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Challenges of Smallholder Farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Perspective from Roger Thurow's, The Last Hunger Season

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Abstract

Small holder farmers are the small-scale farmers who own the land from one hectare to less than ten hectares. These farmers often depend on the family labour for farming activities, and a significant portion of their production is used to support their own livelihoods. Africa is a region where eighty percent of the farmland is cultivated and food is produced by small holders, yet they face multiple obstacles in sustaining their routine. The death rate of children is increasing due to poverty and malnutrition. Major challenges include the lack of sustainable agricultural practices, insufficient planting techniques, inadequate access to fertilizers and markets, water scarcity, and the impacts of climate change. The author aims to raise awareness about global hunger and the importance of long-term viability and economic development. He delves into the lives of small farmers, revealing the complexities of market failures, food insecurity, and the inability to access modern agricultural tools. The author also highlights the efforts of organizations and initiatives, such as One Acre Fund, which provide farmers with high-quality seeds and fertilizers on credit, and require them to attend local farming classes. This paper focuses on the challenges faced by smallholder farmers in Africa, as depicted by Roger Thurow in "The Last Hunger Season". The objective of the study is to emphasize the need for awareness and policy interventions, including family planning and literacy programs, to empower rural communities, achieve food security and improve economic resilience in the face of population growth and agricultural challenges.

Keywords: Poverty, Food Insecurity, Global Hunger, Malnutrition, Economic Development, Sustainable Agriculture.

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Introduction

Roger Thurow is an American author, journalist and a senior fellow for global agriculture and food policy for the Chicago council on Global Affairs in 2010. His book, 'The ***Last Hunger Season'*** was published in 2012. The book focuses on the global issues such as Hunger and Poverty in a region like sub Saharan Africa and also dry land regions of Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya (Thurow, 2013). Critics have called the book 'eye-opening' as it sheds light on the struggles of small-scale farmers and the role of the One Acre Fund in helping these farmers to overcome hardships. He also illustrates the notion on empowering farmers through education, resources and support not only enhances food security but also fosters sustainable development and resilience in rural communities (Binswanger-Mkhize, 2009).

Food Insecurity



Many of the world's poor and hungry are smallholder farmers in developing countries. Yet they have the potential not only to meet their own needs but to boost food security and catalyze broader economic growth. (Diouf, Director - FAO)

African communities during the annual hunger season undergo food insecurity because they run out of food storage after the post-harvest period. Despite Africa's immense agricultural potential, there is some significant barriers obstruct daily life in these communities (Hungry world 2009). Challenges include inadequate access to fertilizers and irrigation, primitive storage facilities and poorly developed roads and markets. As a result, farmers typically harvest only a small part of what their peers in the Western world produce, with up to half of their yield spoiling before reaching the market. This stark reality contributes directly to widespread hunger and starvation among the population. Inspite of these challenges the farmers are pivotal in sustaining local and regional food supplies. To break the cycle of poverty and hunger, the author advocates strongly for supporting smallholder farmers. He emphasizes the adoption of agro-ecological practices that prioritize the well-being of African communities. This approach not only aims to enhance agricultural productivity but also seeks to improve the nutritional quality of foods available to combat hunger and malnutrition effectively (Houmy et al., 2013).

Climate Change

The daily livelihood of the majority of African communities depends on agriculture. The unpredictable climate change pose significant challenges for smallholder farmers (India's Farm Crisis). This leads to drought and flood that disrupt farming cycles. Climate change alter temperatures and growing seasons, causing crops to mature either too quickly or too slowly, thereby reducing yields. Additionally, climate change contributes to soil erosion and degradation, which diminish soil fertility and further reduce crop yields over time. The rise in temperature intensifies evaporation rates, cause drought conditions and leading to land degradation and crop failure. Ultimately, these environmental stresses reduce the overall productivity of crops in affected regions. Roger Thurow highlights in his work how smallholder farmers face economic instability and food insecurity due to their reliance on unpredictable weather patterns

exacerbated by climate change. The inability to predict and adapt to these changing conditions leave the farmers vulnerable to crop failures and economic hardship, persisting cycles of poverty and malnutrition (Malawi, 2022).

Access to Modern Agricultural Tools

Access to modern agricultural tools remains limited in Sub-Saharan Africa, where farming practices predominantly depend on human labor and traditional methods such as using cattle for ploughing. The reluctance to adopt modern tools derives from economic challenges faced by smallholder farmers, who often find these tools unaffordable, and a lack of knowledge with advanced agricultural practices. The author highlights the organization like the One Acre Fund, and its crucial role in providing quality seeds, fertilizers, and training sessions to smallholder farmers. These efforts are pivotal in enhancing productivity, efficiency, and resilience to climate change among farmers associated with the One Acre Fund. By adopting mechanized agriculture, farmers can reduce labor-intensive practices, gain better access to markets, improve crop quality, increase income, and enhance food security and nutrition to their communities. The impact of such initiatives is substantial, as they enable farmers to overcome the limitations imposed by traditional farming methods and economic constraints. Moving forward, expanding access to modern agricultural tools and knowledge will be essential in empowering smallholder farmers to achieve sustainable agricultural practices and improve their livelihoods in Sub-Saharan Africa (Alila & Atieno, 2006).

Awareness of Development Aids

To effectively enhance farming in Sub-Saharan Africa, smallholders must gain awareness of development aid initiatives that prioritize long-term farming practices, effective water management, access to markets, and achieving zero hunger goals. For instance, Thurow portrays the hurdles faced by small farmers like Leonida Wanyama, mother of seven children who grapples with financial difficulties, struggles to provide education for her children, and faces health issues including malnutrition due to limited access to healthcare and nutritious food. Rasoa Wasike, mother three young boys experiences stress balancing farming with family responsibilities and endure food scarcity during the hunger season, leading to malnutrition and household stress. Zipporah Biketi, mother of four children encounters educational barriers due to inability to afford school fees for her children, while Francis Mamati, father of nine children deals with economic instability deteriorated by unpredictable weather patterns.

Jaideep Hardikar a rural journalist, writer and researcher has extensively reported on farmer suicides and struggles. In his work, ‘Ramrao’ he attempts to showcase the unending crisis of the framers in Maharashtra’s Vidharbharegion. Ramrao Panchleniwar, a cotton grower tried suicide due to his inability to provide education to his daughter, adapt the unpredictable climate pattern, unaffordable mechanization, to repay the loan and the loss of hope. The barriers and hurdles of all the characters discussed here is a global crisis and their challenges can be addressed through the support and strategies offered by private organizations. Initiatives and organizations by providing quality seeds, fertilizers, training programs and affordable agriculture tools can stabilize their livelihoods amidst economic uncertainties and improve overall food security and profitable farming throughout the year.

Conclusion

The Sub Saharan African regions suffer from hunger and starvation can drastically change from lower to surplus productivity through concerted efforts. This transformation depends on fostering awareness and implementing effective policies, such as family planning and literacy programs to empower rural African communities. Women, who play pivotal roles in agriculture and food production in Sub-Saharan Africa, must be empowered through improved education, access to resources, and greater decision-making authority. Long-term commitment from all stakeholders is imperative, ensuring policy consistency, sufficient funding, and rigorous accountability to scale impactful interventions. Ultimately, these measures collectively aim to achieve sustainable food security and reduce poverty across the world.

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