

Taking agriculture to the next level

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Tanimola Oyewole in this report, suggests how northern governors and the traditional rule can set up modern farms where farmers from villages under their domain will be required to provide labour on a rotational basis, thereby boosting agriculture in the region.



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Nigeria: Agriculture remains the main occupation of the majority of our rural population. And every improvement we are able to bring about in the sector will translate to an improvement in the life of the majority of our people. Agriculture productivity on the African continent is low relative to other continents because of the low level of technology that is being brought to bear in agricultural production. This is evident by the following:

- Low usage of hybrid seeds particularly varieties that are best suited for our soil type and are more tolerant of pests and diseases
- Soil degraded by poor farming technique and low fertilizer usage

- Limited use of farm machinery, rudimentary hoes and cutlasses very much like the ones used by our parents are still the predominant implements being used by our farmers

- Limited knowledge and use of sustainable farming techniques
- Absence of modern farm management skills
- Market failures which deny farmers the appropriate reward for their labour

Several states in the country are currently grappling with the payment of civil/public servant salaries; with most requiring a federal government bailout to enable them to do so. State governments that are in such sorry financial state can hardly be expected to deliver on infrastructure and other needed amenities/service, so communities have to begin to look out for themselves. And Emirs, as fathers of the community, are very well placed to champion such moves.

The below are some programmes that the Emirs can implement to help address the problems:

Demonstration farms

Emirs in the state will be supported and encouraged to set up modern farms where farmers from villages under their domain will be required to provide farm labour on a rotational basis. These will help bring the local farmers in every single village in the state in direct and personal contact with modern farming techniques and the benefits thereof.

The practical application of the above method and the immense benefit and transformation it can bring about is being played out in the Tsaragi Emirate, and will be held up as an example for others to copy.

The local staples of the community and a few other selected crops will be grown using modern sustainable farming techniques and applying the correct inputs - use of small farm machinery to help increase area under cultivation, small-scale drip irrigation to help keep farmers going all year round and hybrid seed along with inputs - fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides - will be demonstrated. It is expected that the involvement of the local farmers in the process will help them witness in practical terms the difference that modern farming techniques bring about, and that this would help hasten the diffusion of the knowledge amongst the local farmers around the state.

The average farmer in sub-Saharan Africa gets just over half a ton of cereal per acre, while the average Indian farmer gets about twice that, the average Chinese farmer about four times that, and the average American farmer about five times that amount - FAOSTAT. Accessed 2009.

Establishment of equipment hiring and extension services centre

Each Emirate should reach out to its well-to-do-sons to join hands with the state and an experienced business manager to set up an equipment hiring and extension services centre. That will have bulldozers for land clearing, and tractors equipped with plows and planters that will be available for hire at a rate affordable for farmers in the Emirate. This will make it possible for them to put a greater area of land under cultivation.

Agriculture extension officers will be on hand at each centre to provide farmers with agronomy advice, do farm visitations and help organise them into cooperatives. Short video clips on modern practice - how to grow and manage different crops - would be produced by the Ministry of Agriculture and be available for purchase as video CDs or Micro Sims for view on mobile phones.

The centres will also stock hybrid seeds for the staples grown in the state along with agrochemicals - herbicides, fungicide, pesticides, etc.

Correcting market distortion

A large portion of the farm produce by our rural state find their way into the cities, but as things stand presently, the middlemen end up with a disproportionate amount of the final consumer price paid for the foodstuff, depriving the farmers

the full benefit of their labour and acting as a disincentive for new entrance into the sector. To help correct the situation, farmers in each Emirate will be encouraged to form cooperatives that will, in addition to other functions, be engaged in produce marketing i.e. getting information on the going rate of produce in the cities, and seeking ways to ensure that their produce is sold for the best possible price.

Every cooperative will be encouraged to procure at least one DAF truck (if necessary on hire purchase, with the Emir standing as surety). With this, they can directly convey their produce to the city market, cutting out the middle man. The cooperatives will buy the products off the farmers at a more competitive price than the middlemen presently offer them and sell the products in the cities at the going retail rate, with the differential going into the funds of the cooperative.

Community development officers can be recruited for each Emirate, who will be charged with ensuring that the funds been generated by the cooperative are directed towards projects that will enhance the community economically i.e. projects that complement the state government's programmes in education, health care, micro-hydroelectric power plants and road projects, etc. rather than the usual town hall, market stall and such other projects that communities are fond of undertaking. They will be in a position to recommend appropriate small and medium scale enterprises and social welfare projects in the Emirate.

The development officer will also act as an agriculture extension officer charged with introducing new farmer techniques, low-cost farm implements, new crops and other assistance in the area of agriculture.

The general aim has been to implement an integrated community development initiative in every ward similar to those being undertaken by the Millennium Villages Project. The Millennium Villages projects have been able to achieve a marked improvement in the livelihood of the rural people in the area of health care delivery, water and sanitation, education, infrastructure, and business development with just an annual outlay of N20,000 per capita over a five year period.

The above is reminiscent of the Marketing Boards run by the then Regional governments in the country.

Agro-processing plants

The Emirs can challenge communities and farmer cooperatives to attain a position where no unprocessed commodity leaves their communities. They will be encouraged to establish mini/micro agro-processing plants to add value to the produce coming out of their communities. A micro Shea butter processing plant can transform the local economy of a community, so would a micro rice or sugar mill. The groundnut growers can, for instance, come together and establish a mini oil mill with finance from the Bank of Industry's Cottage Agro Product Processing Fund, this will add substantial value to the raw groundnut, set the community on the first rung of industrial development, create additional jobs in the plant - factory, sales, admin and others. Given the extensive linkage that the plant's operation has within the community, the multiplier effect of the new monies coming into the community would have a positive impact on a significant proportion of the population.

Agri exports

Emirs can champion the exports of agri-commodities grown in their Emirate. Asian business people presently undertake the bulk of the exports, with the huge benefits accruing to them being taken out of the country when they could have been used to uplift our people.

Summary

Agriculture provided the foundation for economic growth and development in several countries around the world. The Emirs can exploit this same potential by empowering its farmers to utilise its vast amounts of arable land.

The wealth that will be generated will help ensure that the scourge of rural poverty will be drastically reduced and the inclusive growth that we are all so desirous of will begin to unfold, the way that the earnings from Cocoa, Groundnut, and

Palm Oil did back in the 60's.

The above reforms and the better prospects it will usher in will also make it possible to attract youth into agriculture and help reverse the aging farming population that is threatening the future of agriculture in the country.

Assistance for the implementation of the above can be sought from Local and international organisations such as IITA, the African Green Revolution Forum (AGRF), the USAID Feed the Future Initiative, the G8 New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition, the Nigeria Exports Promotion Council and the Federal Ministry of Agriculture.

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