

## Business

# W African farm 'bootcamp' gets green entrepreneurs into shape

## Program in Tori-Bossito aims to teach basic, traditional ways of agriculture

**TORI-BOSSITO, Benin:** Machetes in hand and wearing a straw hat against the sun, the participants of an "agro-bootcamp" in the farmlands of the West African nation of Benin harvest maize, cowpeas and rice. "Cut at the base," says Oluwafemi Kochoni, an organic farming teacher, who runs the agricultural workshop to prepare young people for a future sustainably working the land.

"Then leave the plants in place, we will bury them—they will decompose and fertilize the soil." It's beginner's advice but the program in Tori-Bossito, just outside Benin's economic capital Cotonou, aims to teach basic, traditional ways of agriculture to those who have forgotten or never known a life on the land.

In Benin, a poor country next to oil giant Nigeria, some 80 percent of its 11 million people depend on agriculture, according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Most are subsistence farmers eking out a living growing crops on small plots where a lack of infrastructure and flooding that can wipe out harvests and seed stocks are key challenges, the FAO warns. But the "agro-bootcamps"—the name is borrowed from the intensive training of the US army—take place close to the suburbs of the city and are aimed at a different market. They are part of a wider movement to encourage self-sufficiency on the continent, which has some two-thirds of the world's remaining uncultivated arable land—but spends \$64.5 billion a year importing food, according to the African Development Bank.

For 27,000 CFA francs (\$45, about 40 euros) a week, agro-bootcampers learn agricultural techniques, follow marketing courses and can network with successful agro-entrepreneurs.

### 'Ecologically-aware businesspeople'

Like in traditional farming, the agro-bootcamp way of life is communal on the three-hectare (seven-acre)

plot of land put at its disposal for the week by a family in exchange for baskets of vegetables. On the edge of the fields, a border hedge of moringa plants and grasses are grown to help stabilize the soil.

There is also a fish farm in a pond, and another area to grow mushrooms. Behind the scheme is the Gardens of Hope, an organization promoting sustainable ways of farming. "The advice usually received by farmers is based on the use of chemicals," said participant Rachidi Idrissou, an agronomy student in Benin.

"We think of quick yields-and not sustainable production to preserve our land." Benin is a youthful country; nearly two-thirds of the population is aged under 25. Camp organizers want to show young people struggling in the crowded cities looking for a job that working the land can offer an alternative and successful livelihood. Originating from Africa and Europe, the 25 participants in this third agro-bootcamp are mostly men and of eight different nationalities but share a vision of an ecological and sustainable way of farming. They sleep in tents and are kept busy from dawn until long after dusk. "Our belief is that to solve the employment problem in our countries, young people must create their businesses with awareness of ecology of the climate," said coordinator Tanguy Gninkobou.

### 'A philosophy'

Of the 85 people who have taken part in the last two bootcamps, 10 have already launched new agricultural activities, farms or enterprises, according to organizers. Social networks mean that participants and organizers can stay in touch for support as they develop their farms and small businesses. Participants farm in ways farmers did before the massive movement of people to the cities.

"Initially, it was an alternative to conventional farming, to return to ancestral methods with the respect of the environment," said Kochoni. "Then it became a way

of life, and a philosophy." More camps are planned for later in the year in north Benin, then in Chad and Ivory Coast. Cheikh Amadou Bass, 36, a civil servant in Nouakchott, capital of the desert nation of Mauritania, owns a large plot of land the size of five football pitches in his home village. Bass dreams of showing his young

phone network that will transmit data at far greater speeds—in Egypt for the Africa Cup of Nations, which will be held from June 21 to July 19. "Africa is a market Huawei had identified and which they conquered thanks to a very aggressive strategy based on cheap financing and speed of execution," Satchu told AFP. "The fact that Huawei has equipped the AU says it all," he added.

compatriots that rather than crossing the sea in search of a new life abroad, there are opportunities on the land. "With nature, you have everything at your fingertips," Bass said, enthusing about how manure means chemical fertilizers are not needed. "I have made a great discovery," he added. —AFP



The program aims to teach basic, traditional ways of agriculture to those who have forgotten or never known a life on the land. —AFP

## Huawei turns to Africa to offset US blacklist

**PARIS:** As the US leads a drive for the West to shun Huawei over security fears, the Chinese tech giant has sought to strengthen its position in Africa, where it is already well-established. Huawei has taken a leading role in developing next-generation 5G mobile phone networks around the world.

But it has been in turmoil since Washington charged its equipment could serve as a Trojan horse for Chinese intelligence services. The world's second smartphone maker fiercely denies the allegations, but the US has urged countries to avoid it and several companies have distanced themselves.

They include Google, whose Android operating system runs most smartphones. And as Washington and Beijing duke it out in an escalating trade war, nations around the world are faced with the dilemma of having to choose a side between the world's two top economies.

Russian President Vladimir Putin weighed in on Friday, slamming Washington's attempt to "unceremoniously push" Huawei out of the global market. Earlier in the week, Russia's MTS telecoms giant signed a deal with Huawei to develop a 5G network in the country. Chinese President Xi Jinping, a guest of Putin at an eco-

omic forum in Saint Petersburg, said China was "ready to share technological inventions with all partners, in particular 5G technology".

But will the escalating fight lead to African nations having to choose between China—the continent's top trade partner—and the US? "For African countries this trade war may end up a binary choice. It will be very difficult for Africa to just ignore" it, said Aly-Khan Satchu, an independent economic analyst based in Nairobi.

### 'Very aggressive strategy'

Huawei, now a major factor in US-Chinese tensions, has looked to strengthen its ties in Africa, last week signing an agreement to reinforce its cooperation with the African Union. "This was a way to show that Huawei is still present in Africa and that they want to remain a major player by positioning themselves in this very important growth sector," said Ruben Nizard, an economist and Sub-Saharan Africa specialist at the French financial services firm Coface.

The deal comes after the French newspaper Le Monde reported in 2018 that China had spied on the AU's headquarters in Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa, citing sources inside the organization. The report said the spying began in 2012 after the completion of the AU's new headquarters that was financed by China, and was only noticed when technicians discovered data on the building's servers was being sent to Shanghai.

Both China and the AU reject the allegations. Huawei has established itself across Africa since launching in Kenya in 1998, and now operates in 40 countries, providing 4G networks to more than half of the continent.

It will also showcase 5G—the next-generation mobile

phone network that will transmit data at far greater speeds—in Egypt for the Africa Cup of Nations, which will be held from June 21 to July 19. "Africa is a market Huawei had identified and which they conquered thanks to a very aggressive strategy based on cheap financing and speed of execution," Satchu told AFP. "The fact that Huawei has equipped the AU says it all," he added.

### 'Big Brother Beijing'

Huawei's presence in Africa goes far beyond selling smartphones and building mobile networks. In South Africa, it provides training at the country's top universities, this year launching a specialized course on 5G.

Kenya's government signed a 17.5-billion-shilling (\$172 million) deal with Huawei in April to build a data center and "smart city" services. The Chinese giant also offers a "safe city" surveillance program. This initiative, according to the firm's website, "can prevent crimes targeted towards the normal citizen, tourists, students, elderly persons etc before they occur".

It has been deployed in Kenya's capital Nairobi as well as Mauritius, with 4,000 "smart" surveillance video cameras set up at 2,000 sites across the Indian Ocean island nation. Some media outlets in Mauritius have condemned the system as "digital dictatorship" from "Big Brother Beijing". But Ghanaian Security Ministry Albert Kan-Dapaah, for one, says Huawei's video surveillance technology helps catch criminals. "When a crime has been committed, thanks to the cameras, we work magic," Kan-Dapaah says in a promotional video for the Chinese firm.

Huawei Marine, the company's submarine cable arm, is helping to deploy a key 12,000-kilometre (7,450-mile) cable system connecting Africa to Asia. With Huawei so



SHENZHEN: People walk past Huawei advertising at Shenzhen-Bao'an International airport in Shenzhen, China's Guangdong province. —AFP

deeply embedded in Africa, the continent may find it difficult to avoid becoming a collateral victim of the US-China bust-up.

"Africa is caught in the middle of a trade war that they should not have to take part in, because they have nothing to gain," said Nizard. —AFP

## Trump, AMLO tout deal to avert tariffs on Mexico

**TIJUANA, Mexico:** Presidents Donald Trump and Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador each declared the deal averting US tariffs on Mexico a win Saturday, as markets breathed a sigh of relief—though rights groups condemned what they called a draconian crack down on migration.

Lopez Obrador said the bottom line on the last-minute deal reached Friday night was simple: "there will not be an economic or financial crisis in Mexico on Monday." Economists had warned the pain of Trump's threatened tariffs—set to start at five percent today and rise incrementally to 25 percent by October—and Mexico's likely retaliatory measures would have been acute for both countries, with potentially global spillover.

Instead, the countries hammered out a deal in which Mexico agreed to bolster security on its southern border and expand its policy of taking back migrants, most of them from violence-riven Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, as the United States processes their asylum claims.

Trump hailed it as a victory, after a week of terrifying his southern neighbor, whose economy depends heavily on exports to the US. "Mexico will try very hard, and if they do that, this will be a very successful agreement for both the United States and Mexico!" he tweeted early Saturday.

Later, he added: "Everyone very excited about the new deal with Mexico!" The relief was palpable in the Mexican border city of Tijuana, where Lopez Obrador led a rally attended by several thousand people to celebrate the deal and "the friendship of the people of Mexico and the United States."

However, the leftist leader—who said he had just spoken to Trump on the phone—also warned his American counterpart that it was not enough for Mexico to tighten its borders, saying Washington also needed to invest in economic development in Central America to stem the exodus from the region. —AFP

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