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Overfarming African Land Is Worsening Hunger Crisis

By CELIA W. DUGGER

The degradation of farmland across sub-Saharan Africa has accelerated at an ominous rate over the past decade, deepening a hunger crisis that already afflicts more than 240 million Africans, according to a study released yesterday.

Three-quarters of Africa's farmland is severely depleted of the basic nutrients needed to grow crops, compared with 40 percent just a decade ago, the study found. African farmers can afford only a fraction of the fertilizers needed to replenish their increasingly barren fields.

Traditionally, farmers cleared land, grew crops for a few harvests, then let the fields lie fallow for 10 or 15 years to rejuvenate as they moved on to clear more land, the study reports. But as they try to feed a rapidly growing population, the farmers instead grow crop after crop, sapping the soil's fertility.

"Nothing grows, so the topsoil is blown away by the wind and washed away by the rains," said Amit H. Roy, president of the International Fertilizer Development Center, a nonprofit agricultural aid organization, which produced the study. "It goes into the river system, silting them, and out to the oceans."

If this process continues unabated, crop yields in Africa will fall as much as 30 percent in the next 15 years, even as the region's population continues to grow rapidly, the researchers predicted. Africa would be likely to face more frequent famines and become ever more dependent on food aid and imports.

Farmers desperate for land are increasingly clearing forests, as well as the savannas that sustain Africa's extraordinary wildlife. Already, farmland in Africa yields less than a third the amount of grain of that in Asia and Latin America. The problem of depleted soil is worst in Guinea, Congo, Angola, Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda.

"To feed our people, we must feed our soils," said Nigeria's president, Olusegun Obasanjo, at a news conference at the Rockefeller Foundation in New York City to release the study.

Mr. Obasanjo will be the host of a June meeting on Africa's fertilizer needs in Abuja that is expected to draw leading experts on rural development as well as wealthy donors.

Foreign aid aimed at improving agricultural productivity in Africa declined sharply in the 1990's and has begun to recover only in recent years. About two-thirds of Africa's 750 million people depend on agriculture for income and employment.

Fertilizer that could restore productivity is far too expensive for Africa's small and often impoverished farmers. Fertilizer in Africa costs two to six times the world average. African farmers use less than 10 percent as much fertilizer as Asian farmers do.

Lowering the price is no simple task. Africa's awful, sparse roads make transportation difficult. It costs more to move fertilizer from an African seaport 60 miles inland than to ship it from the United States to Africa, the researchers said.

To bring a green revolution to Africa would require a functioning road network, credit for farmers, extension agents to teach new methods, better irrigation, as well as development of retailers to sell fertilizers and improved seed varieties in rural areas, the study's authors and experts said at the news conference.

It would also mean combating the corruption that would siphon off the funds for such an ambitious effort, a point made at the news conference by both African journalists and Mr. Obasanjo.

The world's wealthiest countries have pledged to increase aid to Africa substantially in the coming decade, and Mr. Obasanjo said those new resources will help.

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