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Africa's Green Revolution now urgently needed

The week of the 5th – 9th September saw some 1 500 delegates converging for the African Green Revolution Forum (AGRF) in Nairobi, Kenya. This year's theme was titled: "Seize the Moment: Securing Africa's Rise through Agricultural Transformation". In what has been largely described as the biggest and most successful AGRF annual meeting yet, the conference was graced by Their Excellences, President of Kenya – Uhuru Kenyatta; President of Rwanda – Paul Kagame, former President of Tanzania – Jakaya Kikwete, and former President of Nigeria – Olusegun Obasanjo. Also in attendance were the President of the African Green Revolution Forum (AGRA) – Agnes Kalibata, the Chairman of the Board for AGRA – Strive Masiyiwa, the African Union Commissioner for Rural Economy and Agriculture, Rhoda Peace Tumusiime, President of the Africa Development Bank – Akinwumi Adesina, among many other distinguished guests.

Beyond the significance of this year's conference – which also celebrated the decade old existence of AGRA – was a celebration of the collective effort of all Africans for the work that has been done in the continent to advance the agenda of agricultural transformation. In celebrating existing and on-going work across the continent, delegates were not in any way disillusioned by the significance of the challenge that still exists. The dream of an African green revolution is yet to be realised and there is a need to re-double efforts to create the desired level of impact. Strive Masiyiwa reiterated the success of AGRA in raising US\$30 billion in pledged funding – six times more than the originally intended target of US\$5 billion. President Uhuru Kenyatta pledged US\$200 million in funding for Kenyan youth in agriculture, and the African Development Bank announced a planned commitment of US\$24 billion in agricultural investment funding across the continent over the next decade.

The current agro-food system in Africa is not working, and has not worked since the colonial era (1960s-1970s) when Africa was a net exporter of agricultural commodities. If this is taken as a departure point, then Africans need to first reflect on the Dakota Wisdom, which is a word of advice of the Dakota Indians, passed on from one generation to the other - The Dakota Wisdom says: When you discover that you are riding a dead horse, the best strategy is to dismount. Quit kicking the can down the road by arguing that you can buy a stronger whip, changing riders, appointing a committee to study the horse, arrange to visit other countries to see how others ride dead horses, lower the standards so that you include dead horses, re-classifying the dead horse as "living, impaired", hire outside contractors to ride the dead horse, harnessing several dead horses together to increase the speed, attempting to mount multiple dead horses in the vain hope that one of them will spring to life,

providing additional funding and/or training to increase the dead horse's performance, do a productivity study to see if lighter riders would improve the dead horse's performance, re-writing the expected performance requirements for all horses.

So the question to be answered is, with all the investment funding and pledges announced at the AGRF annual meeting in Kenya, will an African green revolution be realised, if investments are made on the basis of the old way of thinking? OR does Africa need to seriously consider re-inventing agriculture in a way that responds to the existing and future challenges of our generation? The population in Sub-Saharan Africa is expected to more than double from over one billion in 2013 to at least 1.9 billion in 2050. The African continent will not be able to feed an additional billion people with the existing agro-food system, not least because it cannot feed the current population – with 45% of the continent's current food needs being met by imports from other parts of the world. While contemplating this fact one can ask the bold question: Will peasant agricultural systems drive Africa's green revolution? Is Africa going to remain engaged in an agricultural system that makes no economic sense from a scale perspective? Will smallholder agriculture remain forever small, or will it evolve into medium to large scale commercially viable agriculture? OR should this green revolution continue to pander to the "donor-driven" romanticization of peasantry at the expense of sustainable commercially driven agriculture? Will the African farmer of the future look like, and practice the same things that the current farmer is doing? Recent studies by the Regional Network of Agricultural Policy Research Institutes (ReNAPRI) show the emergence of a "medium scale" farming class of part-time farmers, who are gainfully employed in urban areas, and who are politically connected, and managing to influence policy. President Uhuru Kenyatta – himself a career politician – confessed to being a poultry farmer himself, and inevitably falls into this group of part-time farmers. Are these the ones that we can expect to spearhead the green revolution for Africa? These are very serious policy questions that few politicians or analysts dare to neither ask nor answer. Yet such questions define the realities shaping agriculture, and potentially, the future of African agriculture.

Studies by Professor Thom Jayne and his research team show that African has the youngest population in the world – two thirds of the continent's population is younger than 25 years old. This means that some 330 million youth will enter the labour market by the year 2025. Under a set of favourable assumptions, the urban and non-farm sectors will be able to absorb only 200 million of the youth into gainful wage employment. The expectation is that the remaining 120 million young people will be absorbed into the agricultural sector, but that will only happen if a "green revolution" happens within the next decade. In light of this impending reality, a green revolution for Africa is not a dismissible option, but a strategic necessity.

This young population – popularly known as millennials – lives in an information technology era of social media, mass data processing, are digital savviness and a level of global exposure that is unparalleled in the history of mankind. Will they accept that Africa's very poor average yield for maize of 2 tons per hectare, compared to the best practice of 19 tons per hectare? Will they be content with a political leadership that continues to pledge to invest in infrastructure and agriculture, but with very little resources on the ground? Will they accept Africa to remain a place of stifled agribusiness opportunities? Will this generation accept mediocrity and remain at the periphery of global advancement and development? Make no mistake, the warnings that have been touted in the recent past, which have described Africa as a ticking time bomb are serious and they need not be understated.

The “agro-food system” in Africa is not adequately equipped to deal with the unemployment and food security challenge that is currently unfolding. In the grains value chain session which was chaired by Agbiz at the AGRF meeting, Joost van Odijk - the country manager of “Grow Africa” for the Western African region alluded to the fact that rice imports in West Africa are at an all-time high of US\$5 billion, and will reach US\$25 billion over the next decade for that region alone. Ironically, as Joost van Odijk alluded in the grains value chain session, the amount spent on food imports, if otherwise invested in the agro-food system, is sufficient to transform Africa into a competitive producer of food. In fact, other experts such as Juergen Koch from the Competitive African Rice Initiative (CARI) - argue that that the continent’s agricultural sector would only need to re-invest a fraction of the value import bill in order to restore competitiveness in the grain value chains.

So what needs to be done to transform agriculture? Who is going to invest and where? The Rwandan President - Paul Kagame said that “we already know what needs to be done. Let’s just go ahead and do it”. The question then is, if the political leadership knows what needs to be done, what is it going to take in order for real action to be taken at a higher level? If agriculture is so important, as is always said in speeches by politicians, why are governments reluctant to “put their money where their mouths are”? Why is it difficult to address real concerns that have plagued the continent – issues such as infrastructure investment and improvements, regulatory reform, improving the “doing business” environment, establishing policy certainty? When are we going to have a bold continental leadership that will “walk the talk”? If the agro-food system is not working, as is the case in the continent today, why are there no bold policy decisions to address the fundamental issues?

Analysts have argued that Africa is over-researched but under-developed. Despite a very successful AGRF annual conference, many analysts argue that such high level meetings are not translating into meaningful progress on the ground. And despite the modicum of headway made in the various efforts, which remain fragmented, one cannot help but feel that a green revolution for Africa is so near, yet so far. To ask if Africa will indeed have a green revolution is a false choice. Africa has no other option BUT to have a green revolution. The alternative is an assured catastrophe.

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