

Guest column: Agriculture essential for lifting people out of poverty

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Agriculture remains critical to economic and human development, as recently affirmed in two very distant parts of the world. Last month, at a meeting in Rapid City, S.D., the National Congress of American Indians went on record urging support for an Indian Agriculture Act to assist the poorest Indian tribes in the United States, and the poorest Americans. Half a world away, the African Union, the organization that brings together all the countries of Africa, adopted a Comprehensive African Agriculture Development Program that urges all African countries to devote at least 10 percent of their national budgets to agriculture.

America has long understood the essential link between agriculture and a healthy, robust national economy. We built America on homesteads, and made ourselves a self-sufficient exporter of food to the world. This science-based food independence became a foundation not only of our industrial boom, our urban culture, and even our new information technology but also our national security and global standing. Today, agriculture is again seen as the key to climbing out of poverty.

The rural American Indian tribes of the Missouri River Valley are today suffering the highest unemployment rates in America, as high as 60 or 70 percent being common and reaching 90 percent for the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe in South Dakota. This economic failure leads to comprehensive social breakdown that affects health care, education, crime and the entire quality of life. Because these reservations are so rural, tourism and casinos are of little economic benefit.

In sub-Saharan Africa, 300 million people are hungry. Medical doctors on the front line against AIDS in Eldoret, Kenya, are forced to grow their own crops if they want to provide their patients with the food needed to go with the AIDS medication.

In Africa, the effort to spur agriculture development is being led by a new organization called the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), chaired by Kofi Annan, the former secretary general of the United Nations, with backing from the Gates and Rockefeller Foundations. AGRA's goal is to help spark emergence of a vibrant, homegrown agricultural economy led by smallholder farmers, mostly women, and thereby lift Africa out of poverty. To do this, it has focused on education, seed production, soils, marketing, credit and public policy. Already in the past two years, its coordinated effort has produced 34 new business enterprises producing over 13,000 metric tons of improved crop seeds, trained some 7,000 agriculture dealers in business management, and sponsored 80 new Ph.D.s in agricultural science.

At the core of AGRA's approach is a basic respect for sound science. Secretary of State Hillary

Clinton, speaking at the recent announcement of the World Food Prize, accompanied by USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack, summed it up: "If we are to feed the future without leveling the forests, draining the aquifers, and depleting the soil of all nutrients, then we need science Drought resistant seeds would change the calculus and begin to give farmers more control over their our environment."

On the Northern Plains, the turn toward agriculture is no less dramatic. An Indian Agriculture Act, as conceived of by the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, would mandate that the U.S. Department of Agriculture target its arsenal of proven programs toward Indian reservations, generating agriculture production, food-based start-up businesses, and needed infrastructure improvements, such as broadband.

A successful Indian agriculture effort could secure the economic health of a major region of the American heartland, providing economic stimulus far more effective than most others tried. The tribes themselves now recognize that enforcing their treaties with the United States, while critical to sovereignty, is not enough. They must build a private sector economy to pull themselves out of poverty, and agriculture is the key.

The 47 countries in sub-Saharan Africa represent 25 percent of all the votes in the United Nations' General Assembly, and are a prized export market of the future. Already, they have become magnets of foreign investments from China, Japan and the Middle East. America cannot afford to lose this market. Africans have strong ties through language and culture with America. Many speak English - a legacy of British and French colonialism - and the election of President Obama has sparked a special goodwill.

The Obama administration and the Congress should support both the Indian Agriculture Act and a green revolution in Africa. Beyond the compelling humanitarian considerations, it would benefit our economic and political interests.

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