

Looking Back to Look Forward

Agricultural challenges to opportunities in the African Great Lakes region

CIALCA cannot do it alone- needs other operatives

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The African Great Lakes region includes Burundi, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Uganda, northwestern Kenya and Tanzania. This region is characterized by recent history of violence and internal conflict, the small farm sizes (<1.0ha), the absence of fallow, and one of the world's highest populations growth rates. The major challenge in this region is to break the poverty trap of many of the subsistence farmers to allow them to invest in intensification and linking to markets in an environment that is further threatened by climate change. Unless there is widespread adoption of sustainable agricultural intensification of food production in the African Great Lakes region, the future looks grim and we will be going back to the situation of war – and not because of ethnicity – war for food, war for space. In Rwanda and Burundi for example we have almost 400 inhabitants per square kilometre. The question here is can the land support the population? Unless there is widespread use of farm approaches and innovations that can grow more food with less land, countries in Central Africa's densely populated Great Lakes region could face increased conflict and greater instability in coming decades. Although good rainfall and temperatures make Central Africa one of the continent's most high-potential farming areas, small farm sizes, severely degraded soils, persistent civil conflicts, poor infrastructure and political instability have left the region plagued with chronic food insecurity and the highest rates of malnutrition and extreme poverty in sub-Saharan Africa. The eastern Democratic Republic of Congo has been in a state of almost continual instability and periodic violence since 1996, a decade of conflicts in Burundi and the 1994 genocide in Rwanda are responsible for widespread displacement and regional instability. On the other hand, the returnee population must be absorbed into the region's development, not remain the object of targeted assistance.

The Consortium for Improving Agriculture-based Livelihoods in Central Africa (CIALCA) in its agricultural efforts in the region is promoting widespread adoption of high-yielding climbing beans to boost food production, dietary protein, and improve soil fertility and efforts to intercrop high-value coffee plants with staple crops like banana. Hopefully, it is these kinds of innovations that can help steer the region towards a brighter future unfortunately, **CIALCA cannot do it alone- needs other operatives.**

The question now is whether the land and the soils that underpin farm yields can support booming populations under new constraints like rapid climate change and other environmental factors. Indeed, the effects of climate change in the region are a major concern for the already resource-strained, landlocked countries of Rwanda, Burundi and Democratic Republic of Congo. Recent research by the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) has shown that the ability of farmers to grow coffee one of Rwanda's largest cash crops is severely affected by rising temperatures, making it more susceptible to pests and diseases. In response to this, CIALCA organized the first international conference to examine the challenges and opportunities for intensifying farm production in sub-Saharan Africa's humid tropical regions, 24 to 27 October 2011 that attracted over 290 participants globally.

What WE will do Today that will contribute to Great Lakes region laughter and smiles?

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We look forward to meeting you at the seminar