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Solution for Africa's food crisis

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Africa continues to face a pervasive and critical food crisis. Millions of Africans are dying each year from extreme malnutrition and the diseases that take advantage of their weakness. Yet Africa's food crisis is solvable with determined international leadership. I believe that Canada has a unique capacity to help find the solution.

The roots of the crisis are clear. Fast growing rural populations, ongoing land degradation, extreme vulnerability to drought in much of Africa (because of rain-fed rather than irrigated agricultural systems), and the utter impoverishment of tens of millions of farm households cause hundreds of millions of Africans in food producing households to be trapped in the worst poverty. A poverty that is both chronic and extreme at the same time.

Africa is the only region in the world with declining food production per person. Since African farmers do not have access to modern farm inputs such as fertilizers and hybrid seeds, their yields per hectare are roughly one third or less of those achieved in other parts of the low income world. Add in shocks such as drought and pests, and the pattern of humanitarian disaster becomes routine, in turn often inflaming violent conflict.

The deep irony of this tragedy is that known, proven, scientifically based and low-cost farm inputs and methods could double or triple food output in short order. In particular, African farmers require four key inputs:

- Soil nutrient replenishment (especially nitrogen), using a combination of chemical fertilizers and proven forestry techniques.
- Small-scale water management.
- Improved seeds (available but vastly under-utilized)
- Local government policies to encourage agriculture.

These same four inputs were the key to Asia's Green Revolution. A comparable package honed to each of Africa's agro-ecological zones and farming systems is already available to produce an African Green Revolution. But the package has not been put in place for the vast majority of Africa's smallholder farmers.

Given Africa's extreme poverty, markets alone cannot do the job of launching the African Green Revolution. Nor did markets alone create Asia's Green Revolution three decades ago.

Despite the utter feasibility of an African Green Revolution, and the calls for such action by United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, the UN Millennium Project, NEPAD, and the international scientific community, there has been very little international action to support African smallholder food production and agriculture more generally.

Donors have continued, remarkably, to favour food aid over food production. Yet food aid does not promote development, arrives late and is perhaps five to 10 times more expensive per metric ton of grain than helping African farmers to grow more food by using the package of improved inputs.

There is no single donor champion of Africa's Green Revolution comparable to the global champions for food aid, AIDS control, education and help in other areas. Canada can seize the space as the global champion of an African Green Revolution, leading the creation of a program to ensure that impoverished farmers in Africa receive the four basic inputs needed to double or triple their food productivity within the next five years. Such food security would help jumpstart Africa's long-term development.

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Since it is unrealistic that we as a country can do everything, this is a unique opportunity for Canada to leverage its position in the world quickly and within existing fiscal parameters of development assistance.

The issue would be a retooled policy and diplomatic focus. It would put Canada on the development map as a leader with bold vision.

Given the strong traditional role of agriculture in the Canadian psyche, and the capacity of our world-class agricultural industry to provide essential commodities like fertilizer and improved seeds, Canada is well-placed to respond to the urgent calls by the UN Secretary General and NEPAD for help.

A focus on increased inputs for African smallholder farmers and increased food yields also offer clear, measurable and monitorable delivery targets for foreign assistance. The Canadian public demands this basic requirement. An investment approach to increased food production, rather than the current Band-Aid approach of emergency food relief, would doubtless be reassuring to Canadians as well, who want to find a way to confront effectively the problems facing the global community.

Canadian leadership to galvanize the donor world for an African Green Revolution would garner enormous support from African leaders, as well as the Europeans and Americans who are preoccupied elsewhere.

I have reached the conclusion that, because of the nature of politics, a Canadian government is unlikely to muster necessary leadership to make Canada champion of the African Green Revolution that would save so many human lives, But that is no obstacle. The potential lies in a consortium of civil society and the private sector that can find a solution outside of and beyond government. As in so many issues, the Canadian public is empowered to act and think ahead of governments.