

“With good policy and the right investment, West Africa’s farming can flourish”

Mali, Michigan and markets: Professor John Staatz

John Staatz is an Emeritus Professor of Agricultural Economics and African Studies at Michigan State University. He has devoted the last 40 years to agricultural development, focusing on West Africa and especially on Mali. With our Foundation, he works on West African regional integration*. We asked him about land rights, Ebola, policy and his long career.

Syngenta Foundation: Much of your work centers on agricultural policy. How would you describe to a lay person what you do?

John Staatz: We work with African colleagues on how rules governing the economy affect the way in which their farmers and traders operate. Together we want to identify and encourage those that best promote sustainable food security.

What sort of “rules” do you look at?

A huge range of laws and regulations govern the food system. Taxation, Customs and business permits are three major areas in which governments can encourage or hamper growers and traders. But we also look at more specific questions that can be very important in particular situations: What defines ‘substandard’ produce? Who checks the scales used to weigh farmers’ grain? How can you know if you’re acting legally in the food chain?

How did you become involved in this field?

One side of my family were dairy farmers, the other were doctors. I originally wanted to enter medicine. However, when I took a course on world food problems, co-taught by a nutritionist and an agricultural economist, the latter’s lectures interested me more than those of the vitamin expert!

“Aid organizations should always study the market”

That explains the subject, but how about Africa?

Well, my youth hero was Albert Schweitzer. But in fact, my involvement with Africa was initially simple good fortune. I had the opportunity to work for a Ghanaian professor studying possible manipulation of the cocoa market by London traders. Then I spent two years in Côte d’Ivoire examining why some aid projects in the livestock industry had failed while others succeeded. (The answer, in a nutshell, is that aid organizations always need to study the market and ask project participants what their real problems are!) While living in Côte d’Ivoire, my wife and I then had the opportunity to visit Mali, and we fell in love with the place.

* www.syngentafoundation.org/index.cfm?pageID=537



In 2013, President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (l.) appointed John Staatz an “Officier de l’ordre national du Mali”.

Why Mali?

Michigan State University’s commitment to Africa started long before I went there for my PhD. In the late 1940’s, President Truman asked MSU for guidance on U.S. foreign assistance to developing countries (and the creation of what eventually became USAID). My predecessors helped set up what became one of Nigeria’s first ‘land-grant style’ agricultural universities. In the 1960’s, they also

started projects in Upper Volta, today’s Burkina Faso. The creation of the MSU program in Bamako was very much in this tradition: USAID funding enabled us to build up an applied research and outreach program, involving Malian graduate students studying at MSU just as the country was liberalizing its agriculture. The program attracted some top talents who have gone on to shape Mali’s policy and lead important organizations.

Mali still faces many challenges, not least in agriculture. Why did MSU subsequently decide to dilute its national focus?

Our shift to a more regional approach was not a dilution, but rather a recognition of important changes. By the late 1980’s, Mali’s food security had become more and more closely interlinked with that of its neighbors. MSU was instrumental in bringing together West African institutions that needed to cooperate more, and in helping ECOWAS and CILSS** create regional networks.

“Good governance is the top priority – including clear land rights”

What do you see as the region’s top priority for the rest of this decade?

Good governance. The rule of law is essential for prosperity – and it has to be the same law for all of society. That priority is not exclusive to West Africa, of course – but the region has suffered heavily from lawlessness and conflict over the past few years.

What do you view as other major problems?

Unclear land tenure attracts far less media attention than terrorism, but it represents a very harmful weakness in the rule of law. Lack of clear land rights discourages investment. That’s true not only of farms, but also for infrastructure: If I don’t know who can sell me the land, where can I build my processing plant? Land tenure is also an example of my point about “the same law for everybody”. According to West African constitutions, men and women are theoretically equal. But by tradition, widows often lose their land to their deceased husband’s family. Women are a key to successful agriculture, and they should face as few barriers as possible.

**ECOWAS is the Community of West African States (<http://ecowas.int/>); CILSS is the Permanent Interstates Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (www.cilss.bf/) .

What else particularly worries you in West Africa?

As in some other parts of the world, youth unemployment is a time-bomb here. This is truer than ever in the age of social media, and at a time when so many young people head for the cities because they see no future in farming. Youth unemployment has contributed to recent explosions of urban violence, for example in Burkina Faso, and I fear that there is more to come.

How would you tackle this?

Clearly, it's not something that governments can alter overnight; even EU countries like Spain struggle to reduce massive youth unemployment. But alongside the long-term and global factors, there are some easier changes that West African countries can achieve, jointly or as pioneers. One is to make farming a more profitable profession, a major aim of both MSU and the Syngenta Foundation. Another is to align schooling better to modern skill requirements. As well as vocational apprenticeships, this also involves tertiary education. For example, MSU has a whole School of Packaging, but I can't think of a West African university that runs even a single course on this subject.

“Youth employment is a regional time-bomb”

But isn't Ebola more important than high-tech cardboard boxes?

Locally, the disease is terrible, absolutely no question. As well as the immediate suffering, it also has knock-on effects such as the collapse of preventive healthcare, disincentives to foreign investment, and disruption of farming and trade. Seen across the region, however, my sense is that U.S. media, in particular, have over-dramatized the situation. I see youth unemployment as a much more disturbing epidemic.

Critics sometimes say that academic theory is too far removed from daily practice. Your own specialty, policy research, runs the risk of producing lots of good suggestions that never get implemented. How can you avoid that disappointment?

For an organization like MSU, there are three main avenues to implementation of better policy. One is to involve politicians and administrators in our work from the start. As “co-owners”, they are more likely to act on the findings and proposals. Another approach is to strengthen regional farmers' and traders' organizations, and bring them together with decision-makers in the Customs bureaucracy. Exporters and border officers need a joint understanding of the rules, and of each other's needs and pressures.

And the third avenue?

Independent media can play a very helpful indirect role. Journalists can show the general public the negative consequences of poor policy for real individuals – for example, an unnecessary increase in food costs. And they can tell voters about the positive results of wise policy well implemented.

You have now formally retired, but continue to work for West Africa's agriculture. How confident are you for the region's farmers?

The future of agriculture across Africa depends crucially on how matters develop in the rest of the world as well. How will water shortage in China affect the West African rice market? Will Californians stop growing tomatoes because of drought, and import them from Senegal instead? When will industrialized countries realize that subsidizing agriculture is neither good for their own farmers nor for African smallholders? I don't know the answers, but I remain quietly optimistic. West Africa already has some agricultural success stories to tell, and demand for the region's produce looks likely to remain robust. With wisely implemented policy and more foreign investment of the right type – i.e. not land-grabbing – the ag sector can flourish. That will generate benefits for farming families, and for the economy as a whole.

John M. Staatz is Professor Emeritus of the Department of Agricultural, Food and Resource Economics at Michigan State University, USA. Since retiring in 2011, he has continued working with MSU's Food Security Group on food and agricultural development projects across West Africa. In 2013, President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita made him an *Officier de l'ordre national du Mali* for his longstanding contribution to food policy analysis and capacity-building. In his spare time, John enjoys hiking, reading history, and traveling to learn about cultures other than his own.