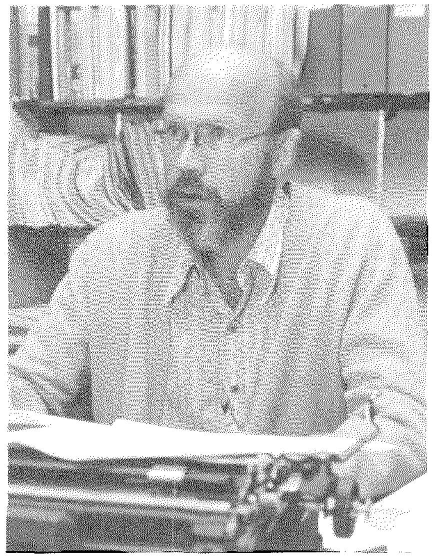
Opinion



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SOUTHERN AFRICA faces "the worst drought in a century," according to the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations. Almost 20 other nations in eastern, western, and central Africa face catastrophic food shortages.

This year's disaster highlights an important fact: For years Africa has been a continent that does not feed itself. The crisis extends from food crops to export crops. There is a crisis in African agriculture.

Since the 19th century, Africa has produced vegetable oils for soap, cosmetics, margarine; beverages, such as coffee, tea, and cocoa; and fibers, such as cotton and sisal. While in the colonial period these crops provided the foundations for the economies of Africa, recently farmers who produce these crops grow less, export less, and earn less in foreign markets.

The decline of agricultural exports means less foreign exchange. In countries where taxes are levied largely from foreign trade, it also means a loss of public revenue. Foreign payments and fiscal crises — these are the results of the decline of agricultural exports.

There are many reasons for the crisis in African agriculture. Belying the myth of the lush tropics, the environmental realities facing Africa's farmers are harsh. Yet many experts now lay the major blame for the current crisis on the economic policies of African governments. These policies place heavy burdens on African farmers and create strong disincentives for farming.

To secure imports for new industries — and for elites with a taste for foreign products — African governments overvalue their currencies. As a result, the African food producer must now compete with the American farmer, because imports of foreign foods appear inexpensive to African consumers. A parallel consequence is that the producers of export crops, such as cocoa or palm oil, earn less. Overvaluation of local currencies means that the producers of exports earn foreign exchange that is now worth less in domestic currencies. Overvaluation for the sake of imports for urban and domestic industries places an economic burden on the African farmer.

So do government taxes. In many African nations, farmers producing exports are compelled to sell through government monopolies. These market their crops on the world market, retaining much of the proceeds in the form of taxes and returning only a portion (often less than half) to the farmer.

Government efforts to protect their new urban industries place further burdens on the farmers. By protecting the domestic market against imports of cheaper foreign goods, governments force farmers to pay higher prices resulting from tariff protection. Moreover, governments insist on low food prices. They do so because higher prices mean higher wages and lower profits for industry, as well as political unrest in the cities.

A range of government policies thus harms the economic interests of farmers. African farm families are like the rest of us. If an economic endeavor fails to offer an adequate return, they move out of it and into another. Some leave the countryside. Others remain but educate their children and send them to the cities. Others don't work as hard, earning subsistence but seeing little profit in producing a marketable surplus. Few invest in new technologies to improve their farming. There is too little return to justify such investments. In the face of few economic rewards, farm families devote fewer and fewer resources to farming. The result is an African continent that cannot feed its people.

Criticism of the policies of African governments have been mounted from every side. Most often they have been rejected. One reason is that while these policies may be economically costly, they have appeared to be politically necessary. Insecure governments promote "cheap food" policies to placate urban consumers who might otherwise back the political opposition. And they use the taxes from exports to provide benefits demanded by restless constituents.

But now the overwhelming reality — political and economic — is one of shortage. In the face of famine, governments may have little choice but to change their farm policies. African governments have to devise ways of rewarding the economic interest of farmers. As a result of current suffering, Africa's rural population may at last be incorporated into the basic political arrangements that underpin the economic order of the continent. □