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Guest column: Sub-Saharan Africa's promise is growing

MARSHALL MATZ is former counsel to the Senate Committee on Agriculture. Contact: mmatz@ofwlaw.com

At a time of seemingly nothing but bad news internationally, from Iraq to Afghanistan, Iran to North Korea, climate change to the global economic crisis, there is a very bright spot in a surprising area of the world: Africa.

Africa not only provides some hopeful news but the real prospect of a long-term success story. The experts I met with recently in Africa agree that the agriculture-based "Green Revolution" conceived of by Nobel Prize-winning agronomist Norman Borlaug is finally taking root in Sub-Saharan Africa. According to Jennifer Mangu, the director of an agriculture dealership in Machakos, Kenya, "It's happening."

The challenge is clearly daunting. One third of Sub-Saharan Africa - 300 million people - is hungry. Half of Kenya lives on less than a dollar a day. Forty-two percent of the population barely survive on one meal a day, according to the World Food Program. Medical doctors, who are the front line in the fight against AIDS in Eldoret, Kenya, are forced to farm if they want to provide their patients with the food needed to go with the AIDS medication. Crop yields are stuck at a fraction of worldwide norms.

"Africa has the capacity to feed itself, and beyond," according to Dr. Gebisa Ejeta of Purdue University, recipient of this year's World Food Prize.

Increasing the food supply and building a stable food-production system are not only the keys to addressing hunger but an absolute precondition to economic development. In the past two years, a new, coordinated effort has produced 34 new business enterprises producing over 13,000 metric tons of improved crop seeds, trained some 7,000 agriculture dealers in business management, and sponsored 80 new Ph.D.s in agricultural science.

What will it take to fully realize the dream of an African Green Revolution?

- First and foremost, agriculture education, or capacity building, must be the priority. From the major public and private agricultural institutions around the world to all concerned governments, there must be a focus on agricultural sciences in Africa.

- "Seed development is the key element to eliminating hunger in Africa; it is also critical to long-term economic development. Africa needs seed varieties that are suitable for local growing conditions. Green revolutions around the world have essentially followed the introduction of better seeds," according to Joe DeVries, director of Program for Africa's Seed Systems in Nairobi. This demands a commitment to sound science and biotechnology. Biotech seeds are improving yields and reducing pesticide use; new seeds will soon require less water.

- Water management and irrigation are critical. Many countries, like Zambia, have large volumes of surface water, but the farmers live from rain to rain because there are no irrigation systems.

- The United States Agency for International Development and other development partners should increase their emphasis on African agriculture.

- Finally, the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa must provide leadership by establishing policies that support agriculture and private investment.

The organization bringing all of this together is the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), chaired by Kofi Annan, the former secretary general of the United Nations, with backing from the Gates and Rockefeller Foundations. AGRA's goal, according to its dynamic president, Namanga Ngonji, is "to provide an African-led, comprehensive approach to agriculture development for smallholder farmers, mostly women, and thereby lift Africa out of poverty."

The Obama administration, fully appreciating the moral imperative of eliminating hunger, as well as the risks of not doing so, has initiated a Global Food Security Initiative. It is in the self-interest of the United States to have a special focus on Africa.

Sub-Saharan Africa is the last reservoir of agricultural land available in the world; it is also an area that has much in common with America. We share a history of British colonization with many of the countries in the Sub-Saharan region and the bond of language. Our food aid and AIDS initiative are making a significant difference to millions of people.

The election of President Obama has, of course, only highlighted the connection between the United States and Africa.

Yet, we face competition for the hearts and minds of Africa. China is investing a significant amount in Africa, and it is providing full scholarships to 3,000 Ph.D. candidates. On the highway from Nairobi to the airport there is an arch dedicated to the friendship between China and Kenya. Japan is providing humanitarian assistance and is investing in rice research. Persian Gulf countries are buying up some of the most productive land in Africa.

There are 47 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, with 25 percent of all the votes in the U.N. General Assembly. Supporting them in their effort to complete the Green Revolution can turn a dependant continent into a trading partner with strong links to the United States.
