

*By Abisola Alaka**

African countries are not on track to meet both the African Union Malabo targets and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on ending hunger. The Malabo Declaration, adopted by African Union member states in 2014, calls for the intensification of collective efforts towards the eradication of hunger and malnutrition by 2025. The Sustainable Development Goals, adopted globally in 2015, aim to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture by 2030.

The number of hungry people in Africa now stands at 250 million, nearly one-fifth of the population. The continent also has the highest prevalence of undernourishment (19 per cent), more than twice the global average (8.9 per cent). Close to 58 million children are stunted in the continent, out of which close to 52.4 million live in sub-Saharan Africa. In addition to hunger, across all countries in Africa, millions of people suffer from widespread micronutrient deficiencies, and overweight and obesity are emerging as significant health concerns in many countries. The high vulnerability of economic and livelihood systems to climate variability and extremes, conflict and instabilities, transboundary pests and diseases and adverse economic conditions have all contributed to such conditions. The case of Desert Locust that has been ravaging crops and pasture in Eastern Africa is an example of how vulnerable rural livelihoods can be to risks. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the problem further, with its far-reaching impacts on the lives and livelihoods of people. In 2019, 73 million people, 6 million more than in 2018, in 36 countries in Africa, faced acute food insecurity or hunger and required urgent food assistance: 37 million due to conflict, 26 million due to climate shocks, and 10 million due to economic shocks.

Vulnerable groups, communities and countries have been impacted more because they lack the necessary capacities to absorb the shocks. Together, these compounded crises have resulted in unprecedented socio-economic impacts and eroded the resilience of large segments of the population on the continent, especially the poor and marginalized groups, and are threatening to wipe out the modest gains made towards achieving Zero Hunger by 2025 and other Malabo Commitments and Agenda 2063, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals.

African governments have made commitments to accelerate and deepen the transformative power of food systems in a manner aligned with the 2030 Agenda. The focus is on feeding growing populations in ways that improve people's nutrition, health and well-being; restore and protect nature, adapt to local circumstances, and provide decent jobs and inclusive economies. Although positive progress is being made, the rate of progress is slower than required, and accelerated action is critical to bringing positive change in food and nutrition

security.

Development actors are investing in strengthening the capacities of countries to collect data and monitor SDG indicators. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), on its part, has advocated with countries for the inclusion of SDGs and CAADP/Malabo commitments in respective national strategic and investment plans. Capacity-building efforts were made to raise awareness and develop capacities of countries and regional institutions on statistical tools for estimating progress made against SDG-2 indicators.

Moving forward, what must Africa do to accelerate progress towards its own goals?

Mobilizing political commitment for a sharper programmatic and investment focus on food security and nutrition, facilitating stronger partnerships and inter-sectorial coordination, and strengthening governance and accountability mechanisms needed to achieve tangible impact are paramount.

Primarily, African countries must recognize the need for stronger political will and leadership to fulfill the Malabo and SDG commitments they have made to ensure food and nutrition security. Political commitment at the highest level, translating the commitment into national legislation and related budget instruments, where feasible, and concrete action at national and local levels actions are critical. There is an urgent need for the continent to build back and forward better with government investment in social protection measures to serve the most vulnerable in society. The transformation of the African food system through the adoption of a common vision, robust leadership, conducive policy environment, and holistic multi-sectorial approaches, with involvement of the private sector in developing solutions is crucial.

A sustainable food system lies at the heart of the SDGs, which call for significant transformations in agriculture and food systems to end hunger, achieve food security and improve nutrition by 2030. Increasing investment in agriculture is vital as the sector has a vast potential constituting Africa's most important source of livelihoods. The agricultural sector and associated services employ 65-70 per cent of the continent's labour force and account for about 30-40 per cent of GDP. African countries must intensify production sustainably through mechanization and digitalization across the value chain and harness the youth dividend. They must also improve land governance, empower women to reduce the gender gap, reduce post-harvest losses and lower transaction costs by investing in road networks, transportation, and market infrastructure. In this regard, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) provides a unique opportunity for the transformation of the food

system.

Market-driven Research for Development and strengthening climate data analysis and reinforcing Early Warning Early Action (EWEA) systems to protect livelihoods remains of relevance and importance for the Food Systems in the Region.

Africa can harness available resources, science, technology, and innovations and explore policy options that support African food systems development. Expanding the Humanitarian-Development-Peace efforts through better coordination, better programming and better financing will support and enable the implementation of mechanisms to address short-term, medium and long-term food security concerns. Finally, strengthening political, economic and social institutions capacities (including food systems) will go a long way in ensuring good governance and delivery of equitable services for robust, more efficient and sustainable food systems. Above all, stronger political will and leadership can play a vital role in aiding the efforts of African countries to meet SDG and Malabo commitments to end hunger and eradicate poverty.

**Ms. Abisola Alaka is Senior Administrative Officer for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Subregional Office for Eastern Africa and Representation to the African Union and UNECA*