COP27 has promised Africa’s food security which now calls for action

Nancy Rapando, Africa’s Food Future Leader. WWF-Kenya, 15 Nov 2022

The African continent stands at a crossroads, with the World Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) estimating that over 278 million people in Africa, or 20 per cent, suffer from chronic hunger.

Arable land is in decline. The soils are overworked and have become degraded, nutrient deficient and prone to leaching over time.

The rains no longer come on schedule and river water volumes have been dropping steadily over the years, due to declining forest cover and the destruction of water catchments.

In semi-arid areas, livestock numbers have risen, yet pasture and water resources have dwindled due to human settlement, land use, and habitat changes.

Fisherfolk hasn’t been spared either, with overfishing, pollution, siltation, hyacinth infestation and shifts in water levels impacting fish species and harvests.

Food security is hampered by cultural aspects as well. Certain communities, for instance, will not take up arable farming or fish farming even when opportunities exist, while women and youths in many instances do not own livestock or land.

Africa’s inability to feed itself has necessitated dependence on fertilizer and food imports to fill the gaps over the years, but the recent Covid-19 global pandemic and the Ukraine–Russia war crises illustrate the fragility of being food insecure.

With global economies destabilized, the price of farm inputs has skyrocketed, in a grim period when African countries are grappling with the worst drought in 40 years and millions face starvation.
This undertaking can, however, only be effected through global and national efforts.

In September, last year, world leaders gathered at the United Nations Food Systems Summit in New York and pledged to transform food systems into a key ingredient towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

SDGs are a United Nations call to action to end poverty and inequality, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy health, justice and prosperity. This noble call will however not be achieved unless global leaders entrench the ‘food systems transformation agenda’ in key global policy processes.

This year’s UN Climate Change Conference in Sharm Al-sheikh Egypt, provided Africa, an opportunity to seek pledges and make specific demands regarding the transformation of food systems.

During the roundtable on “Food security,” co-chaired by HE Ulf Kristersson, Prime Minister of Sweden, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, pledged to invest $1.4 billion over four years to support smallholder farmers, particularly women, with innovative digital technologies in Africa.

The International Finance Corporation (IFC) also announced the launch of their $6 billion global food security platform.

No doubt, this is a welcome move.

First, and this is critical, the hunger crisis raving the horn of Africa should not be ignored, but the deliberations that were held should be honoured.

More than ever, African governments should emphasise the need to safeguard food security and end hunger in line with the global call to “end poverty and inequality, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy health, justice and prosperity”.

To this end, through the funds promised, African smallholder farmers who are the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, should be protected.

This calls for global and African leaders and thinkers, from the outset, to view food security not as a production issue but as one that demands a holistic approach that addresses the food system’s ecological, economic and social dynamics.

At the apex stand conservation of our natural resources. In Africa, as elsewhere in the world, climate and nature have a bearing on food security. But because of climate risks, for which Africa contributes the least and whose consequences it suffers, are undermining the continent’s ability to feed itself, the global community is morally bound to help conserve and protect Africa’s natural resources so as to guarantee food for African communities.

Regional institutions such as the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) and the Africa Development Bank (AFDB) can also help by providing the required leadership, finance and capacities, and developing the required incentives for establishing a sustainable food future.

Africa hunger crisis is not only related to calorie hunger but also micronutrient hunger, requiring that any solutions to Africa food crisis must address nutrition security. The emphasis during this COP should be on creating sustainable diets to protect Africans, who are perennially exposed to
extreme hunger periods impacting on micronutrient availability.

Equally significant, African leaders must address pre and post harvest losses while ensuring waste within the retail and urban food systems are heavily addressed. Implicit here is the global support to enable African governments to build capacities and provide infrastructure for sustainable food production and post-harvest management for farmers.

Discussions to focus on building the blue economy to help resolve the food crisis are now live in Africa, regarding sustainable fishing, safe, post-harvest handling and protection of fish and marine food habitats that took centerstage at COP27, which is also a good start to resolve the hunger crisis.

As WWF Africa Food Futures Leader, Nancy Rapando, emphasized during the COP27: "We have seen good ambition in this COP on food systems integration evidenced by the side events and numerous pavilions on food. From the negotiators, it is still too early to predict. We are here representing people who are hungry and we cannot delay action. The least we can expect from negotiators is an actionable plan and clear modalities on how Africa food systems are transformed to face climate change impacts of climate change." This is nothing further from the truth.