

AfDB looks to turn African savannah into global food basket using agritech

The African Development Bank (AfDB) is leading efforts to wake the 'sleeping giant' that is the African savannah and turn it into the cradle of the continent's green revolution.



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“This sleeping giant needs to wake up,” the bank’s VP for agriculture, human and social development, Jennifer Blanke, told an audience at a 2018 World Food Prize side event in Des Moines, Iowa recently. Blanke described Africa’s nearly 400-million hectares of savannah zones as “the world’s largest agricultural frontier”, and if a small fraction of that cultivatable land – some 16-million hectares - is transformed, it could well set Africa up to decrease dependence on food imports, feed itself and contribute to feeding the world.

Importing food it should be producing

Africa is host to 60% of the world’s uncultivated arable land, but currently spends an estimated \$35bn per year on importing food. This figure is projected to shoot up to \$110bn by 2025. Africa is importing what it should actually be producing: 22-million metric tonnes of maize, 2-million metric tonnes of soybean, 1-million metric tonnes of broiler meat and 10-million metric tonnes of milk product each year. This situation is made worse when African countries export raw goods outside the continent to be processed into consumer products imported back into Africa for purchase. In essence, Africa is exporting jobs outside the continent, and contributing to Africa’s poverty challenges.

The African Development Bank has determined that the African savannah can support the production of maize, soybean, and livestock, and transform the continent into a net exporter of these commodities. Only 10% of the African savannah is under cultivation – better utilised, small sections of Africa’s grasslands could provide direct jobs for tens of millions of young people and indirect jobs for many more.

Smart, sustainable transformation

Blanke, who spoke on behalf of African Development Bank president Akinwumi Adesina, noted that all of Africa’s savannah is more than twice as large as Brazil’s “Cerrados” that launched that country’s farming economy success. She said transforming a small part of Africa’s mixed woodland grasslands, in a smart and sustainable way, can produce enough to supply all the continent’s maize, soybean, and livestock requirements.

Brazil transformed its tropical Cerrados into a \$54bn food industry within two decades through skillful development of production technologies for new crop and livestock varieties; innovative soil and crop management programs adapted to the tropics; wide-scale dissemination of new agricultural technologies; low interest loans, and ambitious rural development programmes.

TAAT-S initiative

The bank's Technologies for African Agricultural Transformation for the Savannahs (TAAT-S) initiative seeks to transform 16-million hectares out of Africa's 400-million hectares of savannah into an agribusiness hive for the production of maize, soybean, and livestock. That is just about 4% of the continent's mixed woodland and grassland areas. If African countries can harness the available technologies with the right policies, they will rapidly raise agricultural productivity and incomes for farmers, as well as assure lower food prices for consumers.

Blanke led a bank delegation selling the merits of its TAAT-S initiative at the World Food Prize gathering. The bank's TAAT-S session discussed training, innovation, entrepreneurship, and policy support for transformation of African savannahs.

To ensure effective implementation, the bank has looked to Brazil's agribusiness success story to engage with organisations with proven track record in tropical and conservation agriculture. These include the Brazilian Research Corporation and the Agricultural Corporation of Brazil, the Argentine Association of Zero-tillage, and the Argentine Agricultural Research Institute – all part of a systematic effort at technology introduction and adaptation.

TAAT-S was launched in October 2017 in Ghana and has since been operating in Zambia, Guinea and Gabon. The bank expects to launch TAAT-S in Uganda, Kenya, Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, and Mozambique next year.

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