

## Farmers of the world unite!

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Sanjeev Chopra deliberates over the India-Africa agriculture dialogue.

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One must begin with a caveat: Africa, as a continent with 54 countries is far more complex and diverse than India- which after all is a sub- continent with a tradition of over six decades of democracy, political stability, free press, independent judiciary and an integrated market, besides of course a common civilisational core. Just as the NITI (National Institution for Transforming India) Ayog is encouraging states to formulate state-specific plans, while at the same time, gently nudging them towards a National Agricultural Market, it is quite obvious that the agriculture development strategy, and by implication, the nature of agribusiness organisation will vary greatly from state to state, it is logical that at the India –Africa



Agribusiness dialogue to understand what India can offer to Africa, the points have to be nuanced- for a "one-size – fit all strategy" will not work , nay, will be counter productive. This was clearly brought out by NITI Ayog member Prof Ramesh Chand who steered the discussion on the Food Security Narrative in the context of India-Africa partnership in agriculture at a recent summit held in New Delhi last week in which this columnist was present as a panel member to share India's experience in addressing issues of state interventions in this sector.

As things stand today, while there are several countries in Africa which have achieved reasonable levels of food security, and some are net exporters of a range of agricultural commodities – from coffee to cotton to cocoa and pulses – the fact remains that most countries are dependent on import of staples – maize, rice, wheat, and milk products even though the continent is endowed with land, water and manpower - resources which are critical to food security. The challenge, therefore, is to ensure "institutional arrangements" which can leverage these resources into a meaningful production, distribution, and consumption strategy, which is in sync with the food security narrative. Closely related to this is the evolution of a livelihood strategy which ensures that the production and distribution of food "empowers local communities" to engage in responsible and sustainable agriculture. For while there is, at the global level, sufficient food to feed the world, the political cost of depending on food aid is often unacceptable, as India realised, to her peril, during the PL 480 period in the sixties of the last century, when we faced the humiliation of "ship to mouth" existence and our "foreign policy" was dictated by the USA, which was providing "food aid".

This was the background under which India launched its successful Green Revolution which transformed the rural landscape, especially in North India, and which is now sought to be replicated in the Eastern Region. Moreover, India's agricultural development has been based on the small farmer model. This is important – for this is perhaps a better model for livelihoods, incomes and food security, compared to the large agribusiness model of the US, wherein small and medium farmers have all but disappeared, and farming has become a "commercial venture" which is highly capital intensive and driven like an industrial venture. True, this model can also produce enough food to feed the surrounding population- but this is based on heavy machinery, fertiliser application, micro irrigation systems, drone-based pest management – all of which make the land "mono- cropped" and completely dependent on external inputs. This is in contrast to the typical family farms in India where "integrated farming" is still the order of the day, and almost every family also has a few fruit trees, a vegetable patch and a few milch cattle to supplement family nutrition (and possibly incomes). In the eastern parts of the country, the pond/water body also has a small fishery to provide the much-needed protein.

Another interesting feature of India's agricultural development which makes the experience so relevant for Africa is that in addition to research on agricultural production systems, India has also encouraged extension services and offered a positive policy environment for farmers to come together to make their own cooperatives, self-help groups, joint liability groups, and of late, farmer producer organisations and companies. This enables them to overcome the limitations imposed by the holding size of the farm. However, as experience shows, one needs visionaries and mentors like Dr Kurien to develop robust and strong systems, which stand the test of time. Of course, Africa has an advantage which India did not: the pressure on land and water resources is not that acute, and therefore, it should be possible, if there is political will, to parcel out a reasonable holding size to farmers. The experience of some of the recent Missions – including the Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana or the National Agricultural Development Programme (RKVY)/(NADP), the National Horticulture Mission, the National Food Security Mission in working with the state governments to look into the "felt needs", local market requirements, encouraging production for exports where commodities have a competitive edge – can also prove to be extremely valuable for those interested in ushering a new phase of agricultural and rural livelihoods programme in Africa.

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In all fairness, India must share its predicament of still not being able to ensure the implementation of the Minimum Support Price regime in remote regions, which are marked by low production and productivity, and are therefore more vulnerable. For as mentioned in the previous two columns, farmers all over the world know only one mantra - remunerative prices. While India may not have perfected the system so far- there's enough in our portfolio to share, and in the sharing and implementing of best practices, also understand our own systems better.

Last, but not the least, India can look up to Africa to meet our requirement of pulses and oilseeds. There are some very good examples of small farmers contributing these commodities to large aggregators. India will continue to depend on the import of these commodities for quite some time. If India can ensure that the returns from this trade go to the farmer, and not the intermediary through a transparent price discovery mechanism, we would have set a virtuous cycle in motion which augurs well not just for India-Africa partnership, but also for sustainable agriculture globally.

*(The writer is a senior bureaucrat. The views expressed are strictly personal)*



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