



# Opportunities and threats: In a globalised world, how does Africa become self-reliant

by James Cooper, Milling and Grain Contributor

‘The Good Life’ is the classic situation comedy about a British middle-class couple in the 1970s who turn their suburban London home into a self-sufficient farm.

Tom Good packs in his city job and with his wife attempts to live a life completely off-grid with animals and crops. Seemingly futile and bordering on the ridiculous, it was nonetheless profoundly aspirational.

A big part of its allure was how it played on the nostalgia of the ‘Dig for Victory’ war effort to combat shortages of food imports. In wartime, Britons were persuaded to plough up every verge and playing field into allotments, from domestic gardens to public parks, even the lawns outside the Tower of London were turned into vegetable plots.

Viewed through a lens of global food insecurity, Tom Good’s project is beginning to look like a great idea. But is self-sufficiency still a fruitless pipe dream?

Certainly, after another tough year for the consumer and with food prices on an ever-increasing trajectory such pursuits today seem far from folly.

But what does self-sufficiency mean at scale? Can we produce all of it? Would we even want to? Would we be willing to give up fruits that are not only out of season but could never be commercially grown in the UK? And to be truly self-sufficient we’d also have to give up coffee, wine chocolate, sugar, soy products and many more.

I’m not sure I want to embrace this new diet.

## Only possible through trade

Brexit (for better or worse, but mostly worse) has set us on a path to economic isolation from Europe, and we’re all painfully aware, especially since Covid-19 - but also other international calamities; the conflict in Ukraine, the Suez blockage, a labour crisis - that essential supplies of food, goods and energy are volatile, can be held to ransom or simply switched off.

We have all witnessed supermarket shelves stripped of basic essentials due to supply chain failures.

A trade that gives us asparagus from Mexico, snowpeas from Egypt and salad crops from Italy and Spain. To go back to pre-colonial food self-sufficiency would require either a massive

drop in population or a massive increase in UK farm productivity which, while possible to some degree is unlikely.

But, rising fuel, fertiliser and feed costs are piling pressure onto farmers and, according to the NFU (National Farmers Union), the UK is “sleeping-walking” into a food supply crisis. In most respects we’re the lucky ones - other countries reached crisis point many months ago.

Food and energy costs are closely linked and clearly, one big factor driving up food prices has been the fallout from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the rising cost of grain. Collectively both countries produce 30 percent of global wheat exports. And with inflation running at 23 percent, Russians too are finding out how difficult life can be, albeit for very different reasons.

## National control

News agencies around the world are reporting on a call for a form of independence, for a sense of national control. It’s making us all re-think how we feed ourselves, now and in the future.

Across many nations, sub-Saharan Africa in particular, it’s a matter of survival: Of economic security and essential sustenance. Leaders are looking at their supply chain dependencies and wondering what they can do better, to become more self-sufficient. The idea of food security and self-reliance are right up there at the top of political agendas.

“The big question I always get is ‘what is a food crisis? How do we measure it? What does history say about it?’ asks economist Dan Basse, President of AgResource, a domestic and international agricultural research firm located in Chicago, talking to MAG from a ‘Farm Foundation’ meeting in Georgia, USA - where Dan is hosting panel discussing the Black Sea situation with policymakers including USDA Secretaries and the World Food Programme.

“When I asked this question to the UN and the WTO, they said to me ‘We look back in time at the amount of grain kilos per person that are available at any particular season, and then we try to measure whether or not those kilos are enough to feed the world,’” explains Basse,

“In particular, this food crisis was going to become acute for about 80 million people in sub-Saharan Africa.

“Nations are turning inward and trying to look at themselves,” explains Dan.

“Some of this becomes evident by the competitive nature, economically and ‘business-wise’ [sic] between countries like China and the United States. The Black Sea and Russia now only enhances that view that just-in-time inventory is not the way to be looking at food security going forward.

“Over 30 countries, last spring, either taxed or restricted their exports of grain, whether they be small or large countries. And that was very concerning and showed that globalisation being flat [even] for trade is really not the case.

“We have countries like Egypt, which is seeing a tremendous appreciation of the Egyptian pound. Egypt is the world's largest wheat importer.

“Well, its cost to buy wheat from a currency perspective is skyrocketing 70 percent. So even though world wheat prices may be down for the Egyptian population, they are at record highs and the same in India.

“So, this this idea that world prices are our level and even for all was something that manifested itself for much of the last two decades. But I think it's slowly changing now.

“I think the best word we can come up with is regionalization. And those regions will look for their own food security.

“I worry that if the war continues into the spring, we will have problems with both wheat and sunflower and corn crops in the season ahead,” says Basse.

As the impacts of climate change continue to intensify and global shocks upend business as usual, sub-Saharan Africa is now feeling the brunt of what has been coined ‘the perfect storm’ – a food, fuel and fertilizer crisis exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, scarring effects from the COVID-19 pandemic, soaring inflation, rising debt and extreme weather.

“Now, becoming more self-sufficient in an uncertain world is starting to look like a very good idea indeed.”

### Enhancing its own food

A big problem is lack of investment because investors don't necessarily feel comfortable their capital is safe.

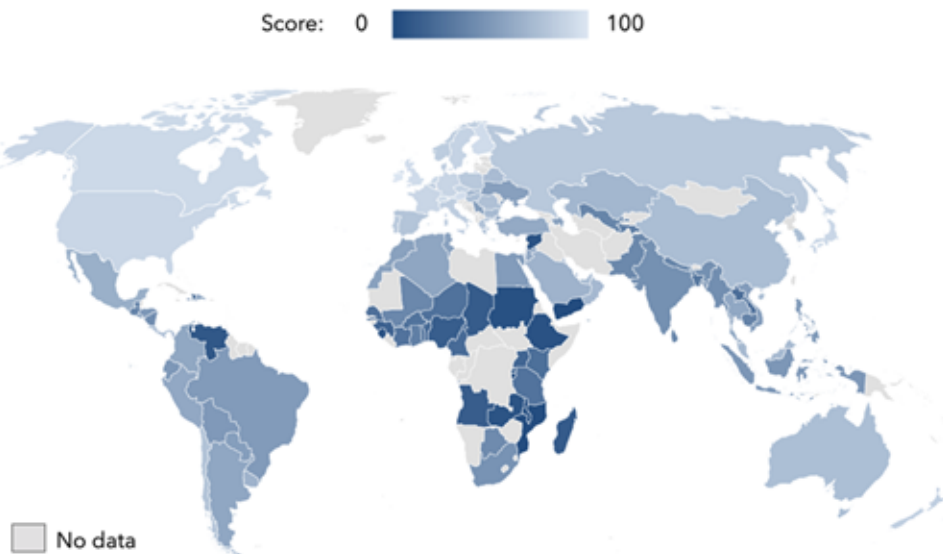
“Africa needs to step forward here and enhance its own food production. Africa does not need to be an importer. It's blessed with a climate, outside of North Africa, that could be advantageous to feeding much of the of itself and even portions of the world,” Basse says. So, what is holding it back?

“Africa needs more investment in technologically, to produce crops, to store them and logistically, to move them; and unfortunately, that investment is not being made or difficult because people worry about the sanctity of their capital relative to controls.

“If you invest in Africa and its farms and it happens to be a productive farm that makes money, in my 40-year career, sometimes those productive farms are taken back by the

## Hunger metrics

Sub-Saharan Africa is the world's most food insecure region.  
(the most food-insecure countries have darkest shading)



Sources: Global Food Security Index 2021 and IMF staff calculations.

Note: The Economist Impact Global Food Security Index assesses countries' food security outlook based on official data, expert judgement, and surveys. It includes 28 countries in sub-Saharan Africa and tracks four food-security metrics: availability, affordability, quality and safety, and natural resources and resilience. The boundaries, colors, denominations, and any other information shown on the maps do not imply, on the part of the International Monetary Fund, any judgment on the legal status of any territory or any endorsement or acceptance of such boundaries.

IMF

government. Local African governments can say, hey, that's now ours.

“The Chinese have been able to get around that because of their size and scale and social programmes that they've been investing in. But others, most of us in the agricultural world, worry about investment in new farms or new technology in Africa, unless it's very small scale.

“That doesn't help the problem of Africa feeding itself, or really what we think should happen, that Africa should be a net exporter of grain. It has the climate, but the investment or the capital just is not there.”

And while there may be enough grain to share around on a ‘per capita basis’, with nations holding stocks this crude metric is not helpful.

“China is holding roughly half of the world grain supplies today,” explains Basse.

“Unfortunately, China's not going to release those grain reserves or help. They were asked of course, last spring if they could help and they said no. And so, the Chinese see their own food security as being front and centre, rather is trying to help the impoverished of Southeast Asia or Africa.”

Perhaps the progressive, globally minded, despaired hearing Donald Trump's nationalistic cry at his 2017 inauguration: ‘America first, America first’, an older trade policy which Trump re-branded as his own slogan. But one that nevertheless galvanised in most Americans a clear desire for self-reliance and economic security – it also emphasised the United States' withdrawal from international treaties and organizations.”

Events of 2022 and the fallout from the Ukraine crisis now place his comments in a quite different light. Whatever you might think of Trump's policies, with many countries now scrambling to be more self-sufficient, it's hard not to reflect on his slogan as at least insightful.

But is closing down international trade really desirable long term?

No modern economy can possibly aspire to complete Autarky like the North Korean model, especially when juxtaposed too starkly against the economic success of South Korea. We should remember perhaps that the South Korean government created the space for the Hyundai and other ‘infant’ carmakers to ‘grow up’ by banning the import of all automobiles until 1988.

### **Why is Africa a net food importer?**

In trying to explain Africa’s food-trade deficit since the mid-1970s, the FAO cite population growth, low and stagnating agricultural productivity, policy distortions, weak institutions and poor infrastructure as the main reasons.

The world bank has declared ‘No priority is more pressing than addressing food insecurity to safeguard the calorie and nutrition needs of Africa’s one billion people and protect their human development.’

At least one in five Africans goes to bed hungry and an estimated 140 million people in Africa face acute food insecurity, according to the 2022 Global Report on Food Crises 2022 Mid-Year Update.

The Horn of Africa is suffering from persistent drought and countries that depend on Russia and Ukraine for wheat and sunflower oil imports have seen prices skyrocket out of reach of ordinary people.

So, it begs the question – has Africa become far too dependent on imported grains? How can it become more self-reliant to buffer itself from these devastating effects?

Josefa Sacko, the African Union commissioner for agriculture, said Africa must become self-sufficient in food production in

order to better insulate itself against external crises like the Ukraine -Russia conflict.

Africa sourced 44 percent of its wheat from Russia and Ukraine before the conflict broke out and was hit hard by the disruption to global supply chains caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

“We need to build a resilient agri-food system on the African continent” she said on Africa Day last year. “We must build a sustainable, resilient food system that can withstand future shocks,” adding that short- and medium-term financial support should be geared towards this goal.

### **Transforming agriculture to feed its people**

“No conversation can be had about Africa without recognising the key drivers of raising food insecurity: climate change, conflict and global economic slowdown,” says Ade Freeman, Regional Leader at FAO’s Regional Programme Office for Africa in Accra, Ghana.

Speaking to MAG yesterday at short notice over a videocall, Ade Freeman switches his office over to an FAO branded background with the organisations’ ethos – ‘Better Production, Better Environment, Better life’ translated into six languages and emblazoned over his head.

“Take any metric and Africa has seen a significant deterioration in food security and nutrition situation since 2014; the most recent data from 2021 indicates during this period the number of hungry people has increased by 89 million to a total figure of 201million.”

Freeman is keen to point out where Africa stands on food security and nutrition within the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (SDG) agenda, which has set targets to ensure that all people in the world have access to safe and nutritious food all year round.

According to The World Bank Several countries in the region,

such as Angola, Tanzania and Zambia, have the potential to become agricultural powerhouses on the continent. But this will require transforming the agricultural sector to meet these goals and needs of the people, economy and environment.

“Africa seems to bear the brunt of the global negative impacts but the drivers themselves are not necessarily emanating from Africa, Covid being a classic example,” says Freeman

Freeman explains that these external drivers are compounded by the fact that population growth rates have been historically high at up to three percent annually, while agricultural production has only increased by 4.3 percent since 2000.

Key to understanding this increase is that it comes from expansion, that is, ‘land under cultivation’, but not from an increase in productivity, which remains sub-optimal due to inadequate inputs.

“For example, areas under irrigation are less than four percent and levels of fertiliser use at only 10 percent of their potential. Limited use of improved agricultural technology is also a critical drag,” he explains.

### The need for built-in resilience

Unlocking this vast potential gives reason to be extremely optimistic about the future for Africa.

“It is possible that agricultural productivity could be two to three times higher with increased private and public investment,” says Freeman.

Working against this are perceptions and concerns of systemic corruption across African regional governments, so working on addressing and improving investment risk is a main goal of the FAO, the World Bank, World Economic Forum and others.

“Organisations like FAO are really focused on supporting countries to improve the policy and regulatory environment, the enabling environment that provide the right incentives for investment like those that Dan Basse is talking about”, noting Rwanda and Morocco as prime examples where such an environment has been created, and risk reduced.

“We think that the potential to unleash the productivity potential in Africa is really to provide the right incentives for all kinds of actors along the supply chain, upstream suppliers, producers, farmers, small medium large, grain processors, food distributors, logistics operators, to have the right incentive to make the investment that we critically need. We're talking about the investment gap here.”

Freeman asserts that if the 100 million metric tonnes of food, the US\$75 million that is spent on food imports annually to Africa, can be competitively traded in the African economies, that is a huge potential for growth.

“We want that US\$75 million to be spent within the African region amongst African countries in the food sector and drive economic transformation.”

But he concedes, “If we're going to be successful in Africa. Even though public investment is critical, the bulk of the



Dan Basse, President of AgResource, an international agricultural research firm located in Chicago, USA at the recent IAOM MEA Congress in Zanzibar, Tanzania

financing has to come from private sources.”

New drought resistant gene edited strains of wheat will certainly be part of the solution, but perhaps also a renaissance of traditional grains like Teff and Fonio.

### Regionalisation and diversity

Many experts are warning that our food system isn't ready for the climate crisis.

The food industry has increasingly relied on fewer and fewer crop varieties that can be mass produced and shipped around the world.

“The line between abundance and disaster is becoming thinner and thinner and the public is unaware and unconcerned,” writes Dan Saladino in his book *Eating to Extinction*.

Free trade in food is generally regarded by economists as a good thing.

Countries have differential competitive advantages, climatic conditions, rainfall, soil types, etc and this delivers a reciprocal glut of fine produce grown in season in vast volume by an organised and motivated workforce.

For Africa the problem is, over time, a historical dependence on core staple crops, wheat, maize, soy. Millions of tonnes of which are required to feed people, and in many cases there's not an obvious transition back to traditional diets simply because to the vast volumes required.

But increasingly we are all seeing and experiencing what happens when that system is disrupted. Today, while we have become used to having fresh produce and huge variety all year round, only made possible by international trade, we have been reminded that food is also a key weapon of war.

So perhaps the whole concept of self-sufficiency is missing the point?

While Africa focusses on developing its agricultural systems, in the meanwhile perhaps instead this could be seen as a good way of refocussing efforts to have more resilient supply chains within emerging world regions.

Luigi Guarino, director of science of the Crop Trust, has said, “Climate change is the greatest threat to food security, there is nothing bigger. Under very unpredictable conditions, the more diversity in farmers' fields the better.”

Africa is seeking huge public and private investment from inside and outside its region. It just needs to convince America and the rest of the world that it's a safe bet.

Ade Freeman, Regional Leader of FAO's Regional Office for Africa in Accra, Ghana with James Cooper, MAG Correspondent

