

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: A FARMER'S VOICE

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Introduction

A greater part of southern Africa is endowed with natural resources which renders agriculture the mainstay activity. If well propelled and guarded against other factors by all players such as policy makers, scientists, farmers, service providers (entrepreneurs), smallholder agriculture can surely provide a lasting solution to many of its inhabitants whose majority is rural based, food insecure populations. Poverty stricken masses will no more be the order of the day. I am dead sure Africa will be on the path of transformation and will underscore the much-talked about African Renaissance.

What then is required which is lacking? The answer to this one million-dollar question is certainly not any additional donor aid, nor additional technologies. But rather a down to earth answer will be a change of attitude among African players themselves; change of how they do things and indeed enhance the collaborated efforts of doing this. If the farmer is centrally focused by all the other players and his small wisdom heard in all their endeavours, smallholder farming will be turned into a hub of development and improve the economic status of many. After all the yardstick of smallholder agriculture success is in the improved food security at household level and increased income and employment opportunities for our youth.

Fostering entrepreneurship in the countryside

First and foremost, the question that comes to mind is why foster entrepreneurship in the countryside of all places? What would that have to do with smallholder agriculture? What sort of objective is to be achieved? The curious mind will come up with questions of all sorts.

Fostering entrepreneurship in the countryside will be to the advantage of all players – the government or public departments, service providers, non-governmental organisations, and more so the smallholder farmer. As it may be appreciated, smallholder agriculture is an engine room for produce that can be consumed in the raw form, or can be semi-processed, or can be fully processed as a finished, usable, or consumable product or by-product. Proximity of available raw materials of produce would justify the need to foster entrepreneurship in the countryside. The enterprising institutions would greatly benefit in this arrangement as transportation costs of raw materials are, by far, mitigated. What else! The smallholder farmer will have a ready market almost at the homestead. They will therefore produce in bulk as they will have little or nothing to lose in terms of transportation or storage costs. In addition, the community by and large will be servicing itself and will begin to commercialise by running small 'kingdoms' of economy in their own way.

On the part of the government, it will be relieved of the burden of urban population pressure. Most of the people from the countryside will not desire to migrate to urban areas in search of white-collar jobs. Resultantly too, the percentage of unemployed will be curbed automatically. As a result of promoting

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entrepreneurship in the countryside who knows, import substitute products can be produced and hence save the much needed foreign earnings.

In a teamwork spirit, this will not be done by others as smallholder farmers sit idle or merely spectate. The latter needs to identify itself as a stakeholder in its own right, needs to realise that it is an institution that should be demand orientated, and be able to engage in a participatory process of having things done. They should not aim at doing things efficiently but rather do them effectively. African smallholder farmers should not feel ashamed of innovative technologies. They should feel proud of championing such innovative ideas – after all that was why the ‘shadow’ was invented in Africa – no matter how primitive it might have been!

When entrepreneurship is fostered in the countryside in totality, the approach of smallholder farming will automatically, and hastily so, change from being regarded for subsistence to a commercial undertaking which will require ownership, profitability, and indeed sustainability. The dependence syndrome on donor aid and loans for inputs will also gradually reduce automatically. Nurturing of the much needed scarce natural resources will be the order of the day and caring for mother earth in so far as environmental degradation is concerned will not be demanding too much.

The entrepreneurship in the countryside will not be without a price. Smallholder farmers must be prepared to change some of their practices. This will necessitate capacity building so that record keeping should become part and parcel of smallholder agriculture. Although mixed cropping is common at this level, certain crops and of good quality have to be grown in abundance in order to satisfy demand on the market scene. Like as it is with Maize Productivity Task Force Action Group, its start is built on a solid foundation. The farmers now have owned the project, the approach is also on a commercial point of view. The production capacity levels of crops in high demand is enhanced. At last entrepreneurship is at the countryside.

Farmer orientated institutional change

In my perception, institutional change simply means how certain rules, attitudes, norms, procedures etc can change. In this regard therefore, these changes must be tailor made or designed to suit the farmer in smallholder agriculture. When service providers service this farmer, they should no longer think of him as a ‘diminutive’ small peasant of decades ago. Rather the farmer must be regarded as an enterprising partner in whatever endeavours. I have in mind certain innovative initiatives which may originate from the farmer himself and which must not be discarded outrightly but should be accommodated, synthesised, blended, and maybe adopted. In this vein, the farmer will no longer feel too ‘small’ to contribute but will elevate his way of thinking and feel part of the process and contribute positively and progressively.

Another approach of institutional change is how lending institutions view smallholders and the role of government. This is one crucial area that requires revisiting and quickly, mainly in Malawi. The targeted beneficiary, the smallholder farmer, is often thought of as someone without collateral and producing crops of low value. Yes, the crops by the seemingly poor farmer may be of low value on the face of it. But if production of these crops of low value staple foods such as maize, rice or cassava is promoted, it is the majority at the end which benefits. At the grassroots, the farmer will be food secured. Because of abundant supply of the food crop, consumers would access this easily and affordably. The earnings of government which would otherwise be used for importing the food crops in times of shortfall would be deployed to other equally important public commitments. This is even more important than the loss that may be incurred due to investing in promoting crops of low value but which happen to be food crops.

While still on this, the so-called rural bank meant for the smallholder of Malawi is far too unrealistic. This is the Malawi Rural Finance Company. Its conditions are alien to the very clientele it is purposefully meant to service – the farmer. The high interest rate, the loan repayment period of a single season, and the calculation of interest which is computed on daily balance all compound to make life difficult for a smallholder farmer whose income comes but once a year. In essence, therefore, there is need for those in government hierarchy to make deliberate policies creating a sort of 'village' or 'land' bank that would suit the plight of the farmer. Why all this? Our economy is agriculture based, seventy percent of the rural based are smallholders. Therefore we need not blindfold ourselves to this fact but we should be seen to do something practically through tangible efforts and actions and not through lipservice efforts of merely holding workshops, university degree theses or other research findings that suffer their demise on the shelf or are locked in filing cabinets.

Getting resources to smallholders

Through collaboration with other stakeholders, farmers would be making informed decisions on what resources are required in smallholder agriculture, how can they be obtained, when and where can they be obtained. Sometimes smallholder agriculture has been a victim of getting wrong types of inputs and at 'wrong' or delayed periods because they have not been offered options. Sometimes these have not been available because either they have been out of stock or because of poor infrastructure in place. It has sounded ridiculous at times that a farmer may have the means to acquire inputs but these are not just there because of poor planning by those in authority or by too few suppliers with licences.

Profiteering by service providers of inputs is another critical issue which thwarts efforts of farmers to become self-sufficient. For example, fertilisers sourced directly and in bulk from Harare to Lilongwe, including freight costs, are 40% cheaper than fertilisers fetched from local traders. More traders need to be encouraged so that there is more competition. If smallholder agriculture can be assisted in this case, there is a need for collaborated efforts amongst policy makers, donors, and farmers who, by themselves, should be in registered associations to be funded directly and import these inputs directly. In which case the effects of profiteering inflicted on smallholder agriculture can be cushioned.

Some implements used by Malawi smallholders need revisiting. Researchers, manufacturers, traders, and the government need to join hands in search of new such solutions. The use of a hoe has not augured well in terms of time management during peak field periods. Considerable production levels have been wasted due to wasteful operations of using this tool. While ox-draft implements provided a solution, the proliferation of thefts which have seen cattle wiped out on the scene have rendered the implements useless. In the same vein are the maize shelling operations, which, during bumper maize yields, have been tedious, time consuming, and enslaving for the women folk. There is need for maize shellers. So far Messrs Chillington AgriMal (Malawi) Ltd. have come up with one such maize sheller. The sheller, however, is a non-starter. It appears that no homework was done when venturing into manufacturing. The sheller accommodates one cob at a time and each cob takes about a minute – not ideal for 'good' year harvests. In which case, therefore, it is such implements as mentioned above which need improving and require some homework on wider consultations. I am not recommending heavy-duty machinery for this group of farmers. But somewhere midway which can readily be sourced by smallscale farmers will be most ideal. In effect, therefore, if smallholders should be seen to be more productive on the ground, resources should be brought down to them by proximity and affordability.

From theory to practice: agricultural change at the field level

In reality a lot has been done in agriculture but theoretically though.. Good research works, proposed technologies, and agricultural policy recommendations have been made but not all have been put to the test practically. This might have been so due to sheer lack of commitment on the part of implementing personnel. Or the fault might have been by the farmers themselves who may not have had the drive to demand for them.