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Centering African voices for a renewed US-Africa Policy

JUNE 2022

Executive Summary

As we enter the "African Century," the United States' orientation towards the continent should be revamped to match the remarkable growth in the continent's first two decades of the 21st century. The youngest and fastest growing, the African subcontinent has struggled to develop at the same rate as other regions. Leading up to the second African leaders' summit to take place in late 2022, CRS seeks to inform a forthcoming strategy on sub-Saharan Africa. We seek to promote African voices from the agency who have worked on the frontlines of humanitarian and development assistance, providing insight into the challenges and opportunities based on a series of focus groups and stakeholder interviews.

Charting a path forward for a renewed US Africa Policy

The rich discussions with CRS leaders in sub-Saharan Africa pointed toward three main topic areas, which frame our recommendations for a renewed US policy towards Africa:

1) Invest in the future of Africa and Africans; 2) Support a safe, peaceful and stable environment for Africans to prosper; and 3) Develop meaningful partnerships with and between the people and institutions that make up Africa.

1. Invest in the continent's economic promise

Investing in the future of Africa means catalyzing its human and natural resources to reach its full potential. As we heard in our FGDs, **youth are the source of Africa's biggest challenge and opportunity**, and the "youthening" of Africa's population is also increasingly well-educated, which means they need special support and investment. Similarly, shifting trends in youth employment, including urbanization and a desire for wage employment, requires additional *investment in training where there are jobs and helping to match young people with job opportunities; investing in economic development particularly focusing on youth; supporting innovation hubs and incubators; and bringing youth into agricultural opportunities.*

Respondents also noted **the great opportunity that technology and innovation could pose** towards the continent with proper investment. COVID-19 has uncovered new ways of using technology to access hard-to-reach people and communities with information and support. Technology has also provided ubiquitous creation of and access to communication tools, which has positive and negative implications for the burgeoning continent, including by authoritarian governments trying to limit the power of civil society. Africa also remains the only continent whose digital gender gap has widened since 2013. Some efforts that the USG could support in the area of technology and innovation include supporting the spread of high-speed internet through a presidential initiative; investing in R&D to create home-grown digital solutions; addressing the



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gender digital divide; modernizing approaches to combat mis- and disinformation; bolstering the work of USAID/State DRG efforts to promote rights to freedom of the press; and promoting the creation of responsive and responsible regulation around information technology and social media through public and private partnership.

The cost to do business in Africa is high relative to other continents. Yet respondents noted the desire to increase economic gains from the wealth of raw materials Africa produces: home to 30% of the world's mineral reserves and countries in sub-Saharan Africa produce the world's leading supply of commodities such as sugar, cocoa, and cotton. The creation of the Africa Continental Free Trade Area across the continent will help boost these numbers. The USG should invest in and promote manufacturing capacity and infrastructure with a focus not just on "quick wins" but investing across the development spectrum; address the enabling environment for a thriving private sector through good governance using MCC as a model; and promote strategic partnerships between Africa and the US by linking African enterprises and major projects with potential partners and investors in the US.

Respondents also reflected on a desire **for increased intra-continental movement and collaboration**, noting the role that transportation infrastructure plays on economic connectivity, both internally with other African countries, but also to those outside of the continent. Addressing barriers created by poor road infrastructure could create a new host of job opportunities in the transport sector and drive down the costs of goods. Additionally, as climate change impacts become increasingly severe, it is crucial for Africa to invest in "green infrastructure" that is aimed at reducing the economic impact of climate change. The US DFC should invest in infrastructure, while also making it more desirable for investors to do the same. In doing so, it might also follow China's marketing of its investments, promoting US investment and partnership along the way.



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2. Promote a safe and stable environment

The challenge most cited by respondents in our focus group discussions was a **lack** of good governance and a growing culture of corruption that impedes trust and private sector investment. A democratic decline on the continent has been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Failure of governments to be able to provide basic services also undermines citizens' trust, which makes communities more reliant on donors for basic services. A strong civil society that can hold governments accountable is an important counterpoint to backsliding democracies for a chance at sustained peace and stability. Therefore, the US should robustly implement its localization strategy and focus on strengthening local partners to build robust civil societies; invest in systems strengthening, so that governments can increase the quality and provision of social services; invest in good governance and democracy building programs, beyond just election monitoring.

Conflict and insecurity continue to be a pressing challenge across Africa and can take many forms. One of the areas in which insecurity is currently being felt most acutely is in the Sahel region of West Africa. The USG can help prepare for the potential spread of conflict through early warning systems for violence; improve civilian protection through holding security forces accountable, which requires communication of mandates, feedback mechanisms and feedback loops that work; and work through diplomatic and other channels to improve humanitarian access and urge respect for humanitarian principles by armed actors.

A strong civil society that can hold governments accountable is an important counterpoint to backsliding democracies for a chance at sustained peace and stability.

Africa is predicted to face some of the greatest challenges posed by climate change.

Climate change acts as a force multiplier for shrinking arable land due to drought and floods, which results in increases food insecurity and decreases the ability of farmers to make a living. This can result in sharp increases in migration—as people seek safer and more tenable land—and increased conflict. Our respondents reflected that farmers in their communities find climate change has made it unpredictable when and how to grow their crops, increasing their risk for failed livelihoods and health challenges from poor nutrition, and can also contribute to further land degradation. Africa's youth will bear the costs of climate change as they will suffer the direct effects (e.g., severe weather disasters) and the indirect effects—the lost opportunities from needed investments in other areas that will not be made because public and private funds will have to be spent on adaptation. The US in turn should invest in reversing land degradation through nature-based solutions that operate at the landscape level, which can have positive effects on agricultural productivity, water availability, incomes, and livelihood opportunities while building resilience to climate change; invest in services that specifically cater to the needs of pastoralists, as their work can be severely impacted by land degradation; and invest in green jobs for youth.

Food insecurity is a consistent challenge given the increasing frequency and intensity of conflict, extreme weather events from climate variability, and macroeconomic crises. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated food insecurity across the world due to loss of income sources, diminished social services as funds were redirected to COVID-19 efforts, barriers to humanitarian support, disruptions in agricultural production, and spikes in food prices due to closed borders and disrupted supply chains.

To address food insecurity and hunger, the USG can bolster humanitarian assistance; explore better integration of programming at the humanitarian, development and peace nexus; invest in climate-resilient, nutrition-sensitive programming to combat external drivers of food insecurity and improve nutrition outcomes; focus on small-holder farmers with land restoration projects as well as with quick, flexible, and direct funding to support

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their work; invest in better data collection and early-warning systems to monitor levels of acute food insecurity and prices of food and commodities; and enhance social protection programs to protect the most vulnerable and reduce household and communities' vulnerability to shocks and stressors that reduce food and nutrition security.

3. Develop meaningful partnership: Local leadership and Localization

The COVID-19 pandemic and its fallout have made it clearer than ever before the essential role of local civil society for effective development and humanitarian response. USAID Administrator Samantha Power has made clear that the future of US development assistance should be rooted in a purposeful shift toward locally-led programming and empowering local leaders. However, several focus group participants noted that although they have frequently heard about US efforts toward localization in theory, they have yet to see the necessary investment in capacity strengthening for local partners, increases in access to direct funding for local organizations, or reforms of funding mechanisms necessary to make true local leadership a reality. For effective and sustainable development policy, USG must "right-size" funding mechanisms to support localization success; fully fund comprehensive, holistic and participatory capacity strengthening approaches; improve data-collection and transparency by better investing in data around how much funding goes to local and national entities; and require Missions to collaborate closely with local civil society to develop Regional/Country Development Cooperation Strategies that guide the missions' work.

Promoting local solutions for local problems can also be achieved by **making market-based approaches for food assistance more accessible.** USAID and Congress should provide maximum flexibility in US food assistance so that the right modality is available to respond to the specific needs and opportunities in each community and context; and further study and understand how Local and Regional Procurement (LRP) can further benefit and develop local and regional commodity markets.



Photo by Nanette Gendry for CRS.



Photo by Sam Phelps for CRS.

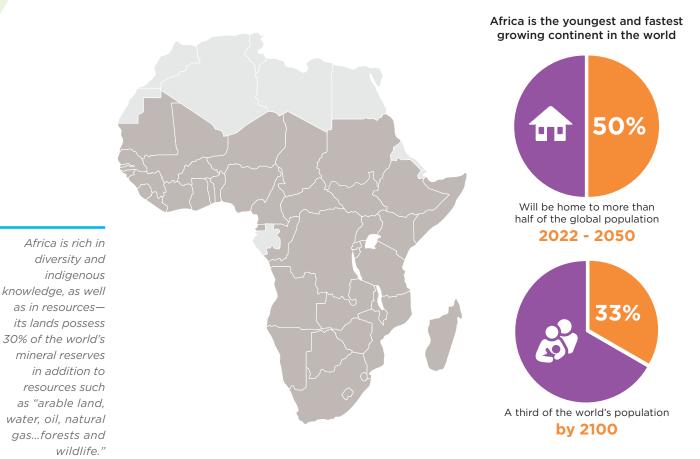
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Introduction

As we enter the "African Century," the United States' orientation towards the continent should be revamped to match the remarkable growth on the continent over the past two decades.¹ Africa is the youngest and fastest growing continent in the world—it is estimated that it will be home to more than half of the global population between now and 2050, and is poised to account for a third of the world's population by 2100.².³ Over 70% of sub-Saharan Africans are under the age of 30—providing the region with rich potential and a burgeoning labor force.⁴ Africa is rich in diversity and indigenous knowledge, as well as in resources—its lands possess 30% of the world's mineral reserves in addition to resources such as "arable land, water, oil, natural gas...forests and wildlife."⁵

WHERE CRS WORKS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA



While the continent holds much growth and potential, it has struggled to develop at the same rate as other regions. There are a number of reasons for this, but those most cited by focus group respondents included its colonial history and extractive policies, existing governance systems, corruption, political instability, and low private direct investment, along with climate change.

Purpose

Catholic Relief Services works alongside local partners to promote human dignity in more than 30 countries across Africa. Our work seeks to respond to human needs after a disaster, address the health care needs of communities strengthening health systems and providing immediate services, promote food security and livelihoods, support youth unemployment, and build long-lasting peace.

More than a year into a new administration, and with a second African leaders summit to take place in late 2022, CRS looks forward to the United States issuing an active and comprehensive strategy for its engagement with sub-Saharan Africa. Promoting the principle of subsidiarity (the idea that those closest to the problem have the best understanding of it, and therefore should be architects of their own solutions), we highlight African voices from CRS who have worked on the frontlines of humanitarian and development assistance. As a key global partner, CRS seeks to provide insight into the challenges and opportunities based on a series of focus groups and stakeholder interviews.

Recent History of US Policy in Africa

US policy towards Africa varies across a wide spectrum of investment and focus, but all have been primarily focused on US priorities, rather than reflecting areas of mutual benefit, notwithstanding US government statements to the contrary. Between 1950-1990, Cold War politics guided US foreign policy towards the continent, where ideological and geopolitical struggles were played out. Following the end of the Cold War, US policy entered a "transitional [period], as the U.S. strove to articulate clear African policy objectives and strategies. [However] without a clear enemy to target, U.S. policymakers found it difficult to connect African issues with U.S. interests."

In more recent political history, the Obama Administration took a relatively light-touch approach to the continent in its "Sub-Saharan Africa Policy." Through Executive Order, the administration made a notable push toward expanding the continent's access to electricity through its Power Africa initiative. The Administration's efforts were heavily weighted towards counterterrorism efforts, particularly in East and Central Africa, including training and equipping national armies, on-ground US military presence in the Sahel, and drone strikes in Somalia.^{8, 9, 10}

The most recent US Africa Strategy came out of the Trump Administration in 2018. While the strategy did emphasize security and partnership, it was largely focused on combatting Chinese and Russian influence across the continent. The Trump Administration proposed cutting US assistance to Africa, asking for a 28% drop in FY2019 allocations, which was not matched by Congress. However, the Administration also launched its Prosper Africa initiative, which was aimed at trade and investment in the continent. In FY2019, Congress allocated around \$7.1 billion to African countries through the State Department and US Agency for International Development (USAID), with additional funding being provided through other accounts such as emergency humanitarian aid. Over the course of Obama and Trump Administrations, approximately 70-75% of aid to Africa was aimed at addressing health needs—particularly HIV/AIDS, malaria, maternal and child health, and nutrition. Is

We encourage the Biden Administration to approach its policy with a holistic lens, investing in inclusive and resilient development, continued improvements in good governance, and a focus on protecting the poor and most vulnerable.



Photo by Jason Florio for CRS.

Methodology

This paper was developed through a combination of desk research using internal and external resources, and in-depth focus group interviews. The researchers held eight focus group discussions with 42 CRS staff representing 21 countries. These staff live and work within all four of our sub-Saharan African regional offices—the West Africa Regional Office (WARO), East Africa Regional Office (EARO), Central Africa Regional Office (CARO), and South Africa Regional Office (SARO)—as well as technical subject matter experts who are familiar with the region. The focus groups aimed to center the voices and opinions of Africans holding varying leadership positions within country programs and regional offices, while also including staff from the global North in positions of leadership.

AFRICA'S PRIMARY OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Defined by CRS Focus Group Participants

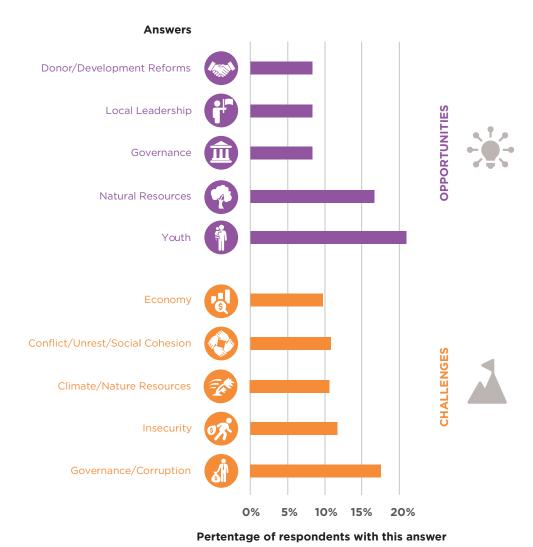


Figure 1. Focus group participants were asked to name 3 opportunities and challenges in their country. This chart shows the 5 most frequent responses, and the percentage of participants who used that answer.

i For more detailed methodology information, please refer to the Annex.

ii Participants included CRS staff actively living and working in: Benin, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone,

Charting a Path Forward for a Renewed US Africa Policy

The rich discussions with CRS leaders in sub-Saharan Africa pointed toward three main topic areas, which frame our recommendations for a renewed US policy towards Africa: 1) Invest in the future of Africa and Africans; 2) Support a safe, peaceful and stable environment for Africans to prosper; and 3) Develop meaningful partnerships with and between the people and institutions that make up Africa.

Invest in the future of Africa and Africans

Investing in the future of Africa means catalyzing its human, cultural, and natural resources to reach its full potential. The US can play a larger role in supporting Africa through bold initiatives to promote stability and harness Africa's full economic potential, supporting the African Continental Free Trade Area and initiatives like Power Africa.



Youth are source of Africa's biggest challenge and opportunity

One of the biggest challenges and opportunities for Africa is its large and rapidly growing youth population. The entire continent is currently experiencing a youth bulge—with 60% of society being 25 or younger¹⁴ (compared to 42% globally).¹⁵ This "youthening" of Africa's population will continue for another decade, with more than half of the world's new population projected to be added in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁶ African youth are increasingly well-educated, with a lower secondary graduation rate of 44% in 2019 compared to only 27% 20 years prior.¹⁷ Youth are a powerful source of creativity, innovation, and political mobilization—which can be a positive force when they are adequately supported and invested in. However as we have seen, young people without opportunities to contribute economically can also be easily manipulated for political gain, participating in localized conflict and violence.¹⁸



Photo by Sam Phelps for CRS.

In many countries, respondents noted their concern regarding the high rates of youth unemployment. For example, in Kenya the pool of university graduates grew from 800,000 to 1 million over the past two years, but the number of available high-quality jobs for those graduates is shrinking. The number of industrial jobs has contracted, and only 38% of Kenyan youth aged 15-24 are currently able to participate in the labor force. Throughout the sub-continent, 10-12 million youth enter the workforce each year; however, only 3 million formal jobs are created annually. Additionally, the jobs that do exist are often mismatched for the types of education youth have and the kind of work in which they are interested. Focus group participants highlighted the trend of youth moving away from rural, agricultural-focused jobs; and while there is a global push on entrepreneurship, research indicates that very few young entrepreneurs are able to find success. Further, one study found that "30 percent of youth with at least a secondary education report being over-skilled for their job" particularly when it comes to the informal market, indicating that the job market as it exists is not adequate for the current level of educational attainment in the region.

The lack of employment opportunities lays the groundwork for brain drain—as graduates move out of their home country to pursue other jobs—or in some contexts creates a vacuum leaving youth to engage in illicit and illegal activities. In West Africa particularly, respondents from Nigeria, Togo, and Benin mentioned that unemployed youth often end up participating in banditry, hustling, or are manipulated into political violence. By some estimates, investing strategically in youth employment opportunities could add "up to \$500 billion per year in sub-Sharan Africa, or about one-third of the region's GDP, for 30 years."²⁴ By investing in youth employment, the potential of young people in Africa can be channeled into more productive and peaceful outcomes.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Invest in training** where there are jobs; provide vocational and other types of training that are matched with job opportunities.
- **Promote job creation for youth** through strategic small and medium enterprise investments and public-sector engagement, utilizing the US Development Finance Corporation (DFC) and USAID.

The evolution of youth employment has shifted towards a desire for wage employment, and trends show that for the most part, sub-Saharan countries have grown these types of jobs from 2000-2018.²⁵ Our respondents highlighted that, in light of the broader trend towards urbanization, and in some areas, youth in rural areas consider farming and agricultural work to be "backbreaking work [that] does not pay very much."²⁶ Instead, they move to cities seeking employment that uses the knowledge they acquired through schooling, pays better, and has more social cache.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Support innovation hubs and incubators so that youth are able to access business skills to match technological know-how and ideas that are localized. Expand these opportunities outside of urban centers, so that rural youth can also participate. Countries such as Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria already have strong incubator networks that could be tapped into to scale and replicate throughout the continent. Working with the local private sector to motivate investment in hubs and small businesses will attract more business and build up the local community.²⁷
- Focus agricultural efforts to bring in youth, supporting skills building, access to finance, and ultimately making agriculture a rewarding and profitable venture. Continue to invest in and expand on Feed the Future programs that focus on youth in agriculture, such as USAID's Youth Leadership for Agriculture Activity (YLA) in Uganda.²⁸

YOUTH AND CLIMATE CHANGE. Youth are a powerful resource for tackling the world's largest collective issue, the climate crisis. In Zambia, the country is already facing reduction in rainfall, record breaking temperatures and other extreme weather events. One of the most damaging impacts on the country is deforestation through unsustainable natural resource management, which is exacerbated by climate change. In response, CRS in Zambia helped to launch a national youth Climate Corps. This project was done in partnership with Zambia's Ministry of Green Economy and Environment and other local and national partners, with the financial backing of the local private sector. In the youth Climate Corps, participants serve one year as a Climate Ambassador, raising awareness and knowledge throughout the country on the impacts of and solutions against climate change. These activities include setting up informational kiosks, supporting community dialogues, implementing monitoring and reporting resources, and organizing communication campaigns. The program also engages with the private sector to grow the amount of "green jobs" available, so that participants have opportunities to find employment using the new skills they acquired throughout the year.



Scratching the surface of technology and innovation

Respondents noted the great opportunity that technology and innovation could pose towards the continent with proper investment. Half a billion people in sub-Saharan Africa subscribe to mobile services, with more than 272 million Africans now connected to the internet on their phones.²⁹ Yet, internet penetration, which has contributed significantly to Africa's overall economic expansion, is still at 40% today.³⁰ A 10% increase in mobile internet penetration can increase GDP per capita by 2.5% in Africa, compared with 2% globally.³¹ Young people in particular are well-versed with technologies, and the abundant youth population in Africa creates a powerful engine for using, developing and innovating around them.



Photo by Dooshima Tsee for CRS

However, where access to technology is growing, it is not necessarily distributed equally across the continent. Africa remains the only continent whose digital gender gap has widened since 2013, with women being "less likely than men to own mobile phones, to use them every day, to have phones with access to the internet, to own computers, to access the internet regularly, or to get news from the internet or by social media"—and this technology gender gap appears to be growing wider over time.³² The barriers to access include unaffordable access, threats to access and use, low digital literacy and confidence, and lack of relevant content, applications and services.³³

The COVID-19 pandemic has uncovered new ways of using technology to access hard-to-reach people and communities with information and support. Telehealth technology providers in Rwanda and Uganda saw increases of phone and video consultations by 70% and 500%, respectively, which allowed more people to receive healthcare consultations than would have previously been possible.³⁴ This virtual technology has also been essential in helping INGOs provide support to their program participants in a way that is safe and convenient. This kind of technology could be adapted to all kinds of programming to maintain support year-round in hard-to-reach places like South Sudan, where 60% of the country becomes functionally inaccessible for six months out of the year due to intense flooding during the rainy season.³⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Support the spread of high-speed internet through a presidential initiative, leveraging the power of MCC or the DFC.³⁶
- Support and invest in research and development measures through the DFC to create home-grown digital solutions.
- Address the gender digital divide by ensuring that girls and women have equal access to learning relevant technical skills, challenge norms and stereotypes to create a better environment for women and girls to learn and adopt, address barriers to entry of technology adoption (e.g., costs, relevant applications, etc.).

Technology has also provided ubiquitous creation of and access to communication tools, which both has positive and negative implications for the burgeoning continent. Messaging platforms like WhatsApp have become embedded throughout politics, business, and society as a way to communicate information across the continent. This unprecedented level of access and communication has helped small business owners grow their businesses, politicians to share crucial political updates, and local NGOs to more smoothly organize and implement programming.^{37, 38}

Because technology is such a powerful source for communication, it is also a key target for authoritarian governments trying to limit the power of civil society, making repression and control more "pervasive, efficient, and subtle." Multiple respondents reported incidents in their country of their government purposefully restricting access to certain groups or types of media in order to control a government-supported narrative. Respondents from one country stated that news stories about the opposition party, protests, and attacks are regularly suppressed in order to maintain a premise of government control and stability throughout the country. Social media platforms can also be channels by which rumors and misinformation are catalyzed into radicalization efforts toward violence and violent extremism.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Modernize approaches** to combat mis- and disinformation, beyond radio programming to utilizing social media and direct messaging.
- Bolster the work of USAID and State Department's Democracy, Rights and Governance efforts to **target specifically mis- and disinformation**; use diplomacy to promote rights to freedom of the press.
- Provide roadmaps and lessons learned to create responsive and responsible regulation and laws around information technology and social media through public and private partnership.



Developing economic opportunity across the value chain

Africa is home to 30% of the world's mineral reserves and countries in sub-Saharan Africa produce the world's leading supply of commodities such as sugar, cocoa, and cotton. However, limited manufacturing capacity within Africa currently contributes 1.9% of the global share, and makes up only 10% of the continent's GDP, lagging far behind other regions.⁴⁰ The creation of the Africa Continental Free Trade Area across the continent will help boost these numbers—some estimate it will increase Africa's exports by \$560 billion primarily in manufacturing.⁴¹ Further, Africa attracts only 3% of global flows of Foreign Direct Investment, and that funding is often tied to natural resources and extractive industries. Some of the obstacles that prevent investment are related to political stability: the costs to do business in Africa is high relative to other continents.⁴²

Respondents noted the desire to increase economic gains from the wealth of raw materials Africa produces, through expanding their ability to refine, process and produce farther along the value chain. This effort could create jobs and capture the

full economic value of their commodities, while reducing migration.⁴³ By investing in more production capacity, such as charcoal plants and cotton gins, Africans will have more capacity to source products locally. US investment in African companies could additionally spur economic development and job creation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Invest in and promote manufacturing capacity and infrastructure, through the DFC, Feed the Future, and MCC, with a focus not just on "quick wins" but investing across the development spectrum.
- Encourage and help **create an enabling environment** for a thriving local and international private sector; MCC could be a model.
- **Promote strategic partnerships** between Africa and the US by linking African enterprises and major projects with potential partners and investors in the US.



Build for intra-continental movement and collaboration

Respondents reflected on the role that transportation infrastructure plays on economic connectivity, both internally with other African countries, but also to those outside of the continent. In order to close Africa's infrastructure gap, investment in infrastructure must double between 2015-2025, manifesting in \$150 billion in 2025. 44 Addressing barriers created by poor road infrastructure could create a new host of job opportunities in the transport sector and drive down the costs of goods. Additionally, as climate change impacts become increasingly severe, it is crucial for Africa to invest in "green infrastructure" that is aimed at reducing the economic impact of climate change. Green infrastructure can include quality roads that are not destroyed by flooding, irrigation systems and flood protection, and investing in renewable sources of energy for electricity such as solar panels. 45 The US should further invest in African infrastructure, while also making it more desirable for investors to do the same. US'



Photo by Dooshima Tsee for CRS.

marketing of its investments can further promote US goodwill and partnership along the way—in particular by ensuring projects do not cause a loss of land or impede their access to farms and markets.

In West and East Africa, the Chinese government has committed considerable funds through its Belt and Road Initiative, building prominent infrastructure and roads which has resulted in a positive perception of China in many of these countries. Further, direct flights between Africa capitals and provinces in China, filled with Chinese goods and few travel barriers has resulted in the perception of China as a country of opportunity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

■ The DFC should **invest in infrastructure**, while also making it more desirable for investors to do the same. In doing so, it might also follow China's marketing of its investments, promoting US investment and partnership along the way.

Reducing risks from climate change; promoting food security

Promoting Governance and Social Cohesion to reduce conflict

The challenge most cited by respondents in our focus group discussions was a lack of good governance and a growing culture of corruption. This has created a lack of vertical social cohesion and trust, and impedes private sector investment. Countries in Africa have ranked as some of the least democratic in the world, with DRC ranking 2nd in the world after North Korea in 2020. 46 Within the 18-month period between August 2020 and February 2022, seven African countries experienced coups and coup attempts, five of which were in West Africa.⁴⁷ A democratic decline on the continent has been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, which gave leaders leverage to impose restrictions on people's movement, freedom of press, and elections.⁴⁸ Respondents reflected an increase in leaders consolidating their power through opaque transactions around newly discovered resources that benefit themselves, rather than their communities. In West Africa in particular, respondents raised a perception by the general population that cabals of elite capture national financial gains for their own personal use, creating suspicion and distrust that can bleed into political violence. These cracks in vertical social cohesion are exacerbated by a diminished space for civil society, due to insecurity and authoritarian crackdowns, leading to marginalized voices in the political sphere and a decreased ability to hold elected leaders and other officials to account.⁴⁹



Photo by Dooshima Tsee for CRS.

Failure of governments to be able to provide basic services also undermines citizens' trust. This makes communities more reliant on donors for basic services, which leads to unrest and takes a toll on productivity.

A strong civil society that can hold governments accountable can be an important counterpoint to backsliding democracies for a chance at sustained peace and stability. Essential roles of civil society include educating the population on their basic human rights and creating a pathway for advocacy to the government. The picture of civil society varies widely throughout the continent. For example, in the case of the Congo, the weakening

of civil society comes following very purposeful policies by the federal government that restrict communication and media among civil society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The US should robustly implement its localization strategy and focus on strengthening local partners to build robust civil societies.⁵⁰
- Invest in peacebuilding and social cohesion programs to strengthen vertical and horizontal social cohesion and promote peace and stability.
- Invest in systems strengthening, so that governments can increase the quality and provision of social services. Investment can be through improving policy coherence and strengthening coordination, as well as investing in civil society to create accountability for service providers.
- Invest in good governance and democracy building programs, beyond just election monitoring.



Working proactively to minimize impacts of conflict and insecurity

Conflict and insecurity continue to be a pressing challenge across Africa and can take many forms. One of the areas in which insecurity is currently being felt most acutely is in the Sahel region of West Africa. The level of violence in the Sahel has been skyrocketing since 2015, including sharp increases in the number of reported fatalities, violent incidents, and direct attacks targeting civilians. While many transnational terrorist groups operate in the region, some sources indicate that conflicts are increasingly local and "motivated by unresolved grievances of local communities," which are then catalyzed by the broad presence of extremist groups. The ongoing conflict has been exacerbated by the secondary impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to stunted economic growth, increased inequality, political tension, and barriers to accessing basic goods and resources. Sa

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Prepare for the potential spread of conflict through **early warning systems** for violence, particularly those that are community-based—such as Ghana's Satellite Peacebuilding Centers.
- Improve civilian protection through holding security forces accountable, which requires communication of mandates, feedback mechanisms, and documenting and reporting channels that are transparent and well-structured.
- Work through diplomatic and other channels to **improve humanitarian access** and urge respect for humanitarian principles by armed actors.



Contending with climate change and land degradation

While climate change will come to impact every corner of the globe, Africa, which on average has contributed the least to the man-made causes of the climate crisis, is predicted to face some of the greatest challenges posed by it.⁵⁴ The Sahel region, for example, faces twice the rate of average temperature rise of that globally. Climate change acts as a force multiplier for shrinking arable land due to drought and floods, which results in increases food insecurity and decreases the ability of farmers to make a living. Africa is also particularly vulnerable to land degradation and desertification;



Photo by Bad Rabbit Studio.

desertification affects around 45% of Africa's land area, with 55% of this area at very high risk of further degradation.⁵⁵

This can result in sharp increases in migration—as people seek safer and more tenable land—and increased conflict. More than 30 million people were driven from their homes in 2020 due to worsening environmental factors, ⁵⁶ and the World Bank estimates that climate change will push more than 100 million into poverty by 2030. ⁵⁷Our respondents reflected that farmers in their communities find climate change has made it unpredictable when and how to grow their crops, increasing their risk for failed livelihoods and health challenges from poor nutrition, and can also contribute to further land degradation. Further, competition over shared, limited resources can result in familial and producer groups coming into conflict—especially between those that mainly practice agricultural and pastoralist livelihood systems.

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Africa's youth will bear the costs of climate change as they will suffer both the increasing direct effects (e.g., severe weather disasters) and the indirect effects—the lost opportunities from needed investments in other areas that will not be made because public and private funds will have to be spent on adaptation. The infrastructure Africa desperately needs will cost more because it will have to be more weather-resistant (otherwise it will break down more often, reducing benefits).⁵⁸ African agricultural research and development will have to improve dramatically to avoid declines of up to 30% in land and labor productivity.⁵⁹ As a result, African countries will have less public money available for other priorities, such as education, health, and nutrition. Investment in productive capacity will cost the private sector more too, slowing down growth and transformation. The result will be lower earnings and increased poverty. The youth of 2030 (ages 5-14 today) will reach their expected peak earnings period by 2045, when the worst economic effects will be felt—up to an 80% decline in income growth (about 4% per annum) compared to today.^{60,61}



Photo by Will Baxter for CRS

The impact of climate change on Africa will be severe, making it imperative that the continent receive financing to reduce and manage climate risks while taking advantage of new opportunities that climate financing may also bring. CRS works with farmers, agricultural extension agents, local civil society, and national governments to apply four models across Africa aimed at agricultural restoration and sustainability: drylands regreening, watershed restoration, water-smart agriculture, and multi-story agroforestry. These efforts have not only been successful in increasing production and income in the areas where they are implemented, but have also led to reduced dependence of food assistance in Malawi, and restored water sources in

Lesotho. These kinds of models will accelerate and sustain restoration for more resilient farms and communities for generations to come, in the face of climate change. In addition to programs aimed at better land management, increased investments in job opportunities around climate, such as working in green tech, are also needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Invest in reversing land degradation through nature-based, collaborative solutions that operate at the landscape level which can have positive effects on agricultural productivity, water availability, incomes, and livelihood opportunities while building

resilience to climate change. As part of this effort, invest in raising awareness and knowledge around available solutions.

- Invest in services that specifically cater to the needs of pastoralists, as their work can be severely impacted by land degradation.
- Invest in green jobs for youth, supporting the job ecosystem including curricula, research, career advising and job placement to build the workforce that can also fulfill national climate commitments.



Food insecurity is a

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frequency and

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crises.

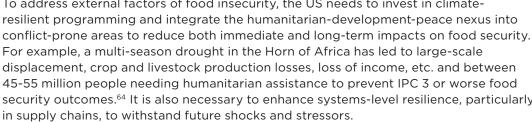
macroeconomic

Increased security through reducing hunger

Food insecurity is a consistent challenge given the increasing frequency and intensity of conflict, extreme weather events from climate variability, and macroeconomic crises. Sub-Saharan Africa faces considerable food security and nutrition challenges, with 24% of the population undernourished and one-third of the continent facing moderate or severe food insecurity. In 2020, 1 in 5 Africans faced hunger, which is double the amount of any other region.⁶² The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated food insecurity across the world due to loss of income sources, diminished social services as funds were redirected to COVID-19 efforts, barriers to humanitarian support, disruptions in agricultural production, and spikes in food prices due to closed borders and disrupted supply chains.⁶³ Further, as climate change will become increasingly impactful and as the African population will continue to grow exponentially, food insecurity will continue to be an urgent issue.

To address external factors of food insecurity, the US needs to invest in climateresilient programming and integrate the humanitarian-development-peace nexus into conflict-prone areas to reduce both immediate and long-term impacts on food security. For example, a multi-season drought in the Horn of Africa has led to large-scale displacement, crop and livestock production losses, loss of income, etc. and between 45-55 million people needing humanitarian assistance to prevent IPC 3 or worse food security outcomes.⁶⁴ It is also necessary to enhance systems-level resilience, particularly

In addition to the external factors noted above (e.g., conflict, climate change, COVID-19), poor soil and agricultural practices, low productivity levels, inefficient food supply chains, and the unaffordability of some nutritious foods worsen food insecurity



in sub-Saharan Africa.65 The majority of food in sub-Saharan Africa is produced by



Photo by Will Baxter for CRS.

small-holder farmers, and better investing in their work is a crucial element to tackling the region's food insecurity. ⁶⁶ CRS has rich experience implementing land restoration programming, and the programs described previously such as drylands regreening, watershed restoration, water-smart agriculture, and multi-story agroforestry, are powerful tools to increase small-holder farmer income and community food security and can help build up resilience to climate change. ⁶⁷ Recent crises, such as COVID-19 and the recent invasion of Ukraine, further demonstrate the fragility of the global food system and the need to invest in small-holder production of diverse, nutrient-dense food sources using climate-smart approaches and supporting local agricultural and market systems. ⁶⁸



Photo by Georgina Goodwin for CRS.

Finally, sub-Saharan Africa must tackle the economic challenges that impede people from accessing ample and nutritious foods. As of 2020, 37% of the world's stunted children and nearly one-quarter of wasted children were in sub-Saharan Africa.⁶⁹ The COVID-19 pandemic further negatively impacted nutrition in Africa, causing people to eat fewer and less-diverse and decreasing coverage of essential nutrition services, such as school nutrition programs or iron supplementation.⁷⁰

In the short term, the US can increase its food assistance and investments in other social protection services targeted to the most vulnerable populations, using cash and voucher assistance where possible,

to bolster weakened market systems, ensure quick responses, and meet households' dietary needs. This can be done in conjunction with market monitoring, which can also act as an early warning of impending food insecurity. Longer term, this will require both public and private sector support to foster an environment that is conducive to investment opportunities and small business growth, in order to address economic inequality and help communities provide for themselves.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Bolster humanitarian assistance**, including immediate food assistance and protection for those most in need.
- Explore better integration of programming at the humanitarian, development and peace nexus to improve program outcomes and build resilience of local food systems to shocks and stressors.
- Invest in climate-resilient, nutrition-sensitive programming to combat external drivers of food insecurity and improve nutrition outcomes.
- Focus on small-holder farmers with land restoration projects as well as with quick, flexible, and direct funding to support their work.
- Invest in better data collection and early-warning systems to monitor levels of acute food insecurity and prices of food and commodities.
- Enhance social protection programs to protect the most vulnerable and reduce household and communities' vulnerability to shocks and stressors that reduce food and nutrition security.

EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS FOR FOOD SECURITY. CRS has had strong results from its recurrent resilience monitoring approach, MIRA, which uses real time data to track shocks and stressors and feeds directly into IPC processes. Through MIRA, data is collected monthly to track HH food security and shock dynamics, such as drought, flood, or COVID-19. The near real-time data collection allows for rapid analysis, adaptive management, and identifying which interventions produce the best results in building resilience, strengthening food security, and promoting well-being, and the data is shared with the affected communities. MIRA also has potential to predict food insecurity outcomes and identify HHs most likely to be affected by shocks and stressors, given its use of machine learning and other tools. For examples: in Malawi, MIRA data enabled them to inform local government actors of problem hot spots, like Fall Army Worm, and small-scale aid organizations in designing localized interventions. In Southern Madagascar, MIRA caught sales of assets (e.g., livestock, cooking implements) and other coping strategies, helping CRS target its response programming to combat acute food insecurity. MIRA data from Malawi and Madagascar also demonstrated that HHs in Savings and Internal Lending Community (SILC) programs face much less drastic reductions in food security when faced with shocks.

Developing meaningful partnership: Local leadership and Localization



Local Solutions for Local Problems

The COVID-19 pandemic and its fallout have made it clearer than ever before the essential role of local civil society for effective development and humanitarian response. USAID Administrator Samantha Power has made clear that the future of US development assistance should be rooted in a purposeful shift toward locally-led programming and empowering local leaders. The Agency has committed to directing 25% of its funding to local partners within the next four years, and has pledged to include input from local partners in 50% of USAID's programming by 2030.72 However, several focus group participants noted that although they have frequently heard about US efforts toward localization in theory, they have yet to see the necessary investment in capacity strengthening for local partners, increases in access to direct funding for local organizations, or reforms of funding mechanisms necessary to make true local leadership a reality.



Photo by Justin Makangara for CRS.

Local leadership is a core tenant of CRS' approach to its work, rooted in the Catholic Social Teaching of subsidiarity. CRS affirms local leadership is critical for effective, meaningful and sustainable humanitarian response and development and must be a priority for the future of foreign assistance. For effective and sustainable development policy, USAID must invest in local civil society, and increase opportunities for local actors to lead in the design, implementation, and evaluation of development and humanitarian programming, while also strengthening local government to empower them to lead and guide programming in their own country. To be successful in advancing local



Photo by Nancy McNally for CRS

leadership roles, these efforts require clarity and consistency in policy, adequate funding and investment with measurable outcomes, and a change in mindset rooted in the financial power of external donors that are reported on transparently.

One positive example of large-scale transition to local leadership is the President's Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (PEPFAR), which pledged to direct 70% of its funding to indigenous organizations by the end of 2021. While PEPFAR is not on track to meet that goal, 60% of funding will go to local actors as the lead implementer by FY2022. This achievement has put PEPFAR on the forefront of US foreign aid's efforts to

increase funding to local actors and may serve as a blueprint for other USG foreign aid programming also working to increase funding to local actors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- USAID Missions should **collaborate closely with local civil society** to develop Regional/Country Development Cooperation Strategies that guide the missions' work and report out on this collaborative effort in a regular and transparent way.
- "Right-size" funding mechanisms to **support localization success** by ensuring award size, timelines, and funding instruments are reasonable, optimal, and flexible enough for local civil society to succeed.
- Fully fund **comprehensive**, **holistic and participatory capacity strengthening** approaches that ensure participatory, locally-led capacity goal setting, and go well beyond simple transitional one-off activities.
- Improve data-collection and transparency by better **investing in data** around how much funding goes to local and national entities across the USG and the impact of these investments in local leadership.

Promoting local solutions for local problems can also be achieved by making market-based approaches for food assistance more accessible. While distributing US commodities for food aid is appropriate in some contexts, utilizing cash transfers and local and regional procurement (LRP) in other contexts or mixing modalities can be a more appropriate approach to food assistance. Mixed modalities could include providing knock-on effects, including greater nutritional benefits, helping private sector vendors expand businesses, and leading to more rapid and sustainable market recovery.⁷³

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Work with USAID agencies and Congress to provide maximum flexibility in US food assistance so that the right modality is available to respond to the specific needs and opportunities in each community and context.
- Study and understand how LRP can further benefit and develop local and regional commodity markets, including identifying and filling data needs like crop forecasts, food balance sheets, and developing data bases and understanding commodity chains.⁷⁴

Promoting local solutions for local problems can also be achieved by making market-based approaches for food assistance more accessible.



Photo by Karen Kasmauski for CRS.

Annex

Methodology Expanded

Over the course of five weeks in February and March 2022, CRS' policy researchers hosted eight focus group discussions that ranged from four to 10 participants. All participants were senior level staff of CRS, who currently or have recently lived and/or worked in sub-Saharan Africa. While the majority of the participants were country program staff, some were also headquarters staff who were invited due to their technical expertise in topical areas such as agriculture, gender, peacebuilding, and shelters and settlements. Two sessions were held for each of CRS' four regional divisions (Western, Eastern, Central, and Southern Africa). For one focus group per regional office, the participants invited were all either Country Representatives, Country Managers, or otherwise the leading role within that country program. The second focus group per regional office was made up of all other levels of staff, primarily Heads of Party, Heads of Operations, and Technical Advisors, asked to join based off of recommendations made by their respective Regional Directors. The focus groups were set up this way to ensure that staff felt comfortable to voice their unbridled opinions, without any concern of having their superior in the discussion. Technical, subject-matter

experts who do not currently live in Africa were dispersed throughout the eight focus groups randomly, and according to their availability.

The general topics to be covered during the session were shared with participants beforehand. During the 90-minute session, the conversations were moderated by one of two Policy Team researchers, through the use of Menti. The conversation was recorded, but participants were told the session was not for attribution. Participants were offered a series of open-ended questions to enter into the Menti database, and then were asked to expand on their selections. From there, the researchers asked follow-up questions and encouraged discussion among the participants. The line of questioning was as follows:

- 1. What are the top 3 challenges present in the country where you currently live and/or work?
 - A. Question was open-ended, prompting participants to include three short entries.
- 2. What are the three biggest opportunities for positive change in the country where you currently live and/or work?
 - A. Question was open-ended, prompting participants to include three short entries.
- 3. Which stakeholders do you or have you interacted with in your country?
 - A. Question was multiple-choice, with participants able to select as many as applied. The options were: USAID, State Department, Military, MCC, USDFC, Department of Agriculture, Department of Commerce/Trade, Global Fund, IFIs (e.g., World Bank), United Nations (e.g., WFP, WHO), European or other donors, and other.
- 4. How much do you agree with the following statements? (with 1 being Strongly Disagree and 5 being Strongly Agree)
 - A. The US has a coherent policy in my country.
 - B. The US implements good development policy in my country.
 - C. The US is perceived positively in my country.
 - I. How (if at all) has the perception of the US changed? (with 1 being it has gotten much worse, and 5 being it has gotten much better)
 - D. China is perceived positively in my country.

How (if at all) has the perception of China changed? (with 1 being it has gotten much worse, and 5 being it has gotten much better)

Responses to the above questions were collated for analysis. To determine the commonalities among the challenges and opportunities identified by participants, an intuitive coding process was used to group responses according to their overarching topic. The most frequently mentioned opportunities and challenges were used to frame the topline structure of this paper and its recommendations. Notes from the conversations during the session were used in order to pull out key anecdotes, programming examples, and to provide more context throughout the paper. All information gathered from participants included in this paper was vetted and cross-checked with external sources.



Photo by Patrick Meinhardt for CRS.

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