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Opinion

An Overview of Smallholder Farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa for Better Engagement in Achieving Sustainable Development

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Opinion

Agriculture is key to achieving broad-based growth, especially in low-income developing countries. Empirical studies have showed that agriculture based economic growth is two up to times more effective in increasing poor household income [1]. Yet almost 80 per cent of the world's 925 million hungry people live in rural areas, and most depend on agriculture as their main source of income and employment. Approximately half of these are smallholder farmers (SHF). Overall, SHF constitute 1.5 billion of the three billion people living in rural areas and 87 per cent of all farmers in developing countries.

SHF are the main building units in African, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), rural areas. They are the foremost suppliers of food, covering almost two third of all domestically produced agricultural. However, they are characterized by poor living conditions and marginalization in the mainstream economic spectrum. It is also important to note that the rural to urban migration is low in SSA based on estimates of Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division of the United Nations, which predicts SSA to be the world's least urbanized region by 2050 [2]. Moreover, labor market in SSA countries is small that it is projected to take in only 25% of young labor force, leaving the rest to the agricultural sector by the year 2030 [3]. Agriculture is the main employer, on average 65 percent, of the African labor force contributing, however, 32 percent of GDP [4]. This displays lower productivity and African agricultural sector is not catching up with the other continents, given the potential of the continent. This makes smallholder farming based agricultural transformation in rural areas noteworthy for sustainable development policies. Conversely, these SHF have been marginalized and have been out of the equation of economic development.

In recent years, a focus on SHF is gaining ground as these SHF hold potential for the transformation agricultural and the economy as a whole. Consensus that smallholder-based development programs ensure there is pro-poor, environmentally sustainable and notably large-scale poverty reduction growth is brought into spotlight. Also, the 2008 crisis that oversaw increase in global food prices has pushed governments and development partners to adapt policies and release funds that can empower SHF. These policies are further encouraged by the market transformation in the African continent. For instance, formation of trade blocks has created access to larger markets with benefit from the exchange of technology and information which can set up SHF in the path towards the ultimate large-scale production. Global increase in food demand due to population growth is also creating opportunities and proving SHF are sustainable given the rapid expansion of urban areas. Furthermore, the role of Supermarket chains cannot be neglected as these chains are providing farmers with information on consumer tastes and sustainable market in SSA.

Nevertheless, SHF in SSA are poor and face challenges that hinders them from tapping their potential. The primary constraint of SHF in SSA is the of lack basic tools of production including fertilizer, pesticide, selected seeds, irrigation system and tractors. They have high after-harvest losses due to lack of storage facilities and under developed transportation systems. The under development of transportation infrastructure makes price of inputs high and output low as the market reach-ability is difficult. This has also implication on the adaptability of new technologies. Smallholder farmers have unique and diverse social capital that have evolved over the span of centuries. However, this has is not been adapted for the advantage of these farmers as policy makers often neglect the social structure and treat the communities as homogeneous single community, not diversely rich societies. This distorts the existing social apparatus leaving SHF un-organized. This phenomenon hinders the dissemination of accurate information between farmers and with authorities while leaving the farmers without the ability to participate and bargain collectively. Increase in population and migration are also having effect in the social structure. Land tenure system also is proving to be incapable of adapting to these changes. Women are the ones that are the most disadvantaged as the customary land tenure system does not reflect the contemporary role of women. Ineffective political institutions as well as inappropriate policies are hampering making of political capital. Smallholder farmers are not represented in political arenas and their needs are overlooked creating a sense of grievance toward governments. Stable life is also distorted by continuous conflicts and political tensions that ravages the SSA.

Financial institutions are reluctant to provide loans to SHF because those farmers do not have financial records and fail to deliver collateral. International standards and subsidies by the developed countries further shrinks market share of SHF and hampers their gains from value added chains. Given SSA is underdeveloped region human capital of SHF is very low. Malnutrition and food insecurity is widespread even though great proportion of household income is spent on food. Smallholder farmers possess little formal education and deal with inadequate extension services that fail to provide viable solutions to their problems. Global warming is having exacerbated effect in SSA in terms of shortage of rainfall, frequent droughts, and increase in temperature, prevalence of animal and plant diseases along with recurrent locust storms. Unfortunately, these farmers do not have the necessary equipment and technology to combat these situations.

Such challenges can be overcome through a series of co-ordinated policies that involve setting and empowering SHF organization, developing national smallholder investment strategies along with research and extension-based productivity improvement.

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