Wagner Today

David Krantz's Letter from Ghana: Lessons in Global Hunger and Sustainable Agriculture

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ACCRA, Ghana -- Dressed in a pink blouse, floral skirt and mismatched plastic flip flops, Anoko Givisi-Adams, 80, carried a machete and a hand hoe through the fields in the neighborhood of La, where she has lived her whole life. When she reached her plot -- about a fifteenth of an acre -- she used the hoe to rip out the remains of her green-bean crop. She then irrigated her remaining crops with water that she had hauled from a nearby drainage canal and stored in old oil and paint cans beneath a neem tree.

Having outlived her parents, her husband, her siblings and all of her children, Givisi-Adams worked as a hair stylist until four years ago, when she began working as a farmer's assistant here. Neither she nor the farmer for whom she works owns the plot -- they tend to undeveloped land in a form of agricultural squatting. They grow corn, peppers, beans, okra, tomatoes and other fruits and vegetables off a dirt road just beyond newly built middle- and upper-class homes. When the owners of the land decide to sell, the farms will be razed and seeded with single-family homes. In the meantime, farmers like Givisi-Adams are growing food for themselves and enough extra to be sold at market.

Givisi-Adams is just one of the people that I have met here as part of NYU Wagner's class, "Hunger and Food Security in a Global Perspective," taught by professors Diana Beck and John Gershman.

Across town in the neighborhood of Dzorwulu, Bukari Fuseini, 45, farms the wasteland between an electrical substation and a drainage canal -- land on which Ghanaian law prohibits construction -- with 30 other farmers and 17 assistants. With support from the International Water Management Institute in collaboration with the Resource Centres on Urban Agriculture and Food Security, the farmers grow lettuce, cucumber and other fruits and vegetables, utilizing crop rotation to help soil quality.

Fuseini started as an assistant farmer on someone else's plot in 1981 and nine years later he started farming his own plot. Today he's the head of the area's farmers' association, but he's still growing vegetables, which he uses to feed himself, his wife and three children, with plenty left over to sell at market.

"It makes me feel great," Fuseini said. "I learn a lot farming here."

As part of the class, my classmates and I learned of new programs that are being developed to help support small-scale local agriculture. For example, in central Accra, the government-run Ghana School Feeding Programme, in conjunction with a host of NGOs, including the U.N. World Food Programme, is implementing a nationwide school-lunch system that supports local agriculture across Ghana. The goal isn't only to provide nutrition to the poor and reducing energy consumption -- since less fuel is burned to transport food shorter distances -- but also to support regional economies by seeking to provide school lunches composed at least 80 percent of food grown by farmers who live in the same areas as the schools. The program requires local procurement unless the food isn't available locally. That helps create market demand for the produce grown by farmers like Givisi-Adams and Fuseini.

In Kumasi, Ghana's second-largest city, we met the leaders of the Kuapa Kokoo collective, which organizes and provides support to about 60,000 fair-trade cocoa farmers in about 1,400 villages throughout the country. By pooling their resources into the cooperative and operating every step of the chocolate-manufacturing process -- from cocoa-bean processing to distributing to production of the chocolate bars themselves -- the farmers are able to capture much more of the money in the cocoa value chain than they would if they just cultivated cocoa trees. Kuapa Kokoo then funnels that extra revenue back into the farming communities by building schools and potable-water facilities.

In a small village outside of Kumasi, we met some of Kuapa Kokoo's farmers. They took us into the forest, where they grow cocoa in the cool shade of taller trees. After picking a few yellow cocoa pods off a trunk, a villager sliced one open with a machete and shared with us the sweet and viscous white pulp that surrounds every bean.

It's one thing to read about international food policy in books; it's quite another to see how these policies are implemented on the ground. In Ghana, I've been learning the human side of the policies that I study back in New York; I hope to use that knowledge when considering food policy in the future. Most importantly, through studying projects such as Kuapa Kokoo and the Ghana School Feeding Programme, I learned about how local agricultural systems in developing countries can become self-sustainable. Rather than relying solely on foreign aid to both fund and run programs, these new projects are being run by locals. Sometimes, as with the Ghana School Feeding Programme, there remains funding from foreign organizations and governments, and sometimes the project is financially self-sustainable without outside assistance, as with Kuapa Kokoo.

"It's a more comprehensive way of looking at agriculture," Allen Fleming, director of the Agriculture, Business and Environment Office at USAID, told us at the American embassy in Accra. "There's a big difference between food security and food self-sufficiency."

In Ghana, we've been seeing that difference first-hand.

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