



AGRICULTURE AS A PATHWAY TO POVERTY AND HUNGER REDUCTION IN AFRICA
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INTRODUCTION:

Africa is at the dawn of a new era. This is a decade of promise for the continent. In spite of the global financial meltdown, in spite of the spiraling food prices, indeed in spite of Africa being designated as the home of hunger and poverty, the continent has shown remarkable resilience, it is moving albeit slowly towards social-economic and political stability. Africa's hope is now!

Glaring Hunger and Poverty : Challenges Remain!

In spite of the positive socio-economic and political gains that have been recorded over the past ten years, Africa remains, a "troubling" continent. This is a continent where famine and diseases are rife. A continent where 200 million people are undernourished, and 33 million children are malnourished and go to sleep hungry every night. The right of all people to have access to adequate food is recognised in international legislation and getting rid of hunger is a moral imperative.

Food insecurity in Africa, especially in Southern and Eastern Africa has been compounded by the overwhelming and rapid spread of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the impact of which on agriculture should be seen in the same context as natural disasters, and could very likely be more systematically damaging in the long run. A number of countries in the SADC region have lost much of their productive labour including agriculture researchers and extension workers through HIV/AIDS.

As long as this situation continues, it is unlikely that Africa can attain the high rates of economic growth to which the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) aspires – that is 7%. Africa's hungry are

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the poorest of the poor, and hence reducing hunger in Africa must be among the first steps towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goal to halve poverty by 2015. But it also makes economic sense to eradicate hunger, for as long as people are undernourished, they can not achieve their full potential: they remain prone to ill health, their learning ability is compromised and their capacity for productive work is curtailed.

The current global financial crisis, coupled with increased population pressure on arable land and global environmental change, can only make matters worse for rural communities in Africa. Unless a focus on agriculture and the quest for combating poverty and hunger are seen as an emergency – which require both short and long term solutions, Africa might remain the home of poverty and hunger.

A Rediscovery of Agriculture in Combating Hunger and Poverty

The rediscovery of agriculture as a conduit to poverty and hunger reduction was given buoyancy with the publication of the World Development report in 2008. The report makes, a strong, yet well known case that rural poverty reduction cannot depend entirely on economic growth in urban areas. In the case of South East Asia and East Asia the report observes, that between 1993 and 2003 the decline of poverty was mostly attributable to better conditions in the country-side, rather than out migration to cities. Higher investments in agriculture to induce higher productivity is key to higher rural income and improved livelihoods. A focus on African agriculture is the buzz word now in the international development circles. This is a turnaround from the past two decades when industrialization urbanization informed by the trickle-down theory gave sway.

Indeed this represents a wider paradigm shift in international development community thinking on the centrality of agriculture to improving livelihoods, securing food security and ensuring environmental sustainability. It must be acknowledged that when the African leaders endorsed the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) in 2003, they were years ahead of this emerging global development thinking. The 10% 2003 commitment of public budget allocation to agriculture, to put Africa on a path towards reaching MDG1 also represented a paradigm shift from past almost exclusive reliance on external funding for agriculture.

The Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP): A New Pathway to Poverty and Hunger Reduction.

In 2003, the AU Assembly endorsed CAADP as their collective vision for restoring agricultural growth and food security in Africa. The premise for endorsing this collective African framework under NEPAD was the understanding that to achieve success required not simply increasing investments, but making fundamental changes in the very way African Governments and their development partners do business.

CAADP being a component of the broader NEPAD agenda, has also been driven by the conviction that Africa's development problems and challenges cannot be overcome without the necessary ownership and leadership by African governments and stakeholders, and the establishment of a clear framework that ensures consistency and coherence of efforts by all stakeholders, including international development partners.

CAADP is committed to the achievement of sustainable growth of the agriculture sector. It is committed to the achievement of 6% annual growth rate by 2015. In its focus on long term growth options, and its implication for poverty and hunger reduction, CAADP also calls on national governments to work through strategic public-private partnerships and business to business alliances that facilitate the development of smallholder friendly supply chains.

This is the first time in the history of African agriculture development discourse that a collective framework has been adopted by African leaders, which tackles growth, poverty reduction, food and nutrition security issues in such a comprehensive way.

What is particularly significant for CAADP is the global interest and support it has generated. Not only have multilateral and bilateral agencies endorsed CAADP as a framework for their collective technical and financial assistance to African agriculture, but also they have facilitated the establishment of a CAADP Multi Donor Trust Fund. The Fund is intended to catalyse investment financing for national and regional agricultural programmes initiated within the CAADP framework.

Clearly the world is listening and the World is responding.

On a personal note

I must say that I for one I have been listening and responding to Africa's challenges for quite some time. From the time that I joined the teaching faculty of the University of Malawi in the 1970s working with small-holders in Malawi's Pioneering World Bank Integrated Rural Development Programmes, to the 1980s as a Consultant to a wide range of donors, I have come to appreciate the complexity of issues and challenges associated with hunger and poverty reduction among Small Scale Farmers and the Urban Poor in Africa. My work with young men and women across Africa, in such areas as Agriculture and Food Security, Youth Enterprise and Employment, Health and Welfare, including HIV/AIDS related issues, has broadened my understanding of development issues in the Africa. I have come to appreciate the apparent scarcity of innovative development strategies and African development thought. This is a complete contrast to the Asian context whereby Asia has relentlessly pursued its own indigenous development pathway/s.

It is in this regard that I have continuously advocated for indigenous and creative strategies in the alleviation of poverty among rural and urban households in Africa. That is, an African-owned and driven development paradigm where small scale producers take the centre stage in their own personal redemption from the wounds and pains that have entrenched them in the quagmire of hunger and poverty.

Challenges to Institutions of Higher Education in South Africa

The Government of South Africa should be proud of the excellent contribution the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal is playing in addressing the challenges of hunger and poverty in Africa through its ground breaking academic training in agriculture sciences and the leadership of the Africa Centre for Food Security in the implementation of the NEPAD food security agenda. This role of UKZN is clearly in sync with the governments' Pan African development vision.

Reaching and Restoring the Dignity of Smallholder Producers in Africa

One of the challenges CAADP will need to grapple with is in stimulating policies and strategies that will ensure that millions of small holder farmers are connected to research, technology, extension services and markets. The current chronic levels of poverty and hunger are a telling story that millions of the small African producers remain unconnected to science and known technological advances in agriculture. Millions are unconnected to markets. Their labour brings minimal returns to sustain their livelihoods.

A Challenge to Graduates

As professionals, as students you will need to understand who these small holder producers are, after all they are and should be the primary consumers of the science and knowledge you have acquired at this prestigious institution. You need to understand not only their enormous knowledge of their own farming environment but also their subtle ways of responding to official demands. When they say yes to you, this may not reflect a subjective inner agreement with your science, it is therefore our expectation that as you go out into the field out there working with farmers and scientists you will endeavour to cultivate a close relationship with farmers, especially the poor endowed resource farmers, by creating trust and feedback mechanism that is essential for analysing problems and finding appropriate solutions.

Indeed, we trust that as graduating students and as researchers, trainers and extension workers, you will not maintain the prevailing status quo of reaching out mostly to the well resourced farmers to the neglect of the small producers. The continued focus on rich farmers as a primary target group in the transformation of African agriculture, as we have seen across Africa over the past 50 years only leads towards the concentration of power on the rich and gradually leads towards increased rural inequalities. This approach is unlikely to reduce hunger and poverty on the continent.

Yes, we fully understand the current fragility of the relationship between the state and its rural citizenry, especially the small producers, who remain unreached with the modern technological advances. Yet based on the history of agricultural development elsewhere, especially in South Asia and East Asia, it is possible to reach to millions of small producers with low cash farm inputs, modern technologies and appropriate services including micro financing. Indeed, it is possible to link them to wider markets that will enhance their incomes and improve the livelihood of their families.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, please allow me to add that as a university professor, head of department, researcher and head of a regional organization I have had the rare opportunity of interacting with African leaders, development professional colleagues and grassroots communities – the latter who over the past 50 years of Africa's post-independence have continued to eke their living from Africa's parched soils and yet they are still able to maintain their humanity with dignity. These are the unsung heroes to whom I want to dedicate this Honorary Doctorate. To my family I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude for enduring my many global journeys and long absences from home in pursuit of the elusive and offshore development mirage.

You as graduates I implore you to retain the repertoire of your intellectual thought processes within the African context without losing touch of the current intellectual developments at the global level.

You as scientists, trainers and extension workers, are called upon to change the status quo. This is your challenge. This is the challenge for Africa. You as scientists have the destiny of Africa in your hands. You are among a handful of the continent's architects, your task is to rebuild Africa's fragile economies.

Your best job qualification is not how well educated you are, but what you are able to do. A PhD is not a sufficient pathway to future opportunities, it is simply a trigger to existing opportunities.

Mr Vice Chancellor allow me to pay homage to you, for the outstanding leadership you have rendered to this institution. Your leadership in transformation and unifying an amalgam of institutions - from an array of academic cultures and holding the university together, is remarkable. This is a fit of true leadership. It augurs well for the future of this prestigious institution as a premier Centre of academic excellence for Africa.

Mr Vice Chancellor, the University Chancellor, Council and the entire University Community, I would like to thank you for this honour. This is an honour I will forever cherish.

Thank you!