

## **Stagnation of Nigerian Agriculture-A Case of The Neglect of The Food Processing Sector**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Nigerian Agriculture has come a long way providing both food and feed and has been the basis for subsistence life of the people and growth, or better still stagnation. Its response to the economy has been mixed. In the 1970-82 period agricultural growth rate stagnated at less than 1% with sharp decline in export crop production. This situation is quite far from the pre-1970 period when the sector provided raw material for both the domestic and export agricultural produce trade.

One feature of the sector is that successive government and policies look at it as self-serving and self-containing. Players in this sector have often emphasized production and marketing of fresh product, with nothing to say or do about the accompanying processing and preservation of the products. They often forget that the agricultural food industry is dynamic. This means that the demand for more agricultural products is a direct influence of the extent of conversion and preservation of these products. It follows the basic economic theory of demand and supply.

This paper seeks to establish the case that agricultural production will continue to encounter serious set-back, except of course there is a meaningful and concerted effort of establishing the food conversion and processing sector which is usually a natural catalyst to agricultural production.

### **NIGERIA AGRICULTURAL POLICY**

The Agricultural policy, as stated in the new Agricultural policy document was designed to stimulate growth and development of agriculture in order to positively impact on the overall growth of the Nigeria Economy (FMARD, 2001).

The performance of this sector was undermined by an array of factors. The new policy document enumerated as much as about thirteen factors, which serve as constraints to achieving policy objectives. There are another fifteen factors or a combination of factors that lead to implementation failures (FMARD, 2001). It is worthy to note that the government in identifying the problems did not take note of the absence of processing and preservation as a major factor hindering the achievement of agricultural policies.

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Furthermore, in articulating the new policy direction for agriculture, there is no mention, at all, of the need for agricultural processing and preservation. This goes to say that the policy formulators see agricultural endeavors to start at seed planting to harvesting. Whatever happens between the farm gate and the table does not seem to worry them. This must be one of the reasons for the stunted growth in the agricultural sector, since it is obvious that agricultural practice and policy do not take processing and preservation with confidence or consideration. This has led to a massive importation of processed agricultural products and corresponding huge loss of scarce foreign exchange, which should have been invested in more demanding areas of the economy.

## **FOOD POLICY**

Various national food policies have a lot of bearing to the food and Agriculture organization of the United Nations (FAO) food policy. The FAO's goal has been to raise the levels of nutrition and to improve production and distribution of food and agricultural products. Hence the whole goal is enshrined in its motto –“*Fiat Panis* (“let there be bread”) (Casadel and Canet, 1993).

The objective of the World food security concept is to ensure that all people at all times have both physical and economic access to the basic food they need. Its more specific aims are related to production, with special emphasis on low-income food deficit countries, to stability in the flow supplies, and to the problems of access to available supplies on the part of needy nations and social groups. Various activities which contributed to the following: expanding production, improving nutrition, stabilizing prices, obtaining a fair return to producers and coping with famine (Casadel and Canet, 1993). All these activities cannot succeed where there are no back up attitude or commitment to food processing and preservation.

Food safety and quality start at the farm level and continue throughout the processing and distribution chain to storage and final preparation by the consumer.

Good agricultural, processing, distribution and marketing practices are essential to ensure consumer protection. There is a strong need for a clearly stated and enforced policy for Nigeria, to ensure a stronger base and impetus for Nigerian agriculture. To move up to this level various government must move many paces away from arable agriculture which starts from breeding and ends at harvesting of plants and or curling of animals. The policies must look beyond the farm gate, as such a change of attitude, commitment or policy would certainly catalyze production of agricultural produce

## **PROPERTIES OF BIOLOGICAL MATERIALS, WHICH INFLUENCE FOOD PROCESSING**

Food processing is the treatments given to agricultural produce after harvest and ending before consumption. These include handling, transportation, refrigeration, holding, washing, trimming, freezing, canning, drying, blanching, chemicals, packaging, radiation, extrusion and ultimately cooking or heating.

One important factor in the design of food processes is the properties or characteristics of the biological materials, which serve as the raw materials for or constitute the final products of the processes. It then becomes possible to predict the nature of the processing once these properties are known (Olatunji, 1984)

Processing techniques are those broad based treatments given to food from the raw state before it ultimately gets to the consumer (Onayemi, 1984, Luck, 1993). Those changes, which a fruit or vegetable commodity undergoes even at the local level to convert it into a new or stable form or make it convenient to use, is also included in this term. The technology of food preservation and processing is partly based on the control of microorganism while cause food spoilage. To extend the farm produce market and provide a more diversified diet through the provision of preserved or processed foods, two basic principles of preventing microbial spoilage of foods are adoptable. The first principle is to prevent recontamination of these commodities by the microorganisms from outside and the second is to alter the environment of the commodity in order to prevent or retard the growth of undesirable organisms (Onayemi, 1984).

#### **THE RELEVANCE OF FOOD PROCESSING AS A COMPONENT OF AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES**

This paper has so far defined the need for processing in Nigerian agriculture. It has also pointed out the near absence of agricultural policy as it affects processing. In view of these, it must be clearly stated that all food materials are susceptible to post-production deterioration. Hence, preservation processes applied soon after harvest or slaughter serves to protect quality and safety, and to restrict subsequent biological and economic losses. They also encourage further and increased production. Labour-intensive primary processing facilities in rural regions where crops are cultivated serve to restrict subsequent loss of quality and to provide employment for rural people, thereby discouraging rural-to-urban migrations (Ifulse, 2004).

Nigeria's traditional food crops are seriously under exploited, due to lack of commitment to processing and or preservation, yet they have been accepted by communities through habit and tradition and are appropriate as well as desirable food sources. With regards to technology input, subsistence agriculture in Nigeria has totally depended on traditional farming methods and low inputs of labour-saving technologies (Oniango'o *et al* 2004).

Traditional staples are known to be resilient to domestic climate. Roots and tubers are the major contributors to food security, particularly in the years of cereal crop failure. Even though Nigeria has grown more roots and tubers to combat hunger, the processing of these crops is yet to be seriously exploited and packaged.

The processing of nuts and oil seeds such as groundnuts, sesame seed, palm oil etc is yet to be effectively exploited. Exploitation of these crops by processing would enable Nigeria to

meet at least part of its vegetable oil requirements. The downstream processing of the crude vegetable oils is still seriously lacking, which if exploited would add value to the industry and more resource to the economy.

With respect to fruits and vegetables, the post harvest technology and processing methods employed are diverse, varying from simple mechanical equipment and sun-drying techniques to high level-technology. Fruits and vegetables are usually processed into products such as jams, jelly, fruits preserves sauces, juices, nectars, squashes, wines, vinegar, dried and pickled vegetable, sauces and flour. These down-stream products are what give credence to agriculture, as they act as catalysts to the producer, when his produce is converted to more lasting and valuable products and in some cases by-products. The exploitation of these values is still lacking, making importation very imperative, with the attendant depletion of foreign reserves.

As it affects meat and fish farming and technology, it is known that traditionally, in Nigeria, meat from cattle, sheep, goats and pigs is consumed unprocessed, in most cases, even though meat and fish are preserved by drying, smoking or salting (Ikeme, 1990). Fresh water and sea fish constitute an important source of protein in diets of many populations. Processing methods used to prevent fish spoilage include salting, drying, smoking, pickling, fermentation, canning and freezing. As has been pointed out most of these preservative or processing methods have not been seriously exploited, otherwise our agricultural efforts should have yielded more results, than they are presently.

## **CONCLUSION**

It has been emphasized in this paper that Nigerian Agricultural Policy is lacking in the area of food processing and preservation. Various other sectors of the economy have clearly stated policies. It is not yet clear what Nigerian food policy is. Food processing and preservation must become a clear component of Nigerian Agricultural policy in order to provide the needed impetus or backbone for continued and sustained agricultural production and to ensure that Nigerian agriculture does not continue to remain primitive and stunted.

With clear and sustained emphasis on agricultural produce processing and presentation, Nigeria would find the basis for sustained agricultural production and self sufficiency because there shall be diversification in agricultural products most of which are currently imported into the country and which constitute the current drain in hard currency and foreign exchange.

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