

COMMENTARY**A CLOSER LOOK AT THE
“NEW ERA” INCLUSIVE AGRICULTURAL AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT****Mabaya E¹ and N Kiiti ²****Edward Mabaya****Ndunge Kiiti**

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Introduction

This paper is a response to David D. Bathrick's special commentary entitled "Helping Advance President Obama's Vision to Substantively Reduce African Poverty: "New Era" Inclusive Agricultural and Rural Development" [1]. Let us start with a disclaimer: Africa is big and diverse. For the agricultural sector, this diversity includes agro-ecology, farming systems, and historical contexts that have shaped policy and regulatory frameworks over many decades. As such, any paper that paints Africa's agriculture with a broad brush is likely to be both spot on for some countries and off the mark on others. Bathrick's paper, and by extension this review, are no exception. They provide a broad and somewhat static overview that sees the forest but misses both the trees and the change of seasons.

Bathrick's paper provides a good overview of key issues around United States (US) foreign policy as it pertains to agricultural and rural development in Africa. The historical context, and overview of the specific initiatives that have been facilitated by the US to strengthen development in Africa, are admirable. Bathrick's rich experience with small and medium countries around the world, working with leading agricultural development organizations and think tanks for more than two decades, is clearly evident in his command of the subject. The key elements proposed to shape "new thinking" on integrated rural development are well reasoned and so too are the six recommendations for "changed approaches" to programmatic and operational areas. The emphasis on agribusiness development is especially well placed in light of Africa's rapid urbanization and the youth bulge.

Bathrick references President Obama's speech to the African Union (AU) as informing the framework to his response. He touches on some of the issues raised by President Obama, however, there are key components of the conversation that seem to be missing. This response highlights five key issues that warrant further discussion.

Setting priorities with limited resources

In an ideal world, every African country could follow Bathrick's recommendation, and for that matter, President Obama's challenge. This would stimulate the continent's growth in both agriculture and agribusinesses. To some extent, the key ingredients for integrated rural development are not new and they have been espoused by numerous academics and practitioners for decades. However, developing countries, by definition, have limited resources that have to be spread among many conflicting needs. Increasing investments in agriculture and agribusiness often requires cutbacks in equally pertinent areas such as health and education. Moreover, among Bathrick's recommendations, agricultural priorities are set to achieve both short and long term goals. Additionally, careful sequencing under uncertain macro-environmental factors is vital to success. Even with best intentions and the right mix of policies, poor implementation, wrong sequencing, and/or unanticipated changes that are beyond the control of policy makers, can derail agriculture and rural development plans. For these reasons, policy frameworks must be constantly recalibrated to realign goals for the current realities. Some indication of priority is important in guiding optimal allocation of resources.

From Aid to Trade

Much of US policy to guide international development has often been driven from paradigms that lean towards Western modernization and dependency-oriented theories. President Obama's speech tied in more participatory focused approaches that emphasize the 'non-tangible' aspects of development such as dignity, ownership, sustainability, empowerment and creativity. It also called us back to a more 'systems thinking' to ensure we make the connection on how interconnected and holistic development must be—linking the many various sectors. The emphasis being, 'How do we work with mutual respect and learning to enable others to improve their livelihoods?' How do we ensure an integrated, holistic and sustainable approach to development? As President Obama aptly points out, Africa needs 'trade not aid.' So, how do policies and programs focus on enabling rather than disempowering people? In the words of Wallerstein, we have to promote the self-empowerment of people or enabling individuals and communities to create their own momentum, gain their own skills, and promote their own change [2]. Narayan supports this idea and suggests that the shift towards empowerment is "the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives" [3].

New Thinking: A Focus on Hope

Recognizing that Africa has made major strides towards governance and development, President Obama's speech to the African Union was one focused on HOPE. Bathrick recognizes the need for this type of 'new thinking towards Africa' but doesn't really explain the 'how and why.' In his speech, President Obama emphasized the strong fabric of community and spirit that has helped shape him and the broader global community. As he put it, "Africa and its people have helped shape America!" This is the 'how' and it is a key part of the conversation because it recognizes that we are building on tremendous positive aspects and assets of African society. Why? Failure to recognize that can continue to take away from the message about "new thinking being needed towards Africa.' As Pete Ondeng argues, when Africans are constantly told that Africa "is a continent that doesn't work" it often affects and defeats their ability to have vision and hope, and even to survive [4]. It can lead to cynicism and despair.

Thinking beyond USAID

Again, we recognize that the focus of Bathrick's commentary is US foreign policy and that justifies the highlighting United States Agency for International Development (USAID), United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and other US based institutions. Because of their budget and the political influence, we recognize the key role of these players in shaping agricultural development policy in many African countries. However, the current reality is that most African countries are thinking beyond USAID and other Western institutions. There are many new players in the field such as India, China, and Brazil. Furthermore, several African based institutions such as the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) and the African Development Bank (AfDB) have been critical to African development. The Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) is one such example of a continent wide policy framework for agricultural transformation, wealth creation, food security and

nutrition. Moreover, significant investments in Africa's agricultural development by and through new institutions such as the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, have greatly eroded USAID's leading role in shaping policies in Africa.

It's worth pointing out that agricultural development is often adversely affected by war and conflict. With Africa suffering from numerous conflicts, the unique and fragile approaches that are often needed could be highlighted in Bathrick's paper because, ultimately, they impact and weaken institutions. The flip side of that argument, pointed out by President Obama, is that a young caliber of African democratic leader is spearheading the continent's growth and competitiveness. A case in point is the recently appointed President of Tanzania – President John Magufuli – who has, within a month of being elected, set a new tone for the country with his anti-corruption and pro-poor focus. Such leadership has a huge impact in closing the gap between formal policy and on the ground implementation.

The Case of Gender

One of the significant topics President Obama addressed in his speech to the AU was the role of gender—with an emphasis on the empowerment of women and girls within African societies. Recognizing the role that women play in agriculture, this aspect of integrated agriculture and rural development deserves more attention. President Obama reminded us that the best determinants of a successful society are how they treat and invest in their women and girls. African women comprise the largest percentage of the workforce in the agricultural sector and contribute about 60-70 percent [5]. Yet women still access and control limited land and productive resources. Gender mainstreaming must be a key component and approach to agricultural and rural development.

Conclusion

We applaud Bathrick's commentary on Obama's speech and bringing back the much needed focus on IARD. Africa is undergoing a transformation resulting from domestic, regional and global forces. Population growth, rapid urbanization and climate change bring heightened urgency to a subject that has always garnered top priority. Now is a unique window to reexamine Africa's agricultural and rural development policy and Bathrick's commentary could not be more timely. The issues raised in this response should be viewed as supplements and not substitutes to Bathrick's proposed framework.

References

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