

Look beyond US droughts and start planning for more catastrophies – experts

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Some experts have urged the global agricultural sector to look beyond the negative impacts of the devastating drought in the US and focus on establishing contingency plans to deal with similar scenarios more efficiently in the near future, as they could hold tangible benefits for smaller grain producers who may benefit from the ripple effects.

In a workshop hosted by FANRPAN in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, Bright Honou, a senior lecturer and economist at the University of Lesotho urged delegates to look beyond the crisis and focus on what could be done to curb the negative effects of similar disasters in the future. He highlighted that the use of simulation techniques could assist in understanding when future droughts would occur.

"We need to engage in long term thinking which will help us understand the issues better. The drought may end next year, so we need to look at the frequency of droughts instead of focusing on one event," he said. However, he conceded that it would remain difficult to forecast when a drought could hit again, as shown by the current situation which has wiped out two thirds of the US crop.

The current drought in the world's largest exporter of grain products saw maize prices rise to record highs. The US department of agriculture cut its crop estimates to levels last seen 25 years ago. In addition, the drought is said to be the worst to hit the US since the 1950's.

In South Africa, many livestock, poultry and dairy producers who rely on yellow maize as a significant portion of their feedstock are in dire straits as some are contemplating to abandon their businesses.

Animal production industries have been affected by the sudden run-up in the cost of yellow maize, and consumers have also been hit as white maize prices have also spiked due to the unrelenting drought in North America.

In July, international maize prices went up by 23 percent month on month, greater than the peaks of 2008. Since August 2010, the maize price has risen more than 100 percent, according to Bloomberg data.

Dr Sepo Hachigonta, the climate change programme manager at FANRPAN said the effects of the drought could see smaller producers turn to cash crops, a move which could see higher yields and greater cash generation for smaller farmers who may want to export to areas affected by the US drought.

"This situation brings an opportunity where farmers in countries such as Swaziland may have to decide between feeding themselves or turning their harvest to cash crops as they decide that they might as well export their products," he said.

The workshop was part of FANRPAN's 2012 annual high level regional food security policy dialogue, where various experts and academics had gathered to share their thoughts on the impact of climate change on small holder farmers. This year's theme centered on finding ways to get the youth involved in agricultural value chains.

Dr Lindiwe Majele Sibanda, Chief Executive Officer of FANRPAN told journalists in a media briefing that one of the core objectives of FANRPAN's role in climate smart agriculture was to provide forecasts on the climate till 2050, which would establish what kind of crops would be able to thrive under the conditions of that period.

"We'll also look at what type of farming will be needed, as well as the kind of resources that will be used by 2050," she said.

She added that the drought in the US was an early warning sign that the agricultural sector in Africa needed to be self-sufficient.

Since one of the roles of the agricultural NGO is to harmonise policies on various issues in agriculture, one of the purposes of the dialogue was to agree on a proactive game plan with various stakeholders and ensure that there are no barriers to progress.