

Speaker:

The Fruits of Beninese Soils

2015 is the International Year of Soils, declared by the UN. Healthy soils are the basis for healthy food production, says the FAO, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Today we will take a closer look at the soils of Benin: How are they used? What is produced on them? and How is this connected to food security in the West African country?

According to the FAO the nutrition situation in Benin has improved in the last 20 years. Today about 10 % of the population suffer from severe undernourishment (<http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4030e.pdf>). Although the fear of starvation is not that present any more nowadays, the majority of the population has not the possibility to eat twice a day.

Ulrich Abiou:

Less than 20% eat two times per day. Most of the people in Benin, they are eating once per day. That means that people don't have access to enough food.

Speaker:

...says Sessi Ulrich Abiou of ESE Benin. ESE Benin is a Cotonou based NGO which fights poverty and malnutrition at a local level. The NGO works with youth and women in the fields of education, health and environment.

The local food production in Benin consists of fruits, cereals like maize and sorghum and roots like yam and cassava. Concerning other needed food products, the population is depending on imports. The high prices of basic food products lead to high food insecurity ([http://www.fao.org/ag/AGN/nutrition/ben\\_en.stm](http://www.fao.org/ag/AGN/nutrition/ben_en.stm)). As we heard, there is not sufficient food in the country. But why is it like this?

Ulrich Abiou:

We have land, but it is a question of the strategy and the politics. What are we producing?

Speaker:

Oumarou Djobo, chemist and biotechnologist, working at IRGIB Africa, the Regional Institute of Biotechnologies and Applied Sciences in Cotonou agrees.

Oumarou Djobo:

The most imported food in Benin is rice and in Benin we can produce rice. The yield of the rice production is really good. We have a lot of green space, space that is not occupied. We have also in the university a faculty of agronomics. The rice cultivation is very complicated and doing all this with hands does not allow people to have a large farm of rice.

Speaker:

So the only problem for domestic rice production is the lack of money. The financial investment for producing the necessary food for local consumption is missing. While rice and other food supply is imported, the national production focuses on cotton for export. Cotton generates about 40% of

Benin's GDP and makes 80% of the country's export. This situation is a result of the neo-colonial politics of structural adjustment of the last decades, in which Benin was forced to cut down its public investment and open the market for private capital.

Another factor of the present food insecurity is the global environmental change, says Ulrich Abiou.

Ulrich Abiou:

In Benin with the global warming the seasons changed and the villagers, they don't know, when they have to produce. The normal times, they were producing, those times changed. They don't know, when it is raining. It's a big problem for them and they don't have the return of the production. Then at the end they are discouraged and now many villagers, they leave the countryside.

Speaker:

The NGO ESE Benin works in in the center of Benin to secure the access to food and education for people.

Ulrich Abiou:

In the center of Benin we have many problems about food. Women don't have food for their children and we have especially in this region the problem of child traffic, because they don't have access to food.

Speaker:

For Abiou the topic of food security is closely linked to education.

Ulrich Abiou:

Education is a basement of sustainable development. We support the women in the area to help the children to have access to food. Because the lack of food is also a problem linked to the education. If they don't have to eat, even if they go to the classroom, they won't understand anything. Today the government is doing a big effort: The access to the primary education is free in Benin. It is a big progress, but it is not enough.

Speaker:

In the south of Benin the diet is mostly based on maize and fish, while in the north milk, sorghum, maize and yam are the most important food products. In the region of Borgou in the north of the country a typical meal consists of a pasta of maize and a soup made out of water, oil and salt.

Oumarou Djobo from IRGIB Africa points out, that this is especially a problem for children.

Oumarou Djobo:

Children need a balanced diet for their growth and their intelligence, for avoiding some diseases. Because we have a lot of diseases here, which are results from a lack of some vitamins or from minerals.

Speaker:

Another problem connected to food security is the quality of the imported and domestically produced food, says Djobo. The quality includes two components.

Oumarou Djobo:

The first component we call “food safe”. “Safe” means, that when you eat the food, you won't have any physical damage due to the food. And the second component is the alterability of the food. That means the food will stay normal until the date, they mention at the etiquette of the food.

Speaker:

There is a government agency in charge of controlling imported and domestically produced food. Ulrich Abiou criticizes that nevertheless one can find unhealthy food on the market.

Ulrich Abiou:

It is said, that the products are controlled, but you can find on the market forbidden products. You don't know where those products come in the country. People are buying it. We are importing everything. Any country can send everything in our country. Really, I know, we have organizations, they are doing the control, but you can see everything – everything is coming to the country.

Speaker:

Consumers tend to trust in food imported from Europe, because it is said to be of good quality. In reality the food is often sorted out in Europe, because it does not fulfill the quality standards there and is then imported to Benin.

Oumarou Djobo:

And the people who are suffering are the consumers. And a lot of people die. Once a whole family died because of an intoxication of lead, a heavy metal. And people don't know what happened to them. And no one has investigated, only the manager of the university. Now we have done a study in my university and we do know exactly that it was an intoxication.

Speaker:

To avoid cases like this, Djobo suggests a stricter control of quality standards.

Oumarou Djobo:

We have some standards for food, that is ISO 9000. ISO, the International Standard Organization of food has stated basic standards to respect in order to get a safe food. So the government must say: Before you can sell, for example, your product in Benin, you must respect the basic rules of the ISO 9000, you must respect the basic rules of hygiene in the food industry. They have to form a group, that is really competent in the HACCP system and that will go to all the producers to check first, if the producer's company has an HACCP system. And secondly, they have to check, if these producers have a quality management system. This are the two most important things recommended by the International Standard Organization.

Speaker:

Ulrich Abiou from ESE Benin suggests

Ulrich Abiou:

Our government should secure our border.

Speaker:

A stricter control of imported food is required. Also subsidies for domestic food production are needed, so that the soils of Benin can be used to nourish the population.

This segment is part of an audio series related to the International Year of Soils. It has been produced with the support of the World Association of Community Broadcasters, in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, celebrating its 70th anniversary in 2015.