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Journalism competition 2012: Young People, Farming and Food Runner up (print)

Agri-what? The Nigerian Youth and Agriculture

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‘Agri-what?’ was my friend’s response to my suggestion of making a career in the sector. She is not alone in her thinking. When you have a country spilling with black gold, it is every youth corper’s¹ dream to work for a big multinational oil company even if they have no clue about oil and gas. ‘Your future is secure with a plum oil company job even if you are just sweeping the floor,’ she tells me.

But the wind is changing and very fast and whether or not we care or have a slight interest in agriculture – it affects us each day in more ways than not. Nigeria was built on agriculture; the green in the flag is testament to our rich history. And sadly, for a long time, agriculture has remained that – history. With the advent of social networking, the internet and news on the go, agriculture is staging a gradual come back. And it is not just the journalists and agro-enthusiasts that are singing the green song; the youths too are forming a significant part of the choir. We are no longer content to see the comedy of errors where a nation flowing with the proverbial milk and honey still has its people going hungry daily. It is estimated that 70% of people in Nigeria live below \$1 each day.² Despite 84 million hectares of arable land and opportunities in agriculture, 60 to 70 percent of our youths are roaming the streets (CV in hand) in search of invisible civil service and white collar city jobs.³

¹ A Youth Corper or corper is a member of the National Youth Service Corps which is a mandatory one year service for all Nigerians who graduated from university under the age of 30.

² United Nations MDG Information 2006

³ The National Planning Commission of Nigeria puts youth unemployment in Nigeria is 60 to 70 percent and the labour market can only absorb 10 percent of new job entrants.

Unfortunately, for many youths, agriculture is only about farming in a rural village that is cut off from civilisation. They fail to see that the sector is very much diversified and keeps evolving as we continue to experience scientific and technological breakthrough. How many times have we sat down to think about where our food comes from? It only takes a strike by delivery drivers coming from the North to make a silent statement. All of a sudden, the common tomato and peppers, key ingredients for stew which is eaten with almost everything from rice to cassava becomes a luxury as prices double and triple. Just imagine if every youth cultivates a back or window sill garden growing tomatoes, peppers, vegetables and herbs. Not only will it be fresh, nutritious and readily available, it could also save some money on the food bill which has significantly increased for many households due to the partial removal of subsidy on PMS products in 2012.

Harambe Incubator for Sustainable Agricultural and Rural Development (HISARD), Nigeria

HISARD which was set up by a youth, Tola Sunmonu, comprises a two-year scholarship program in which selected students engage in extensive training and research which they use to develop and implement innovative solutions to the agricultural problems facing the local communities they work in. The pilot HISARD was launched in March 2009 at Obafemi Awolowo University and consists of ten carefully selected students who are working to increase agricultural development in two local communities near their university; Wakajaiye and Orile-Owu. In addition, HISARD targets secondary school students and its annual Harambe conference is well attended by youths and professionals alike in the sector.

A macro approach to agriculture, food security and employment creation

In the past, successive governments have only paid (partial) lip service to agriculture but the President Goodluck Jonathan regime means business and agriculture is regaining its pride of place on the Transformation Agenda. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Dr Akinwunmi Adesina has already taken some decisive steps under the Agricultural Transformation Action Plan (ATAP) to ban rice importation and make the country self-sufficient in rice production by 2015. According to the minister, Nigeria currently spends a whopping N365 billion on rice annually. Already, the Federal Government has expanded the capacities of three rice mills to 90 000 tonnes each to facilitate rice processing and ensure

competiveness. An additional fourteen rice mills with a total capacity of 440 000 tonnes would be established under the Public Private Partnership (PPP) by April 2012. President Jonathan in his budget speech announced that in order to promote local production and consumption of rice, a levy of 40 percent would be placed on imported polished rice leading to an effective duty rate of 50 percent which will further increase to 100 percent in 2012.

Another initiative directly targeted at employment creation for the youths especially in the areas of agriculture is the reform of the posting of corps members which takes effect from March 2012 for the 2012 Batch A set. The new directive will now see corps members being posted to four sectors; agriculture, rural health, education and industry. In addition, agricultural loans are currently available for all for serving corpsers. The move is aimed at developing the entrepreneurial skills of graduates, making them self employed and eventually employers of labour while they contribute their quota to national development.

The role of the private sector: Nestlé /International Institute of Tropical Agriculture Partnership

Finally, the private sector has a great role to play in stimulating growth in the sector. One example worthy of emulation is the Nestle/IITA partnership on cassava production. Nigeria is currently the largest producer of cassava in the world. The partnership involves bringing farmers together and giving practical workshops through the Nestle/IITA demonstration farm on best practises and how to maximise their output. In addition, farmers are given high yielding and disease resistant cassava stems to plant free of charge. After harvest, the farmers will be able to sell their value added products at competitive prices to food processing companies.

My ideas and recommendations: education and communal engagement

The best place to start is by preaching the agriculture gospel in school. A quick win is to make Agricultural Sciences compulsory for all secondary students. In addition, all schools should have a piece of land dedicated to agricultural demonstrations and each classroom should have some plants to visually stimulate the interest of the students. Also, more competitions should be organised with an agricultural theme to create awareness.

The government could also allot public plots of land for each local government area to serve as communal farms for residents. To further support this initiative, more centres should be established for research, agricultural advisory services and retailing of seeds, fertiliser, books and other related resources.

Conclusion

All hands must be put on deck in making the agricultural revolution a reality. We must all remember that our (in)actions all have future and global consequences. It is up to the Nigerian youth of today to embrace agriculture in his or her own little way to ensure that the legacy we leave behind for our children is better than the one we met.

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