

COMMENTARY**AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA:
THE SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS CONTINUES****Temple VJ^{1*} and P Yearwood²****Victor Temple**

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Introduction

President Barak Obama's much acclaimed speech to the people of Africa on 28 July 2015 presented a strongly optimistic view of Africa's future [1].

The commentary by David D. Bathrick, a rural growth strategist, titled "Helping Advance President Obama's Vision to Substantively Reduce African Poverty: "New Era" Inclusive Agricultural and Rural Development", is a call to coalesce around a new initiative to develop the agricultural sector in Africa. At the start of his commentary, Bathrick correctly noted that the African Journal of Food, Agriculture, Nutrition, and Development (AJFAND) was chosen to publicize it, because of its "special mission and reputation, plus its rich regional professional and institutional network with scholars, government policy leaders, economists, development officials, and private sector, NGO, and donor leaders," that all "make it well suited to advance the new era multifaceted platform, without which, the sustained economic transformation vision captured by President Obama is unlikely" [2].

The authors of this paper appreciate the request from AJFAND to comment on the highly technical expert commentary by David Bathrick. We aimed to briefly assess the ideas highlighted in the commentary, and to contrast them with some past and present ideas and policies designed to revamp the agricultural sector in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).

In his commentary, David Bathrick focuses on one of the issues, raised by the President of the United States (POTUS), from the viewpoint of planning for agricultural development. Both POTUS and Bathrick rightfully predicate economic development on political stability, but, while POTUS believes that "democracy has taken root" in Africa, Bathrick, putting more weight on "agrarian-based small and medium countries (SMCs)," sees it as "increasingly fragile" and likely to be overwhelmed by "mounting and alarming desperation from their growing populations" [2]. If we look instead at the large countries, especially Nigeria and South Africa, which are likely to have the greatest influence on the development of the rest of the continent, and recall where they were politically a generation ago, we must conclude that POTUS has a better grasp of where Africa is going.

The speech by POTUS was wide-ranging, but he did place agriculture near the top, viewing it as a potential catalyst for overall socio-economic development of Africa [1]. To trigger its catalysing effect, he called on all African states to live up to the pledge they had made to invest at least 10% of their GDP in rural development, based on the synergy of organized community effort [3, 4]. These policies, he claimed, will cause an increase in technical aid and encourage public and private investment, which can "lift 50 million Africans from poverty" [1]. Bathrick deals specifically with agriculture, focusing on the importance of ensuring food security in the global economy, and detailing some effective strategies that can help in achieving it. He points out that, in the SMCs, some 76 percent of the workforce are in agriculture, and are mainly "poor smallholder farmers" [2]. Traditionally, these men and women provided the basic foodstuffs of the local villages, and there is still considerable support for those "old ways"—in Africa, most famously represented by Polly Hill [5]. However, Bathrick believes that smallholders are no longer

able to provide food security in the face of growing populations and climate change and, thus, power African economic development. From his “considerable reflection and discussions over numerous years with producers, political and business leaders, academics, and development professionals,” and “in recognition of the United States’ earlier and some recent experiences,” he suggests six “strategic programmatic and operational areas for interventions”, to achieve rapid socio-economic progress through agricultural development [2]:

“Vigorously Advance ‘Inclusive Agricultural and Rural Development’ (IARD)—A national vision and program to promote the introduction and sustained support for a market responsive and more remunerative agricultural sub-sectors where appropriate, beyond traditional cereal crops. Such programs should be generating critically needed, more product-related services and productive value-added links with the industrial and service sectors”: In other words, he calls for an integrated approach to agricultural planning which puts product development, diversification, marketing and supply in the context of concrete environments/ logistics.

“Establish a national sector ownership process—To advance IARD, many vexing constraints and issues deal with sensitive engrained internal political, political/economy, governance, and policy matters that require unprecedented levels of focused public good, private sector, and donor coordinated investments over a sustained 10-15 year period.” To ensure such investment, Bathrick points out, a large-scale and sustained national strategy is required, to capture the synergy of organized collective effort. Governments must advocate and provide appropriate incentives for villagers to form cooperatives, which would enable them to invest in/ take advantage of modern technologies and agricultural practices. These practices have already proved to be highly effective in Malawi and elsewhere, through government and NGO advocacy of collective effort and community development, with the active involvement of traditional community leaders. He encourages ‘agro-entrepreneurs’ to grow cash crops for wider, even global, markets, and calls on governments and NGOs to give them adequate support.

“Introduce a program versus project support focus—Given the breadth of the issues needed to gain producer and investor confidences, a more holistic, visible, and influential IARD program support base is required to be able to appropriately advance and leverage the national sector reform process and achieve the needed results.” This is an important shift in the planning and management of the development process – Bathrick calls for the continuity of a unified, integrated approach to national/regional economic planning, as opposed to unconnected short-term development projects.

“Strengthen policy analysis and strategic planning—The increasingly rapid shift to trade-led growth and the advancing menacing trends currently evolving, require the introduction of a more analytically based, market-orientated national structure to help SMCs chart, steer, incentivize, and prepare for tomorrow’s more competitive and vexing world.” Consistency and continuity of policy and its implementation require expert analysis and strategic planning – two areas where “SMCs” require international assistance.

“Strengthen technology development--The radically changed and more market-responsive complicated world and the broader needs that IARD encapsulates require the introduction of more market-responsive, productive, and efficient technology generation and outreach services. The notably deficient service and investment levels are inadequate to address growing, long festering, internal structural problems which with globalization’s expansion, only exacerbate further the plethora of structural issues.” Again, Bathrick points to the pivotal role of modern technologies in developing industrial infrastructure and transforming the way economies operate in the 21st century.

“Strengthen human and institutional capacities (HICD)--To advance IARD where SMCs beleaguered land and labor comparative advantages have become shockingly weakened, unprecedented strategically addressed efforts must be mounted across numerous fronts and institutional bases. These will require considerably strengthened human resources and organizational and institutional capacities in the agriculture sector”: Finally, Bathrick lays emphasis on human resource development (i.e., education) and the establishment of government and international agencies to monitor and regulate this process effectively.

Another area, where Bathrick is compelling, and his input most useful, is in his account of the run-down of American support for African agriculture. This has had a long history, going back to the work of the Tuskegee Institute in German Togo before the First World War [6, 7]. As Bathrick points out, “By 2005, USAID’s technical staff in agriculture had dropped to less than 2% of the agency’s total roster” [2]. Furthermore, the break in continuity and the loss of personnel and their expertise will be hard to recover from. There was much that these programs provided that is needed and valued on the ground, especially in research, extension, and education.

To avoid vulnerability of national development to shifts in political winds outside of Africa, Bathrick advocates avoidance of short-term projects which most visibly benefit consultants and co-operating officials in gated communities, and establishing broad-based national policies and institutions [2].

In our view, the most essential of Bathrick’s recommendations is his idea of transforming smallholder farming into large-scale organized production through cooperative community effort, promoted and implemented by consistent and well-planned government policies. These will, of course, have to cover the entire multi-faceted paradigm of interventions on all levels: provision of chemical fertilizers at affordable prices through honest and transparent distribution systems, and improving communications are part and parcel of the entire development process (the rapid take-up of the mobile phone, by allowing small scale producers and middlemen to discover and respond to the best market opportunities, has been at the heart of Africa’s rapid economic development). Improved transport infrastructure is also needed, so that village surpluses and cash crops may be readily marketed. As POTUS pointed out, modernisation of customs and border crossings to open up opportunities for continental trade will also stimulate national economies.

Because of the gap between planting and harvesting, agriculture depends strongly on credit. Banks came to Africa as part of the colonial package. They were intended to finance European commercial activities. They were not geared to providing credit for smallholders. Polly Hill long ago showed how lack of funds exacerbated poverty and exploitation at the village level [5]. The emergence of micro-credit institutions has been one of the most promising developments of the past generation. It needs further encouragement. This links to another point. Micro-credit has been largely directed at women. African women have long experience with arranging credits and marketing crops. Building on that experience will be vital for African development. When POTUS urged: “If you want your country to grow and succeed, you have to empower your women” [1], he was not genuflecting to political correctness, but stating a truth as important for the development of African agriculture as for the enhancement of human dignity. Policies which recognise and respond adequately to the challenges of the twenty-first century realities are likely to succeed. Policies, which fail to do that, are likely to be irrelevant or counterproductive.

Are the strategies proposed by David Bathrick different from others?

In general, Bathrick’s suggestions include [2]: Vigorously Advance Inclusive Agricultural and Rural Development (IARD); Establish a national sector ownership process; Introduce a program versus project support focus; Strengthen policy analysis and strategic planning; Strengthen technology development; Strengthen human and institutional capacities (HICD).

Furthermore, Bathrick stated, “*We live in an increasingly complex and inter-connected world wherein hundreds of millions of rural residents from Africa’s agrarian-based small and medium countries (SMCs) are not advancing sufficiently. Income inequalities mount, governmental revenues are not increasing, and multiple perverse activities expand from which IARD mobilizes the only sustainable response. The situation is in part exacerbated by the poorly understood requirements and consequences of the prevailing sea change shifts within the world’s economic and trade structures and the current position of the SMC’s agricultural sector within their broader national economy. For the SMCs, where basic support services and the realities of the farm-level risk “cushion” are comparatively absent and other sectors are not sufficiently advancing, there is basically one, irrefutable option: responsibly advance Inclusive Agricultural and Rural Development*” [1].

The general consensus among African leaders is that agriculture holds the key to economic transformation, growth, and poverty reduction in SSA. Thus, the overwhelming role of agriculture in generating future prosperity in Africa cannot be overemphasized [3,4,8]. Kofi Annan, Chair of the Africa Progress Panel (APP), stated that “*unleashing Africa’s green and blue revolutions may seem like an uphill battle, but several countries have begun the journey. In these countries, farmers are planting new seeds, using fertilizer and finding buyers for their harvests; Impressive innovation and smart government policies are changing age-old farming ways*” [4].

At a meeting in Malabo in June 2014, African Union leaders renewed their 2003 commitment to allocate at least 10 percent of their national budgets to agriculture. Kofi Annan stated that, “*civil society must hold political leaders and businesses to account, measuring their actions against their promises*” [4]. He further stated that, “*people who live in democracy and under democratic rule, do not starve*”. These issues were also highlighted by both POTUS and Bathrick.

Several initiatives, programs and activities have been undertaken during the past decade to improve the agricultural sector in SSA. There is a need to highlight the role of the World Bank, Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) and other agencies in agricultural development in SSA. The World Bank is one of the biggest contributors to the development of the SSA agricultural sector which is fundamental in ensuring food security, reduction of hunger, poverty, and environmental degradation [3, 4, 8 – 11]. According to reports from the World Bank and other organizations, the SSA agricultural sector alone accounts for the employment and livelihoods of over 65% of the working population and contributes on average about 30% of the GDP of most countries of the region [3, 4, 8 – 11]. In a recent speech, Kofi Annan, APP chairman, stated that “*Unfortunately, the neglect of the agricultural sectors has allowed inequality and malnutrition on our continent to accelerate,*” adding that “*malnutrition on the continent represents political failure*” [8]. He reiterated that improving agriculture can create economic opportunities, reduce malnutrition and poverty, and generate faster, fairer growth. Sustaining this growth requires action in five core areas: Facilitating agricultural markets and trade; Improving agricultural productivity; Investing in public infrastructure for agricultural growth; Reducing rural vulnerability and insecurity; and Improving agricultural policy and institutions [9 – 11].

Several organizations have joined the World Bank to work at regional levels in these five core areas. Their activities are coordinated through the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP) of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) and the African Union Commission (AUC). These organizations provide a framework for advocacy and sharing of experience. At the global level, progress in trade reform, particularly cotton subsidies in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, and improvement in agricultural technology through the work of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), are important for the region [4, 8 – 10].

The population of youths in SSA is about 226 million, which is about 19% of the global youth population. By 2030, it is projected that the number of youths in SSA will increase by 42% [9, 10]. The need to create appropriate policies, programs and intervention strategies focused on attracting youths to be engaged in agriculture cannot be overemphasized. The incentives in the policies should ensure that agriculture becomes a profitable, competitive and productive enterprise that will attract the creativity, dynamism, resourcefulness and entrepreneurial potential of the youths [9]. Agriculture can offer income-generating employment to the youths, enabling them to provide livelihood for themselves and their families, and to make a meaningful contribution to the social and economic development of their countries [4, 8, 9]. An agricultural

renaissance can be achieved on the continent and youths are essential to bringing it about, transforming agriculture into a prosperous, income-generating and job-creating sector that will improve the livelihoods of millions of people in SSA [9].

To mark the 10th anniversary of Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP), the African Union declared 2014 as the Year of Agriculture and Food Security. The 66th UN General Assembly declared 2014 as the “International Year of Family Farming” (IYFF). The overall aim of the IYFF was “to promote international awareness and support country-owned plans aimed at strengthening the contribution of family farming and smallholders in eradicating hunger and reducing rural poverty leading to sustainable development of rural areas and food security” [12]. IYFF was designed to raise the profile of family and smallholder farming by focusing world attention on their significant role in eradicating hunger and poverty, providing food security and nutrition, improving livelihoods, managing natural resources, protecting the environment, and achieving sustainable development, in particular in rural areas [12]. After several meetings and discussions, the achievement and effectiveness of the IYFF are yet to be determined.

The Sustaining CAADP Momentum strategic review carried out in 2012/13 concluded that CAADP has contributed to placing agriculture back on the political and policy agenda, and to mobilizing a great range of stakeholders around a common agenda. The African Union Summit in January 2013 endorsed the Sustaining CAADP Momentum strategy, which was to focus on a number of time-bound results. The 5 to 10 years framework for achieving these results was based on the need for agricultural transformation, capacity building, enabling environment, productivity, production and wealth creation [12]. The CAADP target of allocating at least 10% of the national budget to the agricultural sector is equally valid and critical to improved performance in the next decade. The emphasis, however, will be on making “quality” investments combined with transformative policy and regulatory reforms that trigger higher levels of private sector investment in agriculture [12].

These are some of the laudable outcomes from the series of conferences and meetings aimed to improve the agricultural sectors in SSA. However, the implementation of some of these policies and the benchmarks to assess their success leaves much to be desired.

Reardona et al. made another notable contribution to shaping current agricultural policies in SSA [13]. In 2013, they presented their research findings on the emerging “quiet revolution” in African agri-food systems, underscoring the significant opportunities for accelerating smallholder-driven agriculture and agri-business development in Africa [13]. They put forward some of the most convincing evidence showing that the smallholder family farm is the basis for transforming and commercializing African agriculture. They cited five “interlinked transformations” in African agri-food systems, (though they occur at different paces in different regions): (i) urbanization; (ii) diet change; (iii) agri-food system transformation (in wholesale, processing, and retail systems); (iv) changes in rural labor markets; and (5) intensification of farm technology (the agricultural transformation).

They indicated that most of these transformations are taking place in the context of rapid urbanization in SSA which is growing faster than in the rest of the developing world [13]. According to their report, in the aggregate, urban Africa now represents roughly 40% of the African population and consumes approximately 50% of the total food, including 60% of the total marketed food. However, in order to meaningfully compete with imports in their own growing domestic and regional agribusiness markets, African farmers and agribusinesses will need to improve value chain efficiency at all levels. About 95% of the African food market (in value terms) is domestic (local and regional); exports and imports constitute the rest [13]. They stressed the need for assisting a broader set of smallholder farmers in gaining access to inputs, affordable credit, rural services and extension information that allows them to take advantage of this growing market. Innovative social protection and risk management programs may also be required to address the particular constraints of low asset, resource-poor, smallholder farmers.

It is important for the relevant authorities to address the existing constraints on improved productivity, incomes and food security of smallholder and family farmers, and provide affordable credits, targeted social protection program and risk management instruments, in order to increase farmers' resilience [12]. In addition, deliberate measures should be included in national agriculture investment plans, to prioritize and implement proven interventions that support livelihood, employment opportunities for women and youth, reduce post-harvest loss and promote sustainable, climate-resilient agricultural sector [9, 12, 13].

In conclusion, we cite some excerpts from the report on the 3rd Annual Africa Food Security Conference and Agri-Exhibition (AFSCA) held in Nairobi Kenya 2015 [14].

“SSA smallholder farmers depend on rain for farming and with increasing temperatures, rain patterns have changed and more farming areas are becoming drier. Decreasing soil fertility and crop land areas also contribute to this problem. It is estimated that by 2050, Africa's population will more than double to 2 billion people. Today, 250 million people in SSA go hungry every day, yet the continent holds 25% of the world's arable land. Therefore, all players in the value chain need to be involved, and new solutions need to be tabled to avert disaster”.

“Technology for food security: Most of Africa's arable land remains underutilized. The average age of farmers in SSA is 60 years. With an ageing population of farmers, huge tracts of land that could be worked within hours, take days, even weeks, due to lack of mechanization. Farm mechanization increases farm productivity, saves time and is also attractive to young people who turn away from agriculture due to the laborious nature of farming. Irrigation and greenhouse farming both could address the problem of drought, poor soil fertility and shrinking land sizes.”

“Agriprenurship: Farming in Africa is largely seen as poor, uneducated people's job. But actually agriculture is a serious business. African countries could tap into an increasing number of unemployed (working class) youth to revamp agriculture and

capacity build for already existing programs, like agricultural extension. As agriculture becomes agribusiness, African leaders have the task of creating enabling environments that will enable young entrepreneurs to develop skills and get the resources they need to be involved in every aspect the value chain”.

“Including a growing number of youth (65% under 35years) in the value chain will ensure sustainable food security in the continent. Enabling environments and opening up markets will encourage young people to experiment and innovate around agriculture”.

“Markets: Reforms in trade policies and practices in the continent are needed in order to unlock Africa’s trade potential and inclusivity in the world market. An increasing population, growing middle class and urban population all present new market prospects within Africa. Only 13% of African airspace is utilized and ground transportation is unsustainably expensive due to poor road networks. The Yamoussoukro Declaration sought to open up African skies for African airlines in order to increase regional trade and create better supply chain and delivery through regional cooperation. There is an opportunity to boost regional trade by implementing The Yamoussoukro Declaration”.

“Policy discussions on land tenure need to involve women, who are the primary producers and in many African cultures are not allowed to own land”. “African leaders should look at capacity building especially in youth and women to counter the problem of an ageing population of farmers and high youth unemployment. African leaders can encourage creation of more “Small and Medium Enterprise” from smallholder farmer organizations by having supportive tax laws. African governments need to see the potential of future agriculture and invest more into the value chain rather than wait for foreign investment. Africa needs to look at new solutions that will lead the continent towards climate smart, sustainable agriculture. Sustainable agriculture is multi stakeholder and multi-disciplinary, including all relevant actors in the value chain”.

Most of the ideas and discussions highlighted in the report on the AFSCA [14] tend to support the vision of agricultural development mentioned in the speech by POTUS and, directly or indirectly, embrace some of the concepts presented in Bathrick’s commentary.

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