Call for more Diversification in AGRA's vision of Agriculture Modernisation

Denise Ntonta, current student on the MSc African Development programme, considers where The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) falls short as "a driver for overall economic growth".

The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) 2016 Africa Agriculture Status Report notes that African agriculture value addition grew by "5.2% in 2000-2014 compared to less than 3% (in) previous decades". According to Professor Calestous Juma, ''these trends are in line with historical patterns in Asia and other regions where productivity in agriculture was a key driver of long-term economic transformation. This upward trajectory shows that agriculture is more than just producing food. It is a driver for overall economic growth.''

But a robust agro led economic transformation requires ''diversification, sophistication, and specialization'' (AGRA 2016 Status Report).

In fact, diversification strategies are essential to the long term viability of the AGRA model which seems to overlook some of the key risks inherent to agriculture activities such as the seasonality of production, vulnerability to natural and climate related disasters, small-farmers over-reliance on limited input-output markets, single commodity or technology, as well as demographic pressures (over 30% of the world population will be in Sub-Saharan Africa by 2050).

The 'Sustainable Livelihood Strategy' (Maxwell 2001; Ellis & Biggs 2001) is a key framework that can strengthen AGRA's vision of agriculture modernisation and help overcome some of the limits associated with the 'Small Farmer Paradigm'. It forces to look at the direct and indirect impacts of shocks and stresses on household capabilities such as savings, health, education, social coherence and stability—consequently on food security, poverty, and ultimately small farmer's resilience.

Empirical research suggests that, farming activities, on average, tend to correspond to only 40-60% of household income in Sub-Saharan Africa (Reardon, 1997), which makes off-farm activities another dimension that AGRA cannot continue to ignore. Diversification is thus not only about on-farm activities but also about off-farm activities, building linkages with other sectors.

AGRA must therefore promote crop diversification as opposed to pure production intensification. Crop diversification is at the forefront of the Global Action Plan for Agriculture Diversification (GAPAD), an outcome of the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change (COP 21). Successful diversifications can be achieved through further coordination and leveraging successes of GAPAD and other projects alike such as the Millennium Village Project, or programs in Malawi and Zambia (FAO,2015b; Arslan et al., 2016) where high-value crops (i.e. vegetables, fruits, spices), dairy cows and goats, poultry, aquaculture, and various agro forestry systems were introduced.

Another area AGRA must consider is improving protection against the risks of production failure, natural disasters and climate change (droughts and floods alone account for 70 percent of the economic losses in Sub-Saharan Africa; Bhavnani et al.,2008). This can be achieved through easier access to weather related technologies (mobile phone forecasts, crop sensors, irrigation techniques, biophysics…) and crop insurance. Further support to Farm Exit and Safety Nets strategies, especially after shocks, is another innovative idea that AGRA should implement. The Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) in Ethiopia that provides food-for-work, cash-for-work, and cash transfers is a good example of successful programs.

AGRA must also leverage its existing model of intervention and extensive network (governments, private sector) to build linkages between agriculture and other sectoral activities and diversify income sources for small farmers in Africa (Bryceson and Jamal, 1997). Agro-processing, markets upgrading through infrastructure, marketing, improved hygiene, rural tourism; linkages with urban projects are examples of potential multi-sector diversification initiatives that will support small farmer's resilience. Non-Farm diversification calls for an enabling environment to start-up new activities through access to education-led diversification (such initiatives led to higher and more stable incomes in Kenya and Ghana for example; Abdulai & Delgado, 1999; Marenya et al., 2003); stronger advocacy for public policies and greater policy space in order to remove barriers to trade and mobility, reduce licensing requirements and provide financial incentives for small businesses.

This blogpost is part of a series composed by Masters students on the African Development course at the London School of Economics and Political Science. They represent the views of an emerging body of critical young scholars interested in structural transformation and growth in African economies. The series will be featured over the ROAPE.net, Africa@LSE and ID@LSE blogposts in the coming months.

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the International Development LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

April 20th, 2017 | Featured, Student Experience, Teaching, Topical and Comment | 1 Comment