helping substitute food imports with high-value food made in Africa.

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