# A PRIMER ON A-PLATONIC POLICIES FOR DEEPENING NIGERIA'S AGRICULTURE

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## Abstract

Before the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, which compounds Nigeria's food security problems, climate change and the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic (COVID-19) drove the criticality of agri-food, trade, and public health systems in reshaping Nigeria's sustainable development agenda. One of Nigeria's challenges is how to deepen agriculture more systemically towards realising sustainable development than it has done over the last six decades. In response to this question, this article presents some implementable strategies for deepening agri-food competitiveness within the scope of policy a-platonicities.


## Introduction and Rationale

Agriculture plays a critical role in food and nutrition security (FNS), poverty allocation, improved livelihoods, and inclusive development. However, mere agricultural reforms are not sufficient conditions for agriculture to contribute to sustainable development. What matters is the deepening of agricultural transformation towards much higher value activities with associated positive inter-sectoral spill-over effects on the entire economy. For example, the Nigerian Economic Summit Group (NESG) 2021 annual report laments the abysmally low level of agritech adoption, such that out of Nigeria's 92 million hectares of land, it barely cultivates 34 million at largely sub-optimal levels. Thus, agricultural deepening is required for Nigeria to feed itself sufficiently[6].

Furthermore, deepening agricultural competitiveness is essential for sustainable development because agriculture is a significant sector, and development in that sector imposes a high weight on aggregate development, justifying public investment in agriculture. However, like most post-independence African countries, Nigeria has been making frantic efforts to achieve giant strides in its sustainable development agenda over the past six decades, all to no avail. In view of this, it is reasonable to suspect that the quality of Nigeria's agricultural policies may represent one of the significant contributory factors to the feeble agricultural transformation in the country. Thus, one of Nigeria's challenges is how to deepen agriculture more systemically towards realising sustainable development than it has done over the last six decades. Within this context, this article seeks to emphasise the need for a-Platonifying Nigeria's agricultural deepening efforts, strategies, policies, and programmes.

## What is Platonicity?

Two levels of Platonic intervention are possible in an agricultural deepening space. First, and according to Spink (2019), a Platonic confirmation could be explained within the context of confirmation error or confirmatory bias. In this vein, platonic confirmation occurs when an individual, business, or government searches for and identifies instances that confirm their beliefs, constructions, or models. For example, in a food fraud prevention case study, Platonicity occurs when we rely heavily on a published data set to be representative of all vulnerabilities.

Second is the manifestation of Platonic fallacy in the study of uncertainty, thereby making policymakers invoke policy successes based on a linearised narrow world of policymaking. This second type of Platonic intervention is observed in food fraud prevention cases when a

[6]NESG, 2020. 'Building Partnerships for Resilience', 26th Nigerian Economic Summit.

food safety scientist applies statistical methods to an incomplete or inappropriate data set. A good example, in this case, is that most complex statistical analyses are usually based on the underlying assumptions of 5 to 7 percent of world trade (Spink & Levente Fejes, 2012).

In addition, Taleb (2008) believes that most people, including policymakers, ignore this incompletion and uncertainties since policymakers are naturally comfortable with stable agri-food systems rather than an unstructured and chaotic system. This blindness to uncertain or underdeveloped components of a typical agri-food system is referred to as the Platonic fallacy, resulting in an illusion of understanding and overestimating actual knowledge (Taleb, 2008). In other words, agri-food policies should be systemically designed beyond a Platonic understanding where conventional economics is built on equilibrium theory because Schumpeter emphasised that the key features of economies were change and discontinuity, not equilibrium. As Minsky pointed out, stability leads to instability, not rest (Taleb, 2001, Inichen et al., 2010). An agri-food sector's tendency towards Platonicity hinges on the policy processes' propensity to attend to the manifest and the superficial, making the policy outcomes manifest not in what is designed or hoped for but in the agri-food situations (Chia & Holt, 2009). Platonic policies are top-down, formulaic, closed-minded, self-serving, and commoditised, while a-Platonic agri-food policies are bottom-up, open-minded, and empirically driven (Taleb, 2008).

## Agricultural Deepening and Policy Platonicity

One of the basic questions in development studies is how to improve the productivity of poor rural populations in Nigeria (Jerven, 2013). Copious economic literature reveals that structural transformation incorporates the process of economic development in general, and agricultural deepening plays a pivotal role in the early stages of this transformation (Oyejide, 2010). In Nigeria, there exists a broad consensus that the performance of an agricultural sector is vital to long-term economic growth and development because of the significant contribution of agriculture to its gross national product, employment opportunities, food security, and poverty reduction.

Agricultural deepening catalyses sustainable development in that agriculture possesses high growth multiplier effects on other sectors of the economy (de Janvry & Sadoulet, 2010). According to Cheong, Jansen, & Peters (2013), using multipliers generated from the social accounting matrix (SAM) and computable general equilibrium models, there exist multipliers in the order of 1.3 – 1.5, meaning that an additional US$1 of value-added in agriculture generates 30 – 50 cents in non-agriculture. Further, agricultural multipliers are measured to be larger than the reverse multipliers of non-agriculture on agriculture. According to de Janvry and Sadoulet (2010), agriculture and agro-industry are sources of competitive advantage because Nigeria has factor endowments rich in natural resources and semi-skilled labour, giving it a comparative advantage in agriculture, mining, and agro-industry. Further, the Green Revolution programme increased the income of farm households, which fostered the development of non-farm sectors through demand linkages and investment in children's schooling. According to Audibert (2010), since economic growth requires rapid agricultural sector output and income expansion, there is a need to increase the irrigated area and adopt more innovative technologies considerably.

From intersectoral policy consistencies viewpoints, agricultural deepening may influence the health and spread of endemic diseases in the sense that irrigated land or pesticide, and insecticide usage could be a factor in the transmission of water or parasitic diseases and respiratory infections (Audibert, 2010). Audibert (2010) notes that mismanagement of agricultural inputs could induce several health challenges, which could partly be averted by adopting appropriate actions such as manipulating the environment in the case of man-made lakes, improving sanitation conditions, promoting health education and education on good practices as well as encouraging integrated pest management and integrated vector management.

Consequently, the gap between Nigeria's agricultural transformation and the agri-food reform goals the economy thinks it attains becomes dangerously wide. Platonicity makes sustainable agricultural development planners think they understand more than they do. In other words, it makes policymakers think they have attained more significant agricultural development goals than their real socio-economic circumstances. Policy Platonicity occurs when agricultural development experts over-or under-estimate their understanding of the subtle changes that need to be calibrated to its sustainable development programming (Markey-Towel, 2018; Taleb, 2007). For instance, Nigeria's agricultural competitiveness policies suffer from this characteristic Platonicity, especially when compared with the South African Digital Agriculture, which leverages precision agriculture, remote sensing, drone imagery, mobile platforms, vehicle tracking, artificial intelligence, database technology, Bluetooth low energy, weather forecasting, and blockchain technology.

In other words, agri-food policies are Platonic when agricultural development models, programs, and policies are incorrect in some specific applications, and the (i) policy designers do not know beforehand where the policies will be wrong, (ii) nor do they know that the agri-food transformation models are potential interventions that pose random but very devastating side effects on the economy, and (iii) these mistakes result in severe socio-economic catastrophe. By implication, there is a dire need for more data to understand our socioeconomics as we have known them historically and as we build the evidence base that informs strategically tailored and nuanced post-pandemic interventions.

## Concluding Remarks and Policy Recommendations

Policy interventions should be based on a holistic view of the Nigerian economy to properly contextualise agricultural deepening-related challenges and the most effective policy solutions. From an a-Platonic policy standpoint, there is an increasing need for the Nigerian Government to optimise inter-sectoral policy space for developing both agricultural and non-agricultural sectors. A large body of research confirms that enrollment and/or schooling boosts growth. Although there is less research on the effect of health capital on growth, several recent macro-level studies support the positive contribution increases in education capacities and health capital has on agricultural deepening and sustainable development.

Implementing a-Platonic strategies towards overcoming these agricultural deepening challenges will go a long way in addressing the widening capacity gaps in realising sustainable

development goals in Nigeria. To foster agri-food systems transformation in Nigeria, there is a need to support State governments in Platonifying their ongoing reform efforts in smart or digital agribusiness programmes, agricultural finance management, intersectoral policy design and management, and public-sector governance. Ensuring the a-plantonicity of agri-food transformation tools, guidelines, and best practices will serve as a foundation for scaling up lessons learned, thereby catalysing the integration of accountability in agricultural deepening and scaling up the knowledge exchange and expertise acquisition across the Nigerian States, with the further consideration by the Nigerian Governors Forum (NGF). It is expected that a-Platonic policy lessons would result in improved accounting practices, coordination, and coherence of evidence-based agricultural deepening policy advice, systemic enhancement, and capacity strengthening of relevant departments, agencies, and sub-sectors.

Nigeria's technology adoption and advancement policies are crucial in harnessing the diverse potentials of agricultural deepening while overcoming the current Platonicities in its policies. One step forward is the AfDB-Nigeria Transforming African Agriculture: The Feed Africa Agenda Special Agro-Industrial Processing Zones (SAPZ)[7]. SAPZ should further integrate digitalisation policies and programmes in the context of maximising the commodities value chain while leveraging on the ongoing implementation of the AfCFTA. In this way, Nigeria's agricultural development policies and programmes will become a-Platonic, therefore deepening the agricultural sector's contribution to achieving Nigeria's vision. The information asymmetry that typically characterises Nigeria's agriculture, albeit its Platonicities, necessitates increasing digitalisation towards a smarter and more integrated agri-data architecture framework (NESG, 2020)[8].

[7]https://www.afdb.org/sites/default/files/2021/12/13/sapz_va-brochure.pdf
[8]NESG, 2020. 'Building Partnerships for Resilience', 26th Nigerian Economic Summit.

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