

Africa under threat of invasive alien plants

In Africa, invasive alien plants such as *Prosopis juliflora*, *Parthenium hysterophorus*, *Mimosa* spp. and *Solanum elaeagnifolium* have become, in recent years, major biotic constraints to agricultural production and food security. They reduce biodiversity by displacing native species, transforming ecosystems, are difficult to control and toxic to livestock.

Invasive alien plant species have imposed huge losses on economies of particularly Sub-Saharan African countries like Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Zambia, South Africa and Ghana to name but few. It has been estimated that damage caused by invasive species worldwide amounts to almost five percent of the world economy. In the US alone the total economic harm caused by invasive species has been estimated at two to three billion dollars in crop loss each year. Although the economic loss due to invasive alien plants has not been systematically studied in Africa, the damage is believed to be equally extensive.

The major source of concern over and above the possible huge crop losses incurred is the fact that most African countries solely depend on agricultural products for their export earnings. In this context, unless the looming invasive alien plants threat is arrested through a continent-wide alliance and concerted action, it may scare away importing countries, as no country would want to import commodities contaminated by propagules of invasive alien plants. This will eventually kill export trade prospects for poor countries on the continent, potentially stifling their struggling economies.

The regions highly infested by invasive alien plants are currently Northern and Southern Africa infested by, amongst others, *Solanum elaeagnifolium* and Eastern Africa under threat by, for example, *Prosopis juliflora* and *Parthenium hysterophorus*. However, *Eichhornia crassipes* (water hyacinth) is an example of a species that is present across all Africa and it is likely that *Prosopis juliflora* and *Parthenium hysterophorus* will largely expand to West Africa. The afore-mentioned species are by no means the only important alien invader plants that threaten livelihoods and ecosystems (agricultural and natural) in Africa.

In Africa, invasive alien plants lengthen the list of other notorious noxious weeds recently reviewed in a workshop on noxious weeds in production of certified seeds, organized by FAO at Accra in July 2011. Among them parasitic weeds of the genera *Alectra*, *Striga*, *Orobanche* and non parasitic weeds like *Echinochloa colona*, wild rice species *Oryza longistaminata* and *Oryza barthii* increase weed management cost to levels hardly affordable by small scale farmers, the vast majority of farmers in Africa.

Increased globalization and exchange of agricultural commodities favor infestation of new areas by invasive alien plants. Thus, invasive alien plants currently infesting some countries in Africa will quickly spread over the continent and new species will be introduced if appropriate measures are not taken.

The debilitating impacts of many past invasions in many countries could have been reduced, if countries had uniformly applied appropriate best practices and taken rapid action to eradicate introduced species following detection. Current inaction in many countries may threaten the continent's rich biodiversity, public health and economic interests. It is now essential to develop efficient cooperation at national, regional and whole continent level to prevent or minimize adverse impacts of invasive plants. Invasive species populations span geographic and jurisdictional boundaries; thus efforts to manage invasive species must be coordinated across boundaries.

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