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The future of Africa's agricultural sector

The overall statistics on African agriculture are well known. It employs over 200 million people and in most countries provides the livelihood of approximately 70 percent of the population. Despite this, Africa has the greatest proportion of malnourished families. Even in countries with the greatest agricultural potential, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, up to 75 percent of the population is still undernourished.

What is less well known is that in recent decades African agricultural productivity has been improving much faster than the world average, with developed economies having to contend with much less room for improvement in the yields being achieved by their farmers and the genetic potential of their crops and livestock. This improvement has been masked by the high population growth rate which means that per capita food production is still falling.

In the post-independence era it was Africa's misfortune to become addicted to development projects. Each project brought temporary relief and a sense of hope that was rarely justified in the project's outcome, and was followed by another that was rarely more successful. Meanwhile the true source of national growth and wealth creation – human capital – was neglected.

It is true that African governments supported a dramatic increase in the

numbers of university places but without commensurate increases in investment. This has caused the quality of teaching, training and research to decline disastrously, revealed by low rankings in refereed publications and even lower numbers of patents. Meanwhile Singapore has achieved one of the world's highest per capita GDP levels with only a fraction of the natural resources available to even the poorest African country.

Some African governments are turning to foreign management to raise agricultural production with offers of access to land and investment incentives. Views vary on the social and economic consequences and even the technical viability of this approach in the medium-term, but there can be no doubt that it does not offer a long-term abiding solution. That can only come from good governance, good infrastructure and the release of human ingenuity.

There is accelerating improvement in governance with more democratic and transparent constitutions and greater awareness. For instance the growth in mobile telephony will progressively curtail the ability to hide abuses. Africa is also making huge investments in infrastructure, especially in roads and renewable energy.

However, action on the third essential building block, human and institutional capacity, is still lagging. Africa must restore the coherence of the human capacity

building pyramid to generate the right quality of producers, technicians, change agents, scientists, business persons, and policymakers. Weakness in any layer will weaken the whole institutional structure of national development. Once the pyramid is intact it will also need to be expanded to produce the right number of skilled farmers, mechanics, researchers and entrepreneurs.

The creation of human capacity will be futile if the institutional frameworks are not created to facilitate and promote employment and self employment. In this regard, policymakers and development agencies must understand that the public sector is only a small player in national development and that its role is to facilitate the success of the much greater private sector.

The bulk of the private sector in African agriculture is made up of smallholder producers who, despite having time and again demonstrated amazing capacities and willingness to embrace change, are still misconstrued as being bound by tradition and averse to risk. As with the capacity pyramid, so too there is need for policies that support a private sector pyramid with larger agribusinesses producing the high-quality seeds, fertilisers, and other specialist inputs and opening up markets and employment opportunities by capturing more of the value added from processing and marketing on the continent before the products are exported.

Ultimately the prosperity of African agriculture depends, as in industries in all regions, on developing symbiotic links between the industry and the producers of human capacity, i.e. the universities and colleges, and the facilitators and enablers in the public sector, i.e. the governments. When they come into alignment there will only be one way for African agriculture: upwards!

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