

Agriculture as a Crucial Vocation

The United Nations Food & Agricultural Organization (FAO) recently warned that, in the developing countries over the next two decades, hunger might assume an uncontrollable dimension, if massive increases in agricultural production and a simultaneous, stringent population-control are not pursued. According to the FAO, if present agrarian practice continues, no fewer than sixty-four countries—29 of which are African countries—might become incapable of feeding their population by the end of the 20th century even where all cultivable lands are farmed.

In a recent report, the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture concluded that 'in Africa, almost every problem is more acute than elsewhere. Topsoils are more fragile, and more subject to erosion and degradation. Irrigation covers a smaller fraction of the cultivated area, leaving agriculture exposed to the vicissitudes of an irregular rainfall pattern. The infrastructure, both physical and institutional, is weaker. The shortage of trained people is more serious. The flight from land is more precipitate...' Such is the dismal picture of the food problem in Africa.

The food problem, in effect, epitomizes the problems of agricultural practice in Africa. The genesis of the current problem in Africa lies in the 'official colonial' attitude of promoting and encouraging cash-crop farming at the expense of food-crop farming. But as Africa in colonial and earlier times was essentially rural, the food problem did not magnify itself then. Thus at independence, food exports accounted for more than 70% of the Gross National Product (GNP) of Nigeria. Now, 29 years later, there is an almost complete reversal of the situation, with food items accounting for more than 50% of *imports*. This problem is, however, by no means peculiar to Nigeria; a more-than-cursory survey of the economic structure of most third-world countries would reveal similar situations in them.

This basic problem of agrarian practice was later to be compounded by other problems such as inadequate and inefficient infrastructural facilities, land-tenure systems, and a host of other problems. One point which stands out in clear relief is that for too long we have relied on the peasant farmer as the basic producing unit of Nigerian agrarian practice. Unfortunately, it has become demonstrably clear that the Nigerian peasant farmer cannot honestly hope to meet the food- and fibre-needs of the country. In the first place, our population is growing at a rate which far outstrips what the peasant farmer can possibly supply, even if he produces at double the rate at which he is producing now.

Successful and meaningful economic development must proceed with overdue modernization of agrarian practice and systems. In the 1960s it was not uncommon to refer to the Asian Continent as a continent of famine. Indeed at that time Africa, as I noted earlier, was quite sufficient in food production. But as an irony of history that situation has now become reversed, owing mainly to poor performance in agriculture and, at the same time, uncontrolled population-growth.

Agriculture—Central to Growth

The current 'Asian miracle' is an offshoot of the realization and concretization of the dictum that agriculture is central to growth. In essence, developing agriculture should be seen as being solely designed to provide food; but it should also be recognized within a wider spectrum as aimed at serving as the pivotal basis for and of development. Agriculture is indeed capable of providing the needed stimulus for economic growth. But for agriculture to serve as the catalyst for such growth, peasant farming must be encouraged simultaneously with large-scale farming. This is my full belief and indeed conviction as regards an effective resolution of the food crisis and the development question widely in Africa.

During my tenure of office for a period of years as the head of state and government of my country, the Federal Republic of Nigeria, my Government enacted two policy-measures that were designed to deal decisively with the food problem. Firstly we enacted the Land-use Law, which vested all lands in the State, for easy access by the citizens. As issues involving land should not be taken lightly, it was indeed a courageous act which nonetheless generated some flak from the former beneficiaries of the existing land-tenure system. However, we forged ahead undiscouraged, convinced that the first major step in boosting and revolutionizing agrarian practice in Nigeria had been taken.

Nevertheless we launched the 'Operation Feed the Nation' programme at once for public awareness in order to rekindle public interest in agriculture and to intensify agricultural production. In addition we were confident that, with the new land-law in practice, the Operation Feed the Nation would enable all grades of farmers to concentrate on the production of more food for internal consumption and, when possible, also for export.

Determined Embrace of Full-time Farming

In 1979, when I was about to retire from office as the head of state and government of my country, one thing that I was most clear-sighted and convinced about was my preoccupation in retirement. I was resolutely determined and convinced that I would embrace farming full-time, though most people were at a loss to understand why I would opt for such a rural occupation and what they considered to be a degrading vocation.

My decision to go into agriculture was based on certain considerations. Firstly, one of my guiding philosophies in life has been the need to practise whatever I preached or believed in. As I noted earlier, while in Government I launched Operation Feed the Nation as a policy aimed at solving the food problem. When I retired from Government I felt I should demonstrate the viability of the objective by actually living it. My underlying personal conviction was that everybody can be a successful farmer if the desire and will are there.

Furthermore, I was and am convinced that my full-time involvement in agriculture would help to dignify farming in Nigeria and would serve as a root-and-branch remedy for correcting the unfounded perception of farming as mean, menial, undignifying, and unedifying.

Flowing from the above, I felt that my involvement in agriculture would serve as a role model. To me what was needed was a headlong approach at correcting the erroneous belief concerning farming as a vocation for the illiterate rural dwellers alone.

A canon of my social conduct has always been that the life worth living is the life of service to Humankind. Anything less than living to some extent in the service of our fellow men and women is both frustrating and ephemeral. In life one needs to have something at once more enduring, elevating, and internally rewarding. One's vocation in life must be human-centred to be lastingly satisfying. Agriculture has enabled me to continue contributing in my own little ways to the good of Mankind.

Many Satisfactions from Agriculture

Furthermore, going into agriculture would continue to provide me with the sort of challenges that have become a part of me *inter alia* as a military and national commander. Agriculture is a field that allows one the pleasure and satisfaction of creation and procreation. It is a field in which one can see the fruits of one's labour not purely in monetary terms, but in several other respects—such as watching the various crops and livestock grow and mature.

Proximity to Nature creates a special love in one for Nature, both tamed and untamed. It engenders desire and interest in preservation and conservation. It makes life more real and more meaningful. In one word it *satisfies*. Again, it has the tendency to generate more and more employment opportunities and, perhaps more importantly, enables one to contribute positively towards feeding the African population, with gradual eradication of the threat and reality of hunger.

Thus after handing over power to a democratically elected civilian government, and with the support of the agricultural loan guaranteed scheme, I plodded into the unsafe and unsure terrain of modern agriculture. With a willingness for hard work and determination to surmount all conceivable obstacles, the initial teething problems disappeared—only to be replaced by both minor and other serious problems.

Ten years afterwards, I can say there have certainly been the ups and the downs, the high times and the low times; but in all I have weathered the storm. Not only do I produce livestock and food-crops, but these products are processed on my own land before being sold in most cases direct to consumers.

Initial Convictions Sustained

My joy over the years has been that products of my farm have found their ways into numerous kitchens and, invariably, stomachs all over the country and beyond. In my modest way I have contributed my own quota towards the eradication of hunger—in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. Government policies, weather, diseases, and human frailties, have, however, each taken their toll on our agricultural effort.

Within these years, my initial conviction that we cannot conveniently expect the peasant farmer to remain the basic producing unit of African agrarian practice—to produce both the industrial raw-material requirement and domestic food requirement of the continent—appears to have been strengthened.

Farming is without doubt a noble occupation. It is a vocation that increases and solidifies one's personal interaction with Nature. For me no nation can honestly break out of the vicious circle of underdevelopment without giving agriculture real pride-of-place. If agriculture must be accorded priority, as I feel it should, my

experience so far has convinced me that private initiative is equally important, and, what is more, modernized farming is really a needed imperative for thorough-going agricultural development.

Agricultural Productivity Widely Crucial

For development to be concretized, anchored, and meaningful, agriculture must serve as the bedrock of any major nation's development plans and strategies. A nation that cannot feed itself cannot properly prepare itself for the true rigours of development, while a continent that is not self-sufficient in food production cannot afford to be decisive when times are critical and food is most crucial. In fact more often than not, it finds itself bogged down by distracting phenomena during those periods when it needs to move with gusto and confront crucial issues of technological, social, economic, and political, importance in its needed march towards development and progress.

In recent times most people have come to agree that agricultural development, especially as it affects the area of food production, is perhaps the first meaningful step that must be taken, pursued, and executed, with a tenacity of purpose akin to the assured march or religious faithfuls. What is often at issue is the question of modality of execution; while various arguments have been advanced for and against modernized farming practice *vis-à-vis* traditional farming systems, a generation of experience has shown that a combination of both modalities will prove to be the surest key to improved food production in and for Africa.

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