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Letters on Urgent Issues

Covid-19 outbreak and the need for rice self-sufficiency in West Africa

A R T I C L E   I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

In the decade since the 2008 global food crisis, West African countries have made efforts to raise domestic rice production and to make the region self-sufficient. Today, West Africa produces nearly two-thirds of Africa’s rice. The region’s rice import dependency has fallen from nearly half of local consumption in 2010 to about 30%. In spite of this improvement, the region remains the world’s second largest rice importer. The situation of Benin, Burkina Faso, Gambia and Niger remains challenging with rice import dependency still exceeding 70%. Production in some countries has fallen even below the 2010 level due to civil strife, climatic changes and macroeconomic difficulties. Countries of the region, on average, allocate less than 5% of their budget to agriculture, less than half the share committed in the Maputo Agreement. The Covid-19 outbreak and corresponding preventive lockdowns have posed a new challenge as food supply chains were stretched; production, transportation and consumption fell sharply; and household income was affected. In addition, closure of frontiers and temporary trade disruption in major Asian rice exporters has led to increase in rice prices in the international market. In late April, rice futures rose to reach a level not surpassed since 2011. This threatens to further aggravate an already fragile food security situation in the region. The crisis again points to the need for greater efforts at the national and international level to achieve food security. West African countries will need to enhance public spending on agriculture with a greater focus on measures aimed at improving rice productivity.

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During the 2008 food crisis, global cereal prices jumped two or three times within a span of a few months. The hike struck particularly hard the vulnerable populations of developing countries dependent on food imports (Cudjoe et al., 2010). Countries of West Africa, for instance, relied on rice imports for about half of their consumption (OSIRIZ/InfoArroz, 2018). In the wake of this crisis, efforts were reinforced to raise domestic rice production and to make the region self-sufficient in rice. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) launched the Rice offensive programme for self-sufficiency in rice with an objective to attain rice self-sufficiency by 2025. International organizations and collaboration networks such as AfricaRice, Coalition for Africa Rice Development (CARD), Africa Development Bank and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and farmer associations such as ROPPA Partnered in drawing favourable policy regimes and designing relevant initiatives (FAO et al., 2018). Besides, a number of food security plans such as Benin’s Plan d’urgence pour l’agriculture et la sécurité alimentaire (Agriculture and Food Security Contingency Plan), Côte d’Ivoire’s Plans de Relance du Riz et Autres Vivriers (Recovery plans for rice and other food crops), Mali’s Initiative Riz (Rice Initiative) and Sénégal’s Grande offensive agricole pour la nourriture et l’abondance (the Great Agricultural Offensive for Food and Abundance) were devised at the national level to enhance rice production and achieve food self-sufficiency. These initiatives mainly focused on providing farmers subsidies on seeds, fertilizers and other farm inputs, provision of agricultural loans and production of quality seed.

Thanks to these efforts, paddy rice production in the region has taken off from around 10 million tons in 2010 to over 18 million tons in 2018 (FAOSTAT). Today, West Africa produces nearly two-thirds of Africa’s rice. In spite of this improvement, the region’s rice yield, at 20,300 hectogram per hectare, remains far below the world average. West Africa still depends on imports for about 30% of its rice consumption. The situation of Benin, Burkina Faso, Gambia and Niger is particularly challenging with rice import dependency still exceeding 70%. In Burkina Faso, Guinea Bissau, Liberia and Sierra Leone, production has fallen even below the 2010 level. Civil strife, climatic changes and macroeconomic difficulties have taken their toll (Food Security Information Network, 2020; FAO et al., 2019). Countries of the region, on average, allocate less than 5% of their budget to agriculture, less than half the share committed in the Maputo Agreement (Resaaks in 2018). This is in spite of evidence of significant beneficial effects of public agricultural spending on food security for the countries which allocate greater proportions of their budgets to agriculture (Fontan Sers & Mughal, 2019).

The Covid-19 outbreak and corresponding preventive lockdowns have posed a new challenge. During the first and second quarters of 2020, food supply chains were stretched; production, transportation and consumption fell sharply; and household...
income was affected (FAO, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d; Food Security Information Network, 2020). Sub-Saharan Africa’s GDP is projected to contract by 1.6% in 2020 (Economic Outlook Growth Projections, IMF, April 2020). In addition, closure of frontiers and temporary trade disruption in major Asian rice exporters such as Thailand and Vietnam has led to increase in rice prices in the international market. In late April, rice futures rose to 18 USD/CWT, an increase of over 50% within a year, to reach a level not surpassed since 2011 (Data from Trading Economics in 2020). This threatens to further aggravate an already fragile food security situation in the region, and make the pursuit of the second Sustainable Development Goal of ‘No hunger’ more difficult. Several Sub-Saharan African countries faced increasing food insecurity in 2018–19 due to economic difficulties (FAO et al., 2019). The impact of this year’s unprecedented economic crisis resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic will particularly be felt in African countries which heavily relied on imports for their food requirements (Food Security Information Network, 2020). As a result, large segments of vulnerable population in the region are becoming food insecure. The crisis again points to the need for greater efforts at the national and international level to achieve food security. West African countries will need to enhance public spending on agriculture with a greater focus on measures aimed at improving rice productivity. In addition to input subsidies and farm loans, measures such as improving farmer access to technological innovation and promoting contract farming can be considered in this regard (Demont et al., 2017; Maertens & Vande Velde, 2017).

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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