

Voices on Society

The art and science of delivery



In honor of the 10th anniversary of the Skoll World Forum

Ending hunger in Africa

We can help poor farmers double their harvests by eliminating distribution bottlenecks

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In theory, we ended poverty decades ago. Advances in health, financial services, and technology have illuminated a clear development path for the poor. Unfortunately, development theory alone never fed a child. The great challenge now lies in the hands of the entrepreneurs who must distribute these interventions across vast areas with no infrastructure.

Advances in seed and fertilizer technology have helped double farm productivity in many regions of the world. Most African farmers still have not seen these benefits. For the 75 percent of Africa's poor who depend on agriculture for their livelihood, a doubling of the harvest would mean the difference between subsistence and profitability, hunger and surplus, and poverty and opportunity. Yet even the most basic agricultural technologies are not reaching a significant number of African farmers. There is a massive distribution failure.

One Acre Fund believes that the greatest humanitarian challenge of our era is to distribute life-changing technologies to the neglected rural areas where most poor people live. In agriculture, two primary barriers make distribution challenging. First, product distribution is difficult because the distances are vast and transportation logistics are often undeveloped. Second, rural areas operate in a total market void. Even where improved seed and fertilizer are available, fewer than 10 percent of farmers have access to credit, rendering the technologies unaffordable. And in the absence of training, farm inputs like improved seed and fertilizer are largely ineffective. These barriers make it difficult for new interventions to succeed.

One Acre Fund has developed a model for distributing agricultural technologies directly to Africa's poor farmers. We



have set up more than 800 rural market points that bring our services within walking distance of the people we serve. In Rwanda, for example, our market points will make our services available within walking distance to more than 50 percent of the population in the next four years.

We don't just dump off development technology and expect it to work. We provide small, \$80 loans that allow farmers to pay for our seed and fertilizer packages. We provide training, so that farmers actually realize improved productivity from these new technologies. And we help farmers to sell their surplus, so that they can move from subsistence to a commercial mind-set. Our market bundle produces hard results: on average, our farmers double their net farm profits within one planting season.

Since our inception in 2006, we have worked to scale our model as quickly as possible. In the past seven years, we have grown to serve 130,000 rural farm families across Burundi, Kenya, and Rwanda, with more than 600,000 children living in those families. Our local field staff is 1,300 people strong and drives our growth at a rate of 50 to 90 percent a year. Within the decade, we expect to serve more than 1.5 million farm families directly.

Across Africa, there is no shortage of opportunities for entrepreneurs as the continent continues along its explosive development path. In agriculture alone, we need thousands more businesses active in everything from agricultural-input manufacturing and distribution to business and consumer finance, weather and crop insurance, farmer training, market-price information, and crop storage. If you multiply those categories across two dozen different crop families in dozens of countries, it's clear that a breathtaking number of businesses must be created.

At the same time, we believe that the barriers to entrepreneurship are rapidly eroding. Although government is often seen as an obstacle to business formation, we believe it can provide great opportunities for social entrepreneurs, as well as for traditional for-profit businesses. By partnering with our host governments, One Acre Fund has seen significant opportunities to extend the impact of our work.

While many challenges remain, the possibilities are staggering. Along with our partners in government, civil society, and the private sector, we look forward to helping end hunger in Africa—not just in theory but in reality. □