

Mobilizing Nigeria's grassroots for increased food production

Reaching out from the centre

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With the collapse of Nigerian agriculture following the petroleum boom of the 1970s and the debt crisis of the 1980s, the Nigerian government initiated in 1986 a new strategy of promoting rural development and enhancing national food production capacity. The new strategy entailed grassroots mobilization of small-scale farmers through effective community organizations. To give political muscle to this programme it was placed under the direct superintendence of the President in a Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructures. Tremendous changes are already being recorded, especially in the areas of rural feeder roads construction, potable water supply and increased food production.

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The causes of hunger in Third World countries are as diverse as the countries themselves. In Nigeria, for instance, it is difficult to dissociate the emergence of serious hunger phenomena from the euphoria and mismanagement that followed on the sudden windfall of petrodollars in the period after 1973.

Before that date Nigeria's reputation as an agricultural, relatively food self-sufficient country was well founded. The country lies between latitudes 4° and 14° North and thus has adequate insolation for crop cultivation throughout the year. The amount and duration of rainfall, the crucial determinants of crop production capacity, are adequate for at least one harvest even in the driest north-eastern areas of the country. The result is that, out of a total land area of over 98.3 million ha, some 73% is potentially of medium to high agricultural productivity. Nonetheless, until the establishment of a fairly good network and density of roads and the reasonable availability everywhere of transportation and marketing facilities, many parts of the country where there was only one cropping season experienced what was generally known as 'the hunger season' for periods lasting from two to five months each year.

It is of course true that in the period since its political independence Nigeria has experienced a tremendously rapid rate of population growth. Its total population jumped from 55.7 million in 1963 to 106.6 million by mid-1987, reflecting a 2.7% annual rate of growth.¹ Such a virtual doubling of the population within the space of 25 years inevitably put a tremendous strain on food availability considering that it also implied a high dependency ratio in the population. Moreover, with most of the food production coming from smallholder farmers using largely traditional implements and depending mainly on family labour, it was recognized that the food balance in the country was very fragile.

The fragility of that balance became obvious over the quarter century

¹World Bank, *World Development Report 1989*, World Bank, Washington, DC, USA, 1989, p 164.

after 1960 when government after government, especially those enjoying the petroleum dollars after 1973, threw money at the problem of agricultural and rural development without really engaging in any creative and determined effort to transform the situation. The result was a series of schemes all of which had the characteristic that they dealt minimally with the overarching context that impeded the enduring productivity of the majority of small agricultural producers. These schemes included:

- plantation agricultural development schemes operated by various regional government development corporations in the 1950s and 1960s, in which small producers were employed only as hired labour;
- farm settlement schemes since the late 1950s, which were basically restricted to young school-leavers;
- government-owned food companies or corporations in the 1970s, which have all ended in failure;
- the National Accelerated Food Production Programme in the 1970s, which failed largely because of bureaucratic ineptitude;
- 'Operation Feed the Nation' in 1978 which, in spite of its name, was not seriously oriented towards rural farmers;
- World-Bank-assisted agricultural development projects (1974 to date), which have so far failed to justify the huge sums of money sunk into them;
- river basin development authorities, whose extension into agricultural production had to be stopped because of their wastefulness; and
- the National Green Revolution, which became a big racket centred on fertilizer and tractor importation rather than their effective distribution and utilization.

It is thus no wonder that the rural agricultural sample surveys conducted in the early 1980s by the Federal Office of Statistics revealed a startling state of decline in agricultural production in Nigeria since the 1960s. For instance, although in 1960/61 some 2.85 million tons of cassava were produced, by 1983/84 this had fallen to only 1.2 million tons. Over the same period the production of yams fell from 15.9 million to 5.0 million tons; guinea-corn from 3.4 million to 1.2 million tons; rice from 154 000 tons to 94 000 tons; and cocoyams from 902 000 to 207 000 tons. The only crops that showed any significant increases over the period were millet (2.5 million to 3.3 million tons), melon (86 000 to 104 000 tons) and beans (366 000 to 723 000 tons).²

Such a widespread and serious decline in food output reflected most glaringly the state of neglect and indifference to the conditions of farmers in the country. But it also attested to the ease with which inadequate domestic supplies could be made up for by massive importation. Indeed, as the World Bank's *World Development Report 1986* indicated, for cereals alone Nigeria's imports jumped from 389 000 metric tons in 1974 to 2.35 million metric tons in 1984, a sixfold increase over the decade.³ The same was true for other food commodities, especially cooking oil which used to be a major export from Nigeria in the period before 1965.

This state of affairs was, of course, tenable as long as ample financial resources continued to be available from petroleum exports. But by the early 1980s the bottom fell out of the petroleum market. Nigeria's total foreign exchange earnings, which had reached over \$14 billion in 1980,

²Data are from the Federal Office of Statistics, Lagos, Nigeria.

³*World Development Report 1986*, World Bank, Washington, DC, USA, 1986, p 190.

dropped to \$7.6 billion by 1983. Correspondingly, the country's balance-of-payments position swung from a surplus of about \$2 billion in 1980 to a deficit of nearly \$3 billion in 1984. More seriously, external indebtedness, which had stood at only \$175 million in 1970, rose to over \$1 billion in 1979 and escalated to \$12.8 billion by 1984.

By then it was clear that the country was due for a basic structural readjustment of its economy. Details of that effort need not concern us here. What is critical is the fact that the situation forced the government into an agonizing reappraisal of past efforts at rural and agricultural development and made it come up with a more creative and realistic solution, the effects of which are already starting to change the situation significantly for the better.⁴

Enhanced agricultural production

Three elements characterized the new era of enhanced food production in Nigeria's rural areas. These were:

- the design of a new set of policies;
- a reduction in the degree of bureaucratic control over rural development activities;
- a new emphasis on community organizations and mobilization for productive activities.

This new set of policies came with a change of government in August 1985. The new government began by immediately banning further imports of maize, rice and cooking oil, and later wheat,⁵ as a means of resuscitating and enhancing domestic productive capacity in these crops. Secondly, it abolished the six commodity marketing boards whose pricing policies and operational procedures up to then had been a major disincentive to the productive efforts of Nigerian farmers. Thereafter farmers were placed in the position of responding directly to price signals from the market and were encouraged to expand their productive capacity accordingly. Thirdly, the government wound up all 11 food companies and instructed all the river basin development authorities to discontinue their direct agricultural production activities. Henceforth, the mainstay of the nation's food and agricultural production activities was to be the millions of small-scale producers found all over the country. Finally, the government raised the domestic price of petroleum products, thereby raising a revenue surplus of some ₦1 billion, half of which it decided to divert to a novel strategy of rural and agricultural development. In subsequent years, due to the effect of further structural readjustments, funds for this new strategy had to come from normal budgetary allocations.

The new strategy entailed reaching out specifically to the large number of rural producers through the vigorous promotion of community organizations. For this purpose the Office of the President set up an extra-ministerial body known as the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructures. The location of this new agency in the Presidency was intended to give it a salience and powers far beyond those of a Ministry since its Chairman, who was a member of the Armed Forces Ruling Council, the highest legislative body in the country under the military regime, reports directly to the President.

The Directorate formulates and designs programmes for improving rural infrastructure and stimulating food and rural productive activities.

⁴For an account of Nigeria's attempt to curtail its dependence on imported wheat, see Gunilla Andræ and Björn Beckman, *The Wheat Trap*, Zed Books, London, UK, 1985.

⁵A chronology of developments in Nigerian agricultural policy appears in F.S. Idachaba, *State-Federal Relations in Nigerian Agriculture*, World Bank, Washington, DC, USA, 1989, p 36.

It provides matching grants to the states and local governments to ensure that they execute these programmes. It undertakes the monitoring and comprehensive inspection of all these programmes as the basis for further disbursement of funds to states and local governments to move on to succeeding phases of each of these programmes. It uses eminent citizens, leading teams of experts and personnel from television, radio and the print media to undertake these comprehensive inspections, thereby ensuring a high degree of accountability and implementation. All of this has been possible because of a determination to reduce the degree of bureaucratic control in the implementation of programmes.

Equally important was the new orientation of relating to small-scale producers within the context of the community organizations with which they were familiar. These organizations are well known and are found throughout the country. They have a track record of achievements, principally in the area of social development where over the years they have been responsible for mobilizing community self-help efforts to build primary and secondary schools, health centres, post offices, police posts, town halls, churches and mosques as well as to provide the communities with electricity and potable water supplies. The basic strategy of the Directorate, therefore, sought the means to orient community institutions towards serving the economic development goals of enhancing food production and productivity and stimulating overall rural development through improved marketing and storage, food processing, rural craft production, rural industrialization and rural transportation.

The first two of the 18 functions assigned the Directorate in the decree setting it up were thus to (a) identify, involve, and support viable local community organizations in the effective mobilization of the rural population for sustained rural development activities, bearing in mind the need for promoting greater community participation and economic self-reliance of the rural community; and (b) identify areas of high production potential for the country's priority food and fibre requirement and to support production of such commodities along agroecological zones within the context of one national market with unimpeded inter-state trade in farm produce.

Since its inauguration on 7 February 1986 the Directorate has defined its programmes as falling broadly into three main fields:

- the provision of rural infrastructures, especially rural feeder roads, potable water, rural electrification and housing;
- the enhancement of rural productive activities, especially in food production, marketing, industrialization and transportation; and
- the organization and mobilization of rural communities.

Its achievements have been considerable, largely because of its emphasis on performance monitoring and evaluation. In regard to rural infrastructure, for example, a first phase of over 30 000 km of rural feeder roads has been completed throughout the country. Most states are currently on their second phase of another 30 000 km. The plan is to complete at least 90 000 km by 1992. Over 5000 rural communities have also been provided with potable water in the first phase of the rural water programme. Some 227 rural communities are also at various stages of being electrified in the first phase of the rural electrification programme. The 326 trainers who were expected to be trained in new

technologies for constructing rural housing and other structures using cheap local materials have been trained and have been deployed in the 21 states where they have begun the training of 15 200 technical extension workers, who are in turn meant to disseminate these skills down to the community level.

The task of community organization and mobilization began with the listing of settlements and the mapping of the community structure of the 453 local government areas that make up the country. Each community is expected to form a Community Development Association whose officers are to liaise between their communities and the various programmes and services being articulated and provided under the auspices of the Directorate. Communities within each local government area relate to a Rural Development Coordinator, who in turn reports to a State Director for community activities within his area of jurisdiction. State Directors are responsible for states' performance in rural development both to their state governments and to the Directorate.

The organization and mobilization of the communities also involve various educational activities as well as non-formal functional education. In particular, they entail educating farmers in the mode of operation and effective use of various modern institutions, notably banks. They also involve mobilizing the nation's organized private sector in support of rural economic and social development activities.

Food production activities

Among the rural productive activities that the Directorate is stimulating within Nigeria's rural areas, however, food production has pride of place. The basic principle of the Directorate in this respect is not to provide unsustainable public support to rural producers but to create a self-reinforcing enabling environment within which their productive activities can be greatly enhanced and made more profitable. Four elements characterize the work of the Directorate in food production. These are:

- the multiplication and provision of high-performing biological inputs to the farmers;
- the privatization of the supply of other inputs, notably fertilizers, tractor services, etc;
- the innovative transformation of the basis of rural credit provision; and
- the enhancement of the organizational framework of productive activities.

The Directorate decided to concentrate its promotional activities in respect of increased food output in five areas: arable crops, especially rice, maize, millet, sorghum, wheat, soya beans, cowpeas, cassava, yams and potatoes; oilseeds, especially oil palm, sunflower and groundnuts; horticulture, especially citrus, mango, pineapples, plantain, bananas and vegetable seeds; small livestock, especially sheep, goats, pigs and rabbits; and aquaculture. Various research institutes, state ministries of agriculture and local government departments of agriculture were mobilized to multiply large quantities of seeds and seedlings for the various crops, foundation breeding stocks for the animals, and fingerlings for the fishes. These are already being sold to farmers at greatly reduced prices.

The supply of fertilizers has been handled to date by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture. The result has been problems with the adequacy and timeliness of supply. Discussions are underway of proposals to transfer this function to private enterprises whose commitment to profitability would ensure prompt resolution of these problems. At present, private concerns are responsible for the supply of other chemical inputs such as pesticides and insecticides and there have been fewer complaints about their provenance.

The issue of credit provision for small rural producers has for decades bedevilled the growth of agricultural production and productivity in Nigeria because of the difficulty farmers experience in trying to use their land as collateral for raising loans from rigidly orthodox commercial banks. The attempt by government to improve the situation through the Agricultural Credit Guaranteed Scheme whereby the Central Bank guarantees loans of up to ₦5000 by commercial banks to such farmers had not changed the situation appreciably. In this circumstance, and in view of the enhanced community organizations and mobilization, the government decided on a scheme to promote the establishment of unit community banks, that is local banks with no branches, to serve the credit needs of rural producers primarily on the basis of intimate knowledge and trust.

These banks are meant to be owned and managed by the community. Their equity capital will be provided partly by the community and partly by the government. In the 1990 budget the government had announced the sum of ₦453 million as its own equity contribution to these banks. The banks are also expected to take in deposits and savings from local residents. There is a very high expectation that the operations of these banks will help greatly to meet the credit needs of farmers and facilitate their efforts at acreage expansion and the intensification of food production activities.

Lastly, the enhancement of the community organizational framework is already having the effect of raising the general level of consciousness as to the variety of productive opportunities in rural areas. Important and successful sons and daughters living in urban areas are returning to their original communities to assist them with ideas, funds and leadership, this time in respect of different types of productive activities. An important development in this regard has been the Better Life for Rural Women Programme, which is being actively promoted by the wife of the President and the wives of all the state governors and which is already organizing women at the community level into productive cooperatives using modern small-scale machinery and equipment especially for enhanced food processing and improved production of craft goods. The impact of their efforts is already being felt in the processing of cassava, the improved quantity and quality of which in the market have become most notable.

Reference should also be made to the technological innovations that the Directorate has been sponsoring in the course of its activities. A variety of machines and equipment have been designed, tested and manufactured under the auspices of its Engineering and Technology Department. Many of these are to facilitate the widespread provision of rural infrastructures and include a tractor-drawn tar boiler, an aggregate spreader, a watering tank, a roller and grader for the rural roads, drilling rigs and hand-pumps for rural water supply, and manual and motorized tricycles for rural transportation. For food production the

same department has sponsored the design and manufacture of a cassava processing plant, fruit-juice making equipment, a feed-pelleting machine and various other small-scale post-harvesting processing equipment.

Conclusion

It is of course too early to provide definitive data on the achievements of this novel attempt by the Nigerian government to reach the grassroots from the centre. What is clear, however, is that after the first two years when the Nigerian press was uncertain as to the actual achievements of the Directorate, the emphasis on rigorous monitoring and on independent and comprehensive final inspection that involve both the media and the nation's elite has reassured Nigerians about the transformation gradually taking place in the rural areas. Food prices have not necessarily dropped dramatically because of the vastly increased demand generated by heightened domestic consumption of locally produced crops, mandatory import-substitution industrialization requiring the same crops as industrial raw materials, and rapidly expanding exports to neighbouring countries because of the relatively lower prices now obtaining in Nigeria due to the heavy devaluation of its currency.

The inadequate availability of data renders it difficult to state categorically what has happened to the level of malnutrition in the country. Casual observation and media reports, however, indicate that after the difficult first three years (1986–88) of the structural adjustment programme, the food situation in Nigeria has improved significantly. The World Bank has noted that the importation of cereals dropped from 2.35 million metric tons in 1984 to only 677 000 metric tons in 1987.⁶ For the first time in many years, the 1990 Budget noted a 4.58% rate of growth in the food and agriculture sector as against 3.4% for the population.⁷ Although much still needs to be done the evidence is mounting that this strategy of reaching out from the centre could transform the rural situation in Nigeria and lay an enduring foundation for self-sustaining growth in food and agricultural production.

⁶World Bank, *op cit*, Ref 1, p 176.

⁷*Op cit*, Ref 2.