

THE CHANGING ROLES OF AGRICULTURE IN THE NIGERIAN ECONOMY

Invited Paper

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we shall attempt to examine the changing roles of agriculture in the Nigerian economy, from the standpoint of whatever priority is accorded agriculture in the current political dispensation, from the point of view of the policies and programmes pursued by the government; their implications for the future of Nigerian agriculture; and what the future directions to be pursued are in order to ensure that ultimately, Nigeria returns to agriculture as the basis of its economic development.

NIGERIAN AGRICULTURE AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

At the restoration of democracy in Nigeria in 1999, it was the hope of most Nigerians, particularly, agriculturists that agriculture would enjoy top priority in the agenda of the present Nigerian government. Hopes were high that one of the greatest dividends of democracy in Nigeria would come from agriculture. Today, it would appear that these are dashed hopes. Indeed, Nigerian agriculture currently appears to enjoy no priority at all.

As an interested observer of the Nigerian agricultural scene, I found it difficult to identify a clear-cut agricultural programme that is being pursued that is likely to elevate the status of agricultural development in the foreseeable future.

In the past, Nigeria had experimented with a multitude of agricultural policies and programmes. It would have not been too much to expect that it would have stabilized now

with a concrete and result-oriented agricultural programme. From the days of the national accelerated food production programme through the green revolution programme to the ADP strategy, it has been difficult to achieve significant results in agricultural production because of policy and programme instabilities. Agriculture has been a victim of politics and political instability, as every political regime that came into power attempted to create its own agricultural programme in order to foster its own political feasibility.

When the poverty alleviation programme of the present political regime came into force, it was expected that agriculture would have been the main trust of that programme. The surest and most enduring way to alleviating poverty in a manner that is all pervading and far-reaching to the development of Nigeria's economy would have been through agricultural development programmes. From what is currently in practice, poverty alleviation has sidetracked agriculture and therefore does not have any firm and enduring basis.

Available statistics suggest that the bulk of Nigerian (about 65%) are still employed in agriculture, while the sector accounts for a much lower share of the gross national product (CBN 1999) In the 2002 national rolling plan, a 5.5% annual growth target was set for agriculture. However, within the past five years, the agricultural sector has, on the average, recorded a marginal growth rate of 3.2% which does not suggest an impressive

performance (CBN 2001).

Table 1: Selected Agricultural Outlook Indicators for Nigeria

<i>Year</i>	<i>Agriculture's Share of GDP</i>	<i>Annual percentage growth rate in agriculture's share of GDP</i>	<i>Annual percentage growth in aggregate agricultural production</i>	<i>*Labour force in agriculture</i>	<i>Daily calories per capita</i>
1989	31.90	5.00	4.8	65	2312.0
1990	30.11	4.40	7.5	65	2200.0
1991	30.05	4.48	8.1	-	2200.0
1992	30.06	2.99	7.1	64	2200.0
1993	30.23	2.90	6.2	64	-
1994	30.63	3.02	4.2	-	-
1995	31.00	3.38	3.4	-	2000.5
1996	31.13	3.80	3.7	64	1910.5
1997	31.47	4.29	4.1	-	1915.0
1998	32.27	4.95	3.5	-	1915.0
1999	-	-	3.3	-	-
2000	-	-	3.1	-	-

Source: 1994-1998 figures were obtained from CBN Annual Report (1998). 1990-1993 figures were obtained from CBN Annual Report (1994), 1989 figures were obtained from CBN Annual Report (1990), 1999-2000 figures were obtained from CBN Annual Report (2000).

* figures were obtained from African Development Reports 1994, 1999 of African Bank.

The indicators of agricultural performance as shown in Table 1 are far from encouraging. They show an inconsistent and unstable growth in agricultural production as well as declining share of agriculture in gross domestic product (GDP). The percentage share of the labour force in agriculture is also declining in relative terms. These are the results of the neglect which agriculture has suffered in the past few decades. Nigerians and Nigerian government have paid only lip service to agriculture because they live in the delusion that income from petroleum will continue to sustain Nigerian economy for ever. There are many indicators that this neglect which has continued to determine the role which agriculture has played in the development of the Nigerian economy over the time is still persisting. These are examined in the next section of the paper.

DETERMINANTS OF AGRICULTURE'S CHANGING ROLES

(i) Land Tenure, Land Use and Agricultural Development

In the past decade, issues related to land tenure

have become less topical than they were two or more decades ago. There was considerable debate on the land use decree and many called for its modification on the ground that in its present state it tended to hinder agricultural development. The decree was premised on the assumption of difficulties in land acquisition and use. It is however clear that despite the difficulties created by the decree, available land resources remained seriously under utilized. Land use had remained extensive rather intensive in most areas because of the practice of bush fallowing and shifting cultivation which have remained for several decades of Nigerian agriculture.

There has also been the complaint that there is not enough land to go round. As a result, able bodied young men and women migrate to the urban areas in search of white collar jobs. They are found on the streets, chasing buyers with inconsequential consumer items thereby giving the impression of an army of unemployed and underemployed youths who should have been back in the villages contributing their quota to agricultural development. This is the basis of the pretext that there is no land to cultivate. This is far from the truth.

(ii) Water Resources and River Basin Development Authorities

In the 70s a wide array of river basin development authorities were established in the country, to harness water resources and agricultural development. Colossal amounts of money were pumped into these authorities as a basic strategy for agricultural development. With misplaced priorities and operating outside their mandate, the river basin development authorities went into direct agricultural production. This has been largely reversed at the moment. But it remains to be significantly noticed what impact the authorities are making at the moment. However, there are abundant water resources all over the country that can be effectively harnessed for both large scale and small scale irrigated agriculture.

(iii) Forestry, fisheries and wild life resources

In various ecological zones of Nigeria, forestry, fishery and wide life resources have remained un-harnessed. Even in areas where deforestation has taken a toll on these resources, there is still a lot of potentials that remain untapped. Some degree of destruction of the ecosystems continues sporadically all over the country and there is little effort at protection. Our concern for the environment within which agriculture operates has been limited even by our farming and other construction activities.

(iv) Animal Husbandry

Based on our historical experiences, it would be proper to pass the judgment that there is serious neglect of agriculture in this area. Although poultry farms of the 1960s had their problems, it is still certain that there are comparative advantages in the production of live-stock all over the country that remained untapped. The advantages which the people of Southeastern Nigerian particularly have in the area of poultry, sheep and goat production have been left seriously under utilized. cursory observation indicates that there are limited efforts by individuals to promote production activities in this area. As it is at the moment, a

lot of the livestock consumed in this area is imported, thereby underscoring the limited importance and attention given to animal husbandry generally.

(v) Agricultural Education

The general problems of financing education in Nigeria are very well known. Agriculture has its own share of the funding problems. The well known problems of inadequacies in the basic infrastructure are persisting. Although in relative terms, educational funding has improved since this democratic dispensation, little or no impact has been made in the area of providing research and teaching facilities. Indeed, both the students and staff have been subjected to inhuman conditions that are far from being conducive for effective teaching and learning. This has taken its toll on agricultural education because the basic facilities needed for effective teaching delivery are seriously lacking. Our agricultural experimental farms are shadows of their previous existence. One then wonders where the students will acquire the practical experience needed for employment in industry or self employment after graduation.

Obviously, these are some of the discouraging factors that affect enrolment in the agricultural disciplines. There is however, the general feeling among prospective students that agriculture enjoys low priority in government support and in the labour market. It is also note-worthy that when scholarships are advertised by the multi-national corporations in the oil industry, limited space is given for students in agriculture. This is an indication of the seeming neglect and little importance that appears to be attached to agricultural training at the moment.

(vi) Agricultural Employment

Those who are currently students of agriculture suffer from the impression that there is limited employment in agriculture. If there is limited employment in agriculture, it is also applicable to other disciplines in science and engineering. It is not because there is no employment in agriculture. It is simply because the economy is not developing the way it should.

Government has not given deserved attention to programmes designed to create meaningful employment for its graduates. There are as many unemployed graduates in science and engineering as there are in agriculture.

Indeed, because Nigeria is basically an agrarian economy, there are better prospects for employment in agriculture than in the areas of science and engineering. The fact remains that national development policies have not taken agriculture as seriously as they should. It is easier to get into self-employment in agriculture than it is in science and engineering. The problem is with out values and priorities. For now, many Nigerians have settled for quick money through buying and selling and nobody is interested in painstaking effort at real production. When we decide to produce for the economy, agriculture will have no problems with employing its graduates. However, agricultural graduates may want to broaden their base in the training they receive to open new opportunities for them in environment, computer and information technology and biotechnology.

(vii) Agricultural Research and Extension

Nigeria has one of the largest network of agricultural research institutes. Available records show that, at least, there are about 20 of them currently in existence. Their effectiveness has been severely reduced by serious funding and manpower constraints. There is also the problem of inadequate research infrastructure, while the link between research and extension remains weak not withstanding the existence of national agricultural extension and research liaison services. Coordination between research and extension has remained weak. Because of inadequate appreciation of the importance of this linkage, development through research has not found much practical use.

For sometime, the agricultural development programmes [ADPs] in the states have been used as extension outfits while they have maintained strong relationship with the research institutes. The situation is entirely different with most of the faculties of

agriculture in the Nigerian university system. The benefits of the complementary relationship that would be derivable from a close relationship between the two systems are therefore lost.

(viii) Agricultural Financing

The decades of the 1970s witnessed the most concerted efforts by government to give very strong boost to agricultural financing. This period heralded the introduction of the agricultural credit guarantee scheme and various agricultural credit schemes operated by the Nigerian Agricultural and cooperative Bank as well as a number of other financial institutions within the Nigerian economy. We are all aware that these programmes did not make much impact. Indeed, the benefits of these programmes went to the un-intended beneficiaries rather than the multitude of small-scale Nigerian farmers for whom these programmes were mainly designed and did not ultimately make the desired impact on Nigerian agricultural development. At the moment, it is difficult to discern any active and functional financing programme for Nigerian agriculture.

(ix) Agricultural Marketing and Pricing

With the demise of the commodity marking boards in the 70s, it is no longer clear what programmes Nigeria has for the marketing of agricultural products. This is not to suggest that commodity and marking boards are still fashionable. This is far from the truth. However, there is need for an active programme on the marketing and pricing of agricultural commodities.

One is able to glean from media reports sporadic action in the area of agricultural marketing and pricing under what government now construes as its food security programme. The central focus of this programme is the strategic grain reserve programme by which government attempts to buy food commodities off the market during surplus seasons for storage and later release at periods of food scarcity as a method of moderating price increases and making food affordable to the generality of the population at reasonable

prices. One wonders the extent to which this programme benefits the majority of Nigerians, for one, it is only applicable to a section of the population that deals with grains. Those involved in the root crops and animals sub-sectors are certainly left out. Even within the relevant areas, it is doubtful that the programme reaches the intended beneficiaries.

Of course, this logically leads to the vexed question of subsidy. We have, of recent, witnessed the labour crisis caused by recent government withdrawal of petroleum subsidies. That uproar was possible because there is an organized labour that could protest against its adverse effects. Agriculture does not have such an organized body that could protest the withdrawal of subsidies on agriculture. The point to note, however, is that the issue of subsidy withdrawal is as vexed and controversial as it is with petroleum subsidy withdrawal, except that agriculture harbours the silent majority that has no political voice. But it is the duty of professional agriculturists to protest on behalf of those silent majority.

Agricultural input subsidies in a developing agriculture have their merits and demerits. Perhaps, the major demerit it has is that it constitutes a major strain on the finances of government. If this argument is pursued, one can say that it is the legitimate duty of government to finance agricultural development to a large extent even though this responsibility can be shared with the private sector. The merits of subsidy retention is that it makes agricultural production less risky for poor peasants. No matter how one looks at it, it is a matter of concern to all of us.

(x) Agro Processing

The status of agriculture does not appear elevated because people still consider agriculture as primary production. Most able bodied men and women desert this level of production because they consider it humiliating and unprofitable. However, the status can and should be raised by advancing to the agro-processing stages. Indeed, the value added to agricultural commodities comes through processing of agricultural products. Most commodities command lower prices because

not much effort is put into processing of primary agricultural products. Apart from adding value to the products and making them more competitive, processing is an employment generating activity, and the integration of primary production and processing has the potential of making agriculture a more rewarding employment.

(xi) The Private Sector in Agricultural Development

There has been much talk about the sharing of roles in Nigerian agriculture. There is the strong view that there should be a role redefinition between government and the private sector in agricultural production; to the effect that government abandons direct involvement in food production and distribution and concentrates on the provision of rural infrastructure, support for agricultural research and extension, provision of market information and dissemination, provision of conducive policy environment and provision of policies, rules, regulations and standards that facilitate the smooth operation of agricultural production activities.

By implication, it is currently viewed that government is an inefficient producer of agricultural commodities and should leave production and distribution activities to the private sector, while providing the enabling environment for the private sector to perform its functions in direct production and distribution.

In this regard, one wonders why the multi-national corporations in and outside the oil industry should not venture in a very prominent way into agricultural production in one form or the other. If they are unable to engage in direct production, they should be able to fund agricultural research, training and extension through the provision of facilities for work in the universities and research institutes for both staff and students. In addition, it is known that some multi-national corporations that have ventured into certain aspects of agriculture have made a success of it. They can complement individual and government efforts

in agricultural development.

(xii) Provision of Infrastructure

This is an area that I would argue belongs primarily to the government, particularly, in the rural areas. The provision of rural roads, portable water and constant electricity can have positive and pervading influence on agricultural development. They go with the provision of storage, processing and transportation facilities that enhance the status of agricultural production. Perhaps, it is the absence of such infrastructure that has created considerable disincentive for investment and employment in Nigerian agriculture.

(xiii) The Issues of Values and Attitudes

Much of human development, including the area of agriculture, has to do with values and attitudes of individuals and society. This is very much so in the Nigerian society where money and wealth are the things that matter! Hard work and integrity have been relegated to the background. It is easier to make money through buying and selling than to get involved in direct agricultural production. It is not that agriculture does not pay. It is just that it takes time to pay and the flow of income from agriculture is slow and gradual. But for the humble and persevering worker, agriculture can provide a sustainable livelihood. Our young men and women migrate to the cities and roam the streets in all the urban areas of Nigeria because they have perverse and thwarted values. They hustle for where there is quick money. They want to crawl today and run the same day. This is an important issue I want to bring to the attention of the present crop of prospective agriculturists in our universities. We must have our values and attitudes right.

(xiv) Policy and Programme Instability

One of the greatest offenders in Nigeria's agricultural scene is the instability that goes with government policies and programmes. Historically, policies and programmes have changed as political regimes changed. Even within the same political regimes, there have

been frequent policy revisions and reversals. The net effect of these instabilities is confusion and lack of vision among those charged with the responsibility of implementing these policies and programmes. The confusion, as expected, leads to policy and programmes failures, with the attendant colossal loss in human and financial resources.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR ENHANCING AGRICULTURE'S ROLE IN DEVELOPMENT

It is no longer appropriate for existing land tenure systems and land use patterns to persist. Even in the land scarce areas, there is no longer sufficient justification for the fragmentary use of land. Modern technology, including the use of fertilizers and other labour-saving technologies, should permit the practice of more intensive agriculture involving more intensive land use practices that may permit continuous cultivation of the same piece of land over many years. What is even more important is that there are land surplus areas interspersed with land scarce areas. In these areas of surplus, extensive agriculture is still being practiced. I would argue for more intensive land use practices everywhere and the possible migration of labour from land scarce to land surplus areas for optimum utilization of available agricultural land, at least, within each geo-political and agricultural zone.

I am perturbed by the widespread migration of able bodied young men and women particularly from the South Eastern zone; from the rural to urban areas of Nigeria who engage themselves in the very under-employing practice of menial street trading. It constitutes social/economic loss to the people of the area. I believe that these young men and women can be very gainfully employed in agriculture in their rural setting if the lust for city life can be discouraged through changing values and attitude and through the implementation of rural development programmes.

There is no reason why we should not also harness our water resources for small scale irrigated agriculture. In the process, there can

be year-round production of fruits and vegetables that are easily adaptable to the soil and other environmental conditions of our different ecological zones in the country. There can be a case for large scale irrigated agriculture in the northern zones of the country. But certainly in the south eastern zones small-scale irrigated agriculture has very great but untapped potentials.

The great biodiversity for which Nigerian forest resources are well known is being seriously depleted by harmful agricultural and bush burning practices. There is a case for preserving or at least reducing the tempo of their destruction. Indeed, policies should be put in place for their restoration as depletion continues at an accelerated rate.

We have also lost a relative advantage in the production of various types of livestock. From history, we are aware that there was a time when surplus production of eggs was experienced in what constitutes the south-eastern zone of Nigeria. All these have now been abandoned in pursuit of quick money. Since we have relative advantage in this area this must not be lost. The same is applicable to sheep, pig and goat production. We can, however, continue to import cattle where the northern areas have greater relative advantage.

It is clear that education has witnessed severe funding problems within the past three decades of Nigeria's existence. Agricultural education has not been left out. Of particular importance, however, is the dwindling enrolment in agriculture which has been influenced by the development of relatively more fanciful courses in engineering and science. Of course, by the laws of nature, traditional practices often give way to modern practices, but these do not detract from the importance of these traditional practices. We should attempt to increase the relevance of agriculture in this age of modern technology by moving away from the more traditional approaches to curriculum development to more modern approaches. In this regard, I call on agriculturists to find relevance in this new information age by introducing information and computer technology into the curriculum of agriculture. In this way, agriculture

graduates are no longer tied to the apron string of their traditional avenues of employment. They increase their foresight and compete with those in the information and technology market, having agricultural background as additional advantage.

Financing of agriculture needs an entirely new approach that is geared towards ensuring that those who benefit from the programmes are *bona fide* farmers and the intended beneficiaries. We can no longer focus agricultural financing entirely on the small-scale farmers. The emergent large-scale farmers must be appropriately accommodated. The enterprises involved must be those that have clear potentials for profitability and enhancement of the income and welfare of the farming community.

We have already alluded to the fact that there should be a clear definition of roles between the public and the private sectors in agricultural development. The argument is simple. Direct agricultural production and distribution belong to the province of the private sector, while government undertakes its all-important role of providing infrastructure and other facets of an enabling environment. It is already well known that government is an inefficient producer.

There is yet no concrete programmes of agricultural marketing and pricing. However, issues of input pricing and subsidies continue to be areas of major concern. Again, I hold strong views in this area. There is no strong justification for government total and sudden withdrawal of subsidies on agriculture. All over the world where agriculture has played its traditional role in development, it has always received significant levels of subsidy. If this is the price that government must pay, then it should be regarded as price paid for agricultural and economic development. One veritable way out is to pass the burden of agricultural production to the private sector. Even then, government must support agriculture with some minimal level of subsidy.

We must seek to expand from primary agriculture production to agro-industrialization through processing, storage and marketing

activities. In the process, agricultural employment is enhanced and so also is the income and welfare of active participants in the agricultural industry.

Underlying all that has been said about agriculture are the values and attitudes we hold as a people. A generation that is lacking in the right values, one where wealth is everything; and money must be made at all cost cannot support agricultural development. Agricultural development requires the existence of appropriately fashioned attitudes and values. It requires humility, modesty, discipline and love for hard work, integrity and patience. These are values that we as a people, parents and guardians, brothers and sisters and in fact teachers must strive to inculcate in the youth of today, who are leaders of tomorrow.

In the final analysis, it is the policies and programmes that government puts in place that will influence the nature and appropriateness of agricultural activities undertaken in this country. Government must be sincere in its usual commitment to agricultural development. It must fashion out policies and programmes that are sustainable in the long and short run. There must be sincerity of purpose within the government. Indeed, I challenge the present democratic government to display accountability, probity and transparency in its agricultural development policies and programmes in such a way that there is sustainability in the system.

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