

REPOSITIONING AGRICULTURAL POLICIES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Agriculture is the life-wire of development for any nation. It is also the key to political stability without which socio-economic and sustainable development cannot take place. However, everyday one in every 3 people in Africa goes without food. With the shrinking of the world into a global village whereby cooperation amongst nations, organizations and agencies has become vital, it is imperative to reposition agricultural policies in Nigeria to fit in the global race. Agricultural -development cannot be discussed in isolation of other sectors, because of their complementary. This paper will mainly focus of assessing the problems hindering development in the agricultural sector, examine its prospects and providing concrete strategies or proposals for repositioning the sector. In essence, the paper points that all is not lost, the agricultural sector is still crucial to the development of Nigeria if properly repositioned.

Introduction

Between 1980 and 1995 per capita food production increased 27% in Asia and 12% in Latin America. But in Sub-Saharan Africa it fell 8%. Although hunger is most prevalent in South Asia, it is declining - while in Africa about one-third of the population is undernourished, and the number is increasing. (HDR, 2003:87).

Agriculture is very crucial and a significant determinant of economic growth and development, because of its influence on stability.

Development has generated a lot of debate and discussion in various areas of the country due to the concern for ensuring the existence of a sustained drive towards the socio-economic-development of the nation. Opinions however, differ as to which of the various sectors should be emphasized to foster sustained and stable development. For instance one group arguing for agriculture will show that if agriculture is emphasized the country might eliminate the problem of starvation for a rapidly growing population, have a surplus over its current needs that could be exported and earn foreign exchange much needed to buy foreign goods. Those arguing for industrialization will show that emphasis on industrialization will create much needed capital, extensive employment opportunities, increased per capita income and living standard and bring about desirable changes in social and cultural attitudes and national institutions, etc.

Agriculture is simply the cultivation of soil to yield output. It has been referred to as the science or practice of farming: cultivation of soil by the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary. However, agriculture takes many forms e.g. farming of food and cash crops, livestock and fishery, horticulture and many more. It is a very important sector of the economy as it is essential to the lives of all human beings. This is because productive and profitable agriculture contribute to the higher standard of living. Nigeria has implemented many agricultural policies, such as the green revolution, operation feed the nation etc.

In 1986, the Federal Government launched a comprehensive package of policy instruments for the next 15 years intended to develop and improve the performance of the countries agricultural sector on sustainable development. Where then, is the problem? Are Nigeria's agricultural policies formulated with .the target in mind? Are they properly implemented, or probably the policies are isolated and not comprehensive. The position of this paper is that the agricultural policies are very crucial in the drive towards sustainable development, but they need to be repositioned such that they should benefit the target and the society at large.

The paper comprises of five sections. Conceptual framework comes after this section followed by problems militating against successful implementation of agricultural policies. The fourth section focuses on strategies proposed towards repositioning the agricultural policies towards

sustainable development, followed by the concluding comments.

Conceptual Framework

Proponents of more emphasis on agriculture to foster rapid development have shown that it's a live wire of a nation's economy and that there is no area in which the maintenance of development is more important in terms of human welfare than in agriculture. Cochrane (1965) so much believed in the significance of agriculture that he asserted that "a development strategy which fails to incorporate within its structure, a hard determined push for agriculture, will almost certainly lead the country involved first into a food crisis, then into a breakdown of the development process and finally into political upheavals" Gant (1979) also showed the importance of agriculture which he believes has a key role in the development programs of most countries.

Development policies should by nature be integrative so as to enhance comprehensive development. Sustainable development, we argue, should begin from the grassroots and the best way is the integrated development approach. This approach assumes that all sectors - economic, social etc. Significantly affect the development process, because the agricultural, industrial, educational and other services sectors, for example are so integrated that they cannot be separated from each other.

The integrated development approach involves simultaneous actions executed concurrently in an integrated manner, which requires the mobilization of resources, human and material, to achieve its long-term requirement, Integrated development approach involves the development of the different sectors of the economy.

However, such integration should be determined by functional structural arrangements focusing on interrelationships between and among all government departments or institutions, so as to avoid duality of duties and friction between the agencies and their staff as well as enhance coordination, monitoring and mutual reinforcement.

Problems Militating Against Successful Agricultural Policies

The capacity of the agricultural sector to engineer and lead the development bandwagon to sustainable development is challenged by so many factors like the lack of or poor infrastructural facilities, inadequate funding which may not necessarily be certain (delay in cases where funding is gotten), lack of a well-articulated long term research plan, etc. Too much dependence on public enterprises to lead to development also created challenges.

Other problem hindering agricultural development includes reliance on growth strategies which emphasize public production and direct controls on credit, foreign exchange, and prices. Exchange rates were overvalued, tariffs were high as well as restrictions placed on quantities, producers of export crops sold for far less than their world market values. On the other hand input markets values were distorted by heavy-subsidies especially for fertilizer and agricultural credit. All these policies culminated to unfavourable impacts on the sector thereby leading to rent - seeking by taxing productions and investment. It also led to a situation where there is constant short supply of inputs, as well the continuous breakdown of single - channel public marketing systems.

Another significant deterrence to agricultural development is the deteriorating conditions of supportive infrastructure for processing and marketing deteriorated leading to heavy reliance on imports.

In most societies poorly formulated policies contribute to the stagnation of the agricultural sector leading to a situation where rapid population growth has superceded agricultural growth. Thus, setting the stage for a food crisis and causing a rise in the poverty level as well as stagnation.

Environmental degradation which includes deforestation, soil degradation, depletion of fisheries, and freshwater reduction also hinders the successful implementation of agricultural policies no matter how sound they are.

Time tested local knowledge of the farmers are ignored-by researchers and extension workers as primitive preferring to impose imported ideas on them adopting the top bottom or trickle down approach to development. When policies are being formulated specific local needs must be addressed so as to finally adopt a homegrown policy which the people can relate to and recognize.

Repositioning Agricultural Policies Towards Sustainable Development

.....The experience of the last three decades shows unambiguously that misdirected economic policies and the institutions that result - such as punitive output prices, non competitive markets, and non performing public enterprises - are utterly destructive of agricultural growth." (Robert, 1997:xij,

To reposition the agricultural sector, the agricultural and economic policies have to be improved. For instance, food security has to be given adequate attention or else the population becomes malnourished as a result of being poverty stricken.

Another way to reposition agricultural policies includes, monitoring performance such that problems can be detected at the earliest time possible. Without proper regulatory policies and institutions, also agricultural policies cannot lead towards sustainable development.

Integration of the supply of agricultural equipments and inputs (seeds, agricultural chemicals, livestock feed, veterinary supplies etc.) into the global markets also needs to be addressed. Restrictions on these inputs hinders higher agricultural production since improved inputs such as seeds (higher yielding and more disease - resistant varieties), modern technology on chemicals, feeds, etc do not get to the farmers when needed. Another way to enhance development in the agricultural sector is for the developed countries to remove subsidies, lower agricultural tariffs and play fair in the game of trading.

Domestic markets are also very crucial for agricultural development. However, most agricultural policies tend to ignore these local markets and how they operate. Most times, their ineffectiveness is as a result of institutional and policy weakness, poor price information, licensing restrictions, non standard weights and measures and movement controls. Despite trade liberalization most developed countries e.g. USA have policies that protect their domestic markets and farmers. Hence, if Nigeria wants to be self-reliant in food sufficiency, it has to make policies that will protect as well as enhance the competitiveness of its local markets, because allowing free flow of imported goods into the markets will weaken the indigenous based products especially as a result of mass production of goods abroad while goods are produced using manual small scale production. When the farmers are ready they can participate in the global race but before then they need to find their feet first.

Another way to reposition agricultural policies is by improving the policy environment within which the agricultural sector operates.' When this is done, the pay-off can be very large due to increased and more efficient agricultural development. The government needs to also adopt sound socio-economic policies conducive to the development of the people, strengthen its institutes and mode of governance. To reposition, the government also has to avoid a hostile environment which is detrimental to the effective and successful implementation of any policy.

The rural area has to be transformed and developed, since improved agricultural production will not be possible without it. The impact of local governments should also be tapped. Because the local government is the tier of government which the poor people can hold accountable as it is closest to them. Local government also enables quicker responses to the local needs of the people. If local governments are made to be effective in performing their roles, they will be more transparent and acceptable to the people as well as reduce to a large extent the level of corruption. However, because local governments in Nigeria are not managed and administered as they should be, they are rather a hotbed of corruption.

To reposition the agriculture policies, there is the need to reallocate resources from the rich -urban areas to the poor - rural areas as well as mobilize more local resources to reach (people/farmers) policy targets. To be able to make sure that people have food and are not in the hunger belt, then policies that distribute income among people should be formulated and implemented, this will ensure their control of the resources that will enable them to buy the food with the required calorific quantities.

Other strategies by which the agricultural policies can be repositioned to increase productivity includes; introduction of advanced technology such as improved seeds, tillage, crop rotation systems, soil nutrient management and pest management so as to tackle intensive cultivation which brings about rapid diminishing returns. In other words, the land should be augmented using biological and chemical methods to improve the quality of existing lands and raise yields per unit of land. These methods do not necessarily require large capital inputs or mechanized equipments.

Rural infrastructure should also be improved through irrigation projects, storage and transport facilities, feeder roads connecting villages to towns with larger markets.

Land reform policy is very important as the farmers take agriculture as a way of life, so their land is closely bound up with their inner most feelings of self-esteem and freedom from coercion. Thus, when their lands are confiscated it does not only affect them materially but also affects their self-esteem, hence, killing their zeal for self-improvement. This is why agricultural policies should be repositioned to provide for security in land holdings as this goes a long way in providing for a more equitable income and welfare outcomes, improving household nutrition, protecting their rights as well as encouraging them to invest in land improvements that increases long-term productivity. It should be noted however, that the mere enactment and enforcement of an egalitarian land reform program is no guarantee for agricultural development if it is not accompanied by complementary government programs to transform the potentiality for improvement into reality.

Policies should aim at promoting and encouraging re-investment out of increased production through subsidies, education, creation of credit facilities and land tenure improvement and reforms. Improving market of the agricultural products is also very important.

Establishing large mechanized farms in the various food producing areas with existing farmers as farm hands is also a strategy which could be adequate to enhance agricultural efficiency and productivity. The farm hands (that is existing farmers) can be trained to meet the demands of modern technology - oriented farming. When properly selected, agricultural mechanization will leave most subsidiary jobs for manual handling.

Agricultural research without doubt is a very important component for improved agricultural productivity. Hence, agricultural policies, should provide for it so as to widen the knowledge base, and be dynamic. However, such agricultural research should not only concentrate on technical issues like storage technologies, protection against pests and diseases, genetic composition species etc, but should also provide decision makers with the necessary working tools and policy options to enable them formulate relevant policies with the correct practicable strategies. Long-term research plans as well as well articulated and executed extension services should be provided for extension services/programmes provide new agricultural technology, knowledge and the skills to use it. In essence, agricultural researchers should work hand in hand with policy makers in formulating, implementing, monitoring and evaluating policies for them to be useful and enable the sector to bring about sustainable development.

Conclusion

For sustainable development to, take place and become self-sufficient and self-sustaining, it will have to start from the grassroots (rural areas) in general and the agricultural sector in particular. The main problems of widespread poverty, growing inequality, rapid population growth and rising unemployment all find their origins in the stagnation of economic life in rural areas. Therefore, the future of Nigeria's development depends largely on the agricultural sector. However, to implement the agricultural policy at the expense of other policies such as the industrial; social sector-health, education, water etc; infrastructural; ecological and those bordering on equity is not sufficient. There should be simultaneous implementation of these policies because of their complementarities and degree of symbiosis no matter the level of economic development.

The Nigerian government should also note that it is still not sufficient to formulate these policies concurrently amidst an environment of endemic corruption, inefficient machineries for implementation of policies, lack of transparency and accountability and good governance. Hence, for effective repositioning of agricultural policies to enhance sustainable development the above should be taken into cognizance.

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