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21 April 2016

The Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP) Partnership Platform: Reflections and Perspectives

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Introduction

The African Union held the annual African Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP) for the 12th time from the 12th to 14th 2016. This year, it was held at the La Palm Beach Hotel in Accra, Ghana, under the going theme: “Innovative Financing and Renewed Partnerships” to accelerate CAADP Implementation. All the discussions that took place made reference to the Malabo Declaration (2014) on Africa’s Accelerated Agricultural Growth and Transformation – focusing on its vision, goals and targets set for the period between 2015 and 2025.

The Malabo Declaration is clear – it provides a set of ambitious targets, which include:

- (1) a recommitment by governments to uphold 10% public spending target towards agriculture,
- (2) ending hunger by 2025, through three key ways, namely: doubling productivity and yields, reducing post-harvest losses by half, and reducing malnutrition and stunting by 10%
- (3) halving poverty
- (4) tripling intra-African trade in agricultural commodities and services
- (5) enhancing climate change resilience in agriculture
- (6) promoting accountability by reporting and assessing progress towards the aforementioned goals.

In their articulation of the Malabo Declaration, the African Union Commission described it as a “recommitment” by the African political leadership to agriculture.

Different days, same rhetoric?

In my limited experience of attending CADDP Partnership Platform (PP) meetings, I have noticed two fundamental things. Firstly, that there is a renewal of enthusiasm and focus towards the improvement of agricultural issues, particularly the development of smallholder farming. Secondly, that the expression of interest by the political class towards was borne by the need to establish a new transformative paradigm that brings African agriculture closer to the rest of the world in terms of development and technological advancement. Statements emphasizing the need to depart from rudimentary technologies such as the hand hoe, have been popularly echoed in speeches at the AU. By exploiting our social networks, we have grown to appreciate and understand our diversity as Africans. Moreover, the continuous emphasis of a number of issues affecting our agricultural economies has enabled us to realise that we are uniquely capable of resolving our own problems as a people.

However, after attending only two CAADP (PP) meetings I began to notice something very peculiar about our gatherings. The CAADP (PP) meetings are attended by the same people, who articulate the same message, rehashing the same phrases in almost a rehearsed fashion. Perhaps this trend falls within the belief that there is power in repetition, and emphasizing a point one too many times ideally gets a point across more forcefully. It is within this frame of thinking that I believe that the rehashing of the same old message is somewhat deliberate. To the careful observer, one can almost sense the frustration of the delegates, who many I believe, have patiently waited for the process to begin to translate to action, to bear fruit, and provide tangible results. And this sense of frustration has never been more clearly articulated than the previous CAADP (PP) theme titled: “Walking the Talk: Delivering on the Malabo Commitments...” There seems to be a general understanding that the enormous challenges facing African agriculture will not, and cannot, be solved by rhetoric and lip-service, but rather, by political action that translates to results on the ground.

The need for a new approach

Despite several positives with respect to the demonstrated interest in agriculture by the political leadership in Africa, one cannot help but feel that there is far much more work to be done, particularly in areas of increasing agricultural productivity, ramping up output and intra-regional trade. In its 12th year, CAADP has not satisfactorily moved swiftly enough to combat many of the problems that bedevil the continent’s smallholder farming sector. In fact, the snail’s pace at which policy cycles have progressed on the continent has meant that much of the policy deliberations are overtaken by events. This means that, while CAADP tries to resolve old-age problems, it tries to rope in contemporary issues (such as climate change) and address today’s problems all at the same time. The resultant effect is that we have an ever-growing omnibus of problem issues are being added to the list of already pressing areas of critical concern.

Some delegates feel that the African Union should rather adopt a more focused and phased approach, by identifying a set of two to three high priority areas or declarations to be resolved, before proceeding to another set of declarations for redressed. Such perceptions challenge the prevailing trend of trying to tackle a broad array of challenges, which often translate to negligible impact because available meagre resources are spread thin over too many commitments. Others feel that there is a need for an entirely new approach to debating and discussing African solutions to African problems. I argue that for such a new approach to yield any result, there would be a need for this platform to engage effectively both technocrats in government and private sector stakeholders – domains in which all the decisions affecting African agriculture are made.

The disconnect between private sector and public sector discourse

By its very nature, CAADP is a political decision that was constructed, framed and designed by governments. The process of developing CAADP compacts was therefore meant to address what were ostensibly government imperatives in agriculture. The first 10 years of CAADP were typically government processes and decisions, up to the point when a realisation was made that the public sector would not be able to undertake the enormous funding requirements needed to address all the issues raised under CAADP. In characteristic fashion, private sector was called upon to “rubber stamp” CAADP and endorse its contents. Though obvious, I specifically pointed out that the process of designing CAADP was not participatory and excluded private sector in the formative stages. It is against this background that CAADP, with all its good intentions, was fundamentally flawed. It had long been argued that, due to a lack of private sector consultation, CAADP sought funding to finance “un-bankable” investment projects. Efforts in 2013 to bring in stronger private sector participation were nonetheless, not matched by a shift in mind-set. Calls to appeal that CAADP understand private sector, rather than the other way round, fell on deaf ears. An emphatic response from public sector officials noted that private sector should understand CAADP, and therefore should “tow in line” with government’s policy imperatives. The argument I made was that the two strands of thought need not be mutually exclusive, as there are matters of mutual interest in which both public and private sector would engage.

However, I feel that there remains a huge disconnect between private and public sector, both in terms of approach and ideology. Perhaps the lack of progress that has been noted by many delegates can be traced back to this private-public gap – which can be seen in both figurative and literal terms. There is a silent admission that government is suspicious of private sector, such that they feel food security matters are “too important” to leave them entirely in the hands of profit-seeking agribusiness companies. Meanwhile, private sector has viewed government as a bureaucratic machinery that is not only slow and unresponsive to the emerging demands of a global food system, but also as an institution that tends to over-regulate and overbear the market to the extent that it negatively impinges on efficiency. Without understanding efforts already made through Grow Africa, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) and other various platforms that have fostered private-public engagement, one can be forgiven for emphasizing the need for much deeper dialogue, particularly at higher levels of government and private sector.

Are we having the right discussions at CAADP?

The long and short of the story is that governments are seeking for private sector to invest in agriculture, while private sector is looking for governments to provide the necessary conditions and the appropriate incentives for them to do so. I have noticed that there is a broad consensus relating to the fundamental problems, and both sides of the public and private sector divide generally agree on the growth potential domicile in the African continent. However, there is a stark divergence regarding how these problems can be resolved, and how this potential can be fulfilled. The major concern for me is that CAADP (PPs) have focused repetitively on the same identified problems which are now being couched by an ever-expanding list of additional cosmetic items on the agenda, all disguised under difference running themes. Not that there is anything wrong with setting agendas, or even discussing the same problems. What seems to be the problem, as far as I am concerned, is that CAADP is not evolving fast enough into an action-oriented mode, which tackles the basic fundamentals. These basic fundamentals are linked to the creation of a conducive environments that offer appropriate incentives that reward risks of investment. This problem is expressed in a myriad of ways, using declarations, bombastically decorated speeches as well as very elaborate acronyms – to the extent that people end up pre-occupying themselves in discussing acronyms, programmes and declarations instead of the real task at end; which is “how governments can create the right market conditions that reward risks to investment”.

If ever people decide to take the root of discussing “the right market conditions” and attendant policy reforms warrant consideration, you also open another can of worms that is linked to the ideological praxis that has informed the paternalistic approach of many governments across Africa. It is clear that governments across Africa have made it their core business to control (staple) markets, and to meddle in input markets through poorly targeted subsidies – all of which counter the private sector investment that they seek to attract. Private sector calls for a deregulated market, but there is a dependency on government interventions such that it has become for stakeholders to conceive a deregulated staple food market. The problem is therefore, deeply ideological, and politically sensitive too, and this often relegates the conversation regarding market-related risk versus reward to non-staple food markets. But is this not the kind of discussion we need to have to inform CAADP initiatives in the various countries throughout the continent? The irony of this situation is that Africa finds comfort in articulating its poverty, food and nutrition insecurity, BUT does not confront the real discussion around the bold actions which governments need to take to ensure that such problems are addressed.

So often we talk of the obvious fact that Africa is one of the most difficult places to do business, with all manner of evidence pointing to this fact. Many indicators point to the need for policy reforms that facilitate, rather than hinder, business development. And given the lack of responsiveness of governments to market-related problems, the problems tend to be systemic in nature, linked to weak or dysfunctional institutions. All one needs to do is to look at the World Economic Forum (WEF) Doing Business Report each year in order to fully appreciate the crux of the African problem. Yet we never quite discuss what policy reform progress is being made in any of the countries that have CAADP compacts, despite the Malabo Declaration specifically alluding to the need for transparent reporting

and monitoring and evaluation. The argument to be made is that CAADP (PP) now needs to move beyond the diagnostic phase or the problem description phase, to a platform that facilitates dialogue on where reform measures are being implemented or not; and to determine if such reform measures are yielding any impacts.

Where to from here?

As argued in this discussion, the CAADP (PP) is in great need of a fresh dynamic approach which requires a shift from a discussion of prevailing problems, to a discussion of policy reforms that are already underway in order to create the necessary incentives for private sector investment. The Africa Agribusiness Forum has played a particularly pivotal role in this regard, but there is still room for improvement. The diversity of African society and its problems has been presented as a unique feature of the continent's outlook, but there are fundamental problems that affect all agricultural sectors – and these include market and policy reforms that create conducive environments for a thriving agricultural sector. While such reforms remain an area of national sovereignty, it makes for useful debate particularly with regard to staple markets. A discussion of policy reforms for staple markets challenges the political disposition of over-regulation and interventionist approaches. The contradictions around over-regulation versus deregulation, as well as broader policy reforms are essential for future deliberations, as the continent seeks agricultural investment under CAADP.

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