

Drought in African Sustainable Agri- Food Systems: Slow Processes with a Severe Impact

Intervention of the AFRICAN UNION-SAFGRAD

As I sat at home to put pen to paper for this piece, I was still pondering on how to start this over vexed topic when I was asked by my children what I was writing. As i tried to explain what I am writing, it became very obvious to me that for quicker comprehension there was a need to link the effect to the causes. It was important to focus their attention to something is dry, hot and dusty; cracks may appear in the soil, and rivers, lakes and other sources of water may go dry¹



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During a drought, ponds, lakes and rivers may begin to dry up.¹

SLOW CAUSES BUT VERY LOUD AND PROFOND EFFECTS

Droughts are not new to Africa and date back to earliest records. Drought cycles have been battering the African continent for thousands of years. However, over time indications are that the frequencies have become shorter, severe, and widely spread. The cumulative impacts of drought in the Sahel resulted in the deaths of thousands of people and affected livelihoods and ecosystems. This region still remains the most vulnerable area, and desertification adversely affects the well-being of high percentage of the population. The severe droughts and protracted famine of the early 1970s in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa triggered world-wide concern, leading to the creation of the Semi-Arid Food Grains Research and Development (AU-SAFGRAD).

THE NEED OF CHANGING PEOPLE'S MENTALITY

The most effective way to manage drought is a change in peoples' mentality and a general commitment to reverse the spread.

At the Earth Summit in Rio, 1992, desertification, along with climate change and the loss of biodiversity, were identified as the greatest challenges to sustainable development². The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) was established in 1994 as the sole legally binding international agreement linking environment and development to sustainable land management. Since the adoption of the Convention, was focusing on combating desertification and reversing land degradation. It was only during the eleventh session of the Conference of the Parties in Windhoek, Namibia, in 2013 that the importance of addressing drought issue was ignited. This led to a regional conference on drought in Africa whose output was the Windhoek Declaration. The impetus gained at the Windhoek Conference. it successfully mainstreamed drought into the 2018-2030 UNCCD'Strategic

Framework in COP 13 in Ordos, China, 2017. Moreover, At COP 14 in India, in 2019 Parties considered a need for a stronger political commitment and advocacy as well as a more effective policy framework on drought. In COP15 (Abidjan 2022), The African Group of Negotiators made a strong appeal to all Parties to the Convention, to stand up as one and engage in a process leading to a legally binding instrument on drought.

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African Union through a number of resolutions and decisions made by the Heads of State and Government have always put issues of drought and agricultural development in front of its Development Agenda. Among which the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP), Malabo Declaration 2014 “where the Excellences Heads of State and Government committed themselves toward an “accelerated agricultural growth and transformation for shared prosperity and improved livelihoods”. The African Union agenda 2063 and its first 10 years Action Plan “Africa we want” that indicated in aspiration number 1 entitled “A prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development”.

The African Union-SAFGRAD as one of the specialized, technical offices of the African Union Commission, in its strategic plans focuses on building livelihood resilience of small holders in the dry lands of Africa (people that are most vulnerable to the effects of drought), has designed some of its programmes on drought preparedness and management as it affects the sustainable agri-food systems. In collaboration with National Agricultural Research Systems (NARS) and International Agricultural Research Centres (IARCs), AU-SAFGRAD played a key role in facilitating the release of several (maize, sorghum and cowpea) food grains cultivars currently cultivated by farmers in the semi-arid regions of Africa. These improved crop varieties are drought tolerant, early maturing, resistant to major pests and diseases and are high yielding. AU-SAFGRAD has set a functional network that brings together all the actors on the same table (farmer organizations, and research and extension agencies) to identify the main challenges and opportunities of sustainable agriculture systems in Africa and agreed on the different ways of collaborations. Furthermore, capacity building and training of research scientists on issues of the impact of desertification and climate change on agriculture and food security in Africa and modern irrigation schemes has been one of the main programmes of AU-SAFGRAD over the years (Young African professionals from 46 Member States have been trained in the last few years). The office has developed some continental frameworks, reports and guidelines that has been endorsed by the Specialized Technical Committee (STC) of Ministers in-charge of Agriculture, Rural Development, Water and Environment and the Executive Council of the African Union, among others(The framework of irrigation and agricultural water management in Africa; guidelines to secure pastoralism and prevent conflict in Africa , the report on boosting investment in agriculture in Africa), It also has contributed to strengthening the capacity of the Regional Economic Communities(RECs) by facilitating them in developing their strategic plans in irrigation and agricultural water management as well as in prioritizing their agricultural commodities value chains. In collaboration with UNCCD, AU-SAFGRAD provides platform for the African National Focal Points and the African National Scientific Correspondence to discuss the main challenges and opportunities of combating desertification and having the African Common and strong position for UNCCD-COPs. The office organizes high level policy

dialogue sessions in the areas of nexus among which sustainable agri-food systems, desertification, land degradation, drought, security and development with participation of Excellences African Heads of State and Government, Ministers and experts (The outcome of the dialogue feeds the decisions of African policy makers). In addition, the office is building the knowledge base on drought and sustainable agri-food systems through production/dissemination of reports, articles and periodicals (700 titles are available online through AUC repository so far and the activity is ongoing).

CRUCIAL TO AVOID THE DRYNESS OF PEOPLE'S MIND

In conclusion, it must be borne in mind that drought preparedness and management are a collective responsibility. As stated above, though the causes are cumulative and often unobserved, the effects are severed and devastating. All hands must be on deck to stop this great scourge that seeks to consume entire population and the continent. Our actions and inactions will decide our fate and destiny. Policy and decision makers at all levels, scientists, farmers, herders, development planners, women and youths must all be involved. They must be able to appreciate and link their actions and activities, in their micro environment, to the long-term consequence in the global environment. Policies that encourages conservation and sustainable use of natural resources must be implemented and aggressively enforced at all levels. If we do not start as individuals, families and groups to seriously and positively contribute and be strong partners in development of our countries, if we are still waiting for external experts to plan for us, if we put everything in the side of the policy makers without our real contribution and waiting mistakes to blame them. We must not have drought in our mentality this has to be treated so as to be positive members in our villages or our cities and contributing to the development process and achieving Agenda 2063.

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African Union SAFGRAD

References

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