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COVID 19 recovery: an opportunity for RUFORUM?

Introduction

The COVID19 pandemic has drastically transformed the global economy for the worse. Governments everywhere are running up huge debts to sustain their economies. For the coming decade at least, poor nations can expect a significant fall in aid and development assistance as the traditional donor countries focus on domestic rather than international problems. It will be unsurprising if the concept of triage amongst poor nations does not form a focus of the future development agenda (see Paddock and Paddock, 1967).

The pandemic effect on African economies

Few African nations will be able to borrow on the scale that American, Asian, and European countries are contemplating. So another route will need to be found. Which takes me back to a meeting I attended in 1995 called by the then Minister of Agriculture in Malawi, the late Honourable Aleke Banda. At that time, most Malawi families failed to grow enough food to feed themselves from one harvest to the next. To survive, they took on temporary employment, often working as labourers for better off neighbours – preparing the ground for planting, and doing weeding once the crop was growing. This meant that their own crop was planted late and badly weeded – and again the result would be a poor harvest. Malnutrition was rife and the child mortality figures appalling. Without further borrowing to pay for food imports or, alternatively, relying on food relief from outside, food prices would rise and the plight of the poor deteriorate even further (and fast). This has many similarities to the current global economic situation as viewed from Africa.

The meeting called by Minister Banda included senior government officials, the head of the only seed company in the country, fertiliser representatives, Charles Mann, from Harvard University, and Dr Anne Conroy, special advisor to the Minister. An analysis developed by Professor Mann showed that, if every farm household in Malawi was given a small bag of the best maize seed, together with the correct amount and type of fertiliser for that farm, the ‘hunger period’ could be eliminated. The quantity of the new farm inputs to stop the dreaded hungry season price increases was surprisingly small.

Access was the key word. With an average income per family member of 20c a day; and with what little cash the family had going on clothing and food, households could ill afford to divert even a modest amount of money to buying seed and fertiliser. As the amounts needed were so modest, it proved cheaper (and easier) simply to give the inputs to the farmers than to mount a national feeding programme. It had the further advantage that

because they would not need to buy food to ‘fill in’ during the hungry period, they would start the next season without debt and some cash to invest in their own farms.

The concept was tentatively called a ‘starter pack’ – a pack to start the climb out of poverty. If the poor had more money in their pockets since they no longer had to buy food when prices were at their highest in the months before harvest, then they would start investing in the things that matter to them: education, better homes, transport, irrigation systems - just as the poor everywhere do. This is where the private sector takes over. The starter pack could help farmers learn about new crops so they could start to break away from the sole reliance on maize. As their maize yields grew, they would need to put less land down to maize and release it for other crops - for food (such as beans which would improve the nutrition of the family) or cash crops to bring in income. Future starter packs could be developed to introduce these options. The development pathway was logical, simple to implement, and revolutionary.

The Best Bet Starter Packs were distributed to 2.8 million smallholder farmers in 1998 and 1999, together with careful extension messages (Blackie and Mann, 2005). Maize production increased on average by about 125–150 kg per household (significantly more than was estimated) - 67% higher than the 20-year average. The starter pack programme performed extremely well compared to alternative food crisis prevention measures, such as general fertiliser price subsidies; and relief interventions, such as subsidised commercial food imports and food aid (Levy, 2005). Starter Packs containing the best bets to jump-start maize production for all smallholders simultaneously improved the food security of all food-deficit smallholder households, and increased the marketed surplus available to urban consumers (bringing food prices and inflation down sharply).

Subsequent to Malawi’s innovative use of focused subsidies through its starter pack initiative, other attempts have been made to increase cash availability to smallholders. These involve various types of subsidised resource transfers to poor families in a less prescriptive manner than that of the starter pack. Using modelling techniques, Gough et al. (2004), compared the effects on food security of three different methods of subsidy:

- the original starter pack as distributed through government channels,
- vouchers which could be exchanged for starter packs at local retailers, and,
- “flexi vouchers” could be redeemed for either a starter pack or goods to a value approximating the content of a starter pack - soap, salt, oil, fertiliser, hybrid maize seed, agricultural tools, pots and pans, blankets, lamps, or similar household items.

Comparing the effects of the three options on the poorest farmers, the model results showed greatest improvement in food security with starter packs as concluded by the original conclusion of the Maize Productivity Task Force in Malawi (Blackie et al., 1998). That task force had recommended that the initial starter pack was just a step on the road to transforming Malawi’s agriculture. The programme, had it been implemented in the manner

originally planned, would have quickly moved from its emergency focus into a more prescriptive and flexible form of subsidy probably along the lines subsequently recommended by Gough *et al.* (2004). In both Zambia and Malawi, transfers of actual cash have been used to help households recover after a major food crisis (Harvey and Savage, 2006).

The opportunity for RUFORUM

In the 'starter pack' model there are two key components – skilled teams and good technology. RUFORUM has a distinct advantage in both. The RUFORUM programme engages the best in African science professionals and students and is actively engaged to working with farmers to develop solutions to problems. Furthermore, as a networked institution, it has experience of, and information from, a wide range of ecologies and circumstances across Sub Saharan Africa. RUFORUM scientists and students facilitate the development of ideas and help define options rather than entering with already identified solutions. The overall emphasis in RUFORUM development initiatives is that of encouraging participants to take control of the process of change and thus empowering them to become more active partners in development.

This brings in two key elements in creating change and transforming smallholder agriculture. The first is building the trust and respect of the farmers. The second, necessary for enhancing impact and sustainability of change, is building ownership of the process by the poor. Making farmers proud of their involvement in creating and contributing to change, and their participation in the process an enjoyable and interesting experience is typically, often unintentionally, downplayed in many development programmes.

The benefits from correcting this neglect are considerable. Scaling up can be achieved through showing community groups how their knowledge could bring others benefit, who then spread the ideas further. The emphasis in the implementation is building pride in and ownership of the new technologies, and helping people become happy to engage with change. Farmers can be encouraged to organise themselves into research groups for effective access to information and technologies - serving to boost farmer confidence further. RUFORUM students and professors act as 'honest brokers', helping farmers choose and evaluate various technologies in an unbiased manner through:

- **Farmer experimentation:** farmers have the chance to experiment, at low risk and low cost, with the right inputs and informed by data which they themselves have been directly involved in developing. They participate in the screening of crop varieties, fertiliser types, herbicides, and crop storage chemicals. They can use their own criteria; for example in selecting different maize varieties for sale as green maize, as grain for sale, and for home consumption.
- **Farm diversification:** after experimenting with different crops, farmers can choose which crops, such as vegetables or fast maturing maize varieties, respond favourably to inputs. They start with very small quantities to apply on crops such as kale or

cabbages. As farm produce increases and more profits accrue from the sales, farmers gradually expand their capacity to acquire the needed inputs, and to diversify into other production activities. Those with small land holdings are able to invest in renting more land.

Final thoughts

RUFORUM interventions, through encouraging partnership and collaboration, can create broad-based opportunities for the poor to benefit directly from the critical inputs that are the foundations of the essential growth in agricultural productivity. African recovery from COVID19 will depend on the promotion of economically viable and verified agricultural technology packages and practices to enhance input use efficiency levels substantially. The aim is a viable, diversified agricultural sector, in which the currently poor and excluded become productive participants. It will harness and exploit water resources so as to extend the cropping season and reduce the impacts of seasonal rainfall variation.

Building household food security and bringing down food prices is the first step in a comprehensive programme of science led agricultural transformation. Farmers are helped by students and their professors to explore a variety of diversification choices through properly verified alternative 'best bets'. At the same time, RUFORUM liaises with policy makers to ensure that these best bets are actually accessible to those that need them. The approach relies on the availability of proven and reliable improved technologies suitable for the poor as well as for the better resourced farmers. It needs the evaluation, in a highly participatory manner with farmers, of various crop diversification options. These should be introduced at the earliest opportunity and form a cornerstone of the effort to create ownership amongst farmers, policy makers, and agricultural specialists of common goals and objectives.

Through efficient and accessible 'best bets' farmers are able to use inputs profitably and are no longer tied mainly to their food crop as an income source. And RUFORUM universities play their critical role in transforming African agriculture.

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About the Author:

Prof. Malcolm Blackie is a Zimbabwe agriculturalist who established the Faculty of Agriculture at the University of Zimbabwe after Independence and later joined Rockefeller Foundation to set up its agriculture programme in southern Africa. Although now retired, he runs a smallholding outside Norwich in Britain and maintains an active involvement in agricultural development in Africa.