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Globalisation and Small-Scale Farming in Africa: What role for Information Centres?

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Abstract

Globalisation aims at bringing the world closer like a global village. But it has not had much impact on small-scale farming communities in Africa due to several barriers. These include illiteracy which hinders access to printed and electronic information; poverty which does not allow farmers to have the purchasing power to acquire equipment, such as television sets, radio sets, computer, etc, that would enable them benefit from globalisation; and the lack of basic infrastructure, such as adequate electricity supply and communication facilities. The obstacles faced by the farming communities would disable them from accessing latest innovations in farming practices. This paper proposes the setting up of information centres throughout the rural Africa, where majority of small scale farmers live.

Introduction

According to Wikepedia Encyclopaedia (2007) globalisation refers to increasing global connectivity, integration and interdependence in the economic, social, technological, cultural, political and ecological spheres".

Globalisation is hinged on improved technologies and elimination of barriers to trade.

Benefits that result from globalisation include increased economic growth, improved living standards, reduction in poverty, increased life expectancy, growth in liberal democracies (World Bank, 2004). From the perspectives presented above, it is clear that globalisation encompasses different aspects of human activities.

One major concern in the world is food security. According to FAO Committee on Food Security described as follows "Food security means food is available at all times, that all persons have means of access to it, that it is nutritionally adequate in terms of quantity, quality and variety, and that it is acceptable within a given culture. Only when these conditions are in place can a population be considered "food secure". We aim to achieve lasting self-reliance at the national and household levels. In order to succeed, our initiatives must be founded on principles of economic viability, equity, broad participation and the sustainable use of natural resources" (FAO, 1996).

There is a threat to food security in the world because of declining food productivity. Food security is a major focus of globalisation. In order to provide for increased food productivity, globalisation promotes trade liberalisation, which will ensure increased efficiency and improve the economic situation of farmers. It is expected that trade liberalisation would provide for increased prices of farming products, alleviate the economic situation of farmers, and improve patterns of food consumption (Shiva and Bedi, 2002)

Issues and Problems of Agriculture in Africa

There are many issues confronting agriculture in Africa.

- A large number of inhabitants of Africa are involved in agriculture, ranging between 30 %-40% in North Africa to over 80 % in West Africa.

- Majority of farmers in Africa are subsistence farmers, who have small farm holdings, ranging from 0.5 hectare to about 4 hectares. They produce food for their household plus little for sales in the neighbourhood.

- Agriculture in Africa is labour intensive, as they rarely use advanced technology in farming; rather they use limited technology, such as hoes and cutlasses. Farmers in Africa are not financially adequate; hence they are unable to invest in modern technology.

- Majority of farmers in Africa are aging, as rural-urban drift is prevalent among the youths. For example in Botswana, the rural-urban drift has been phenomenal. While the rural population of Botswana constituted 90.4% in 1991, it fell to j47% in 2001.

- A large number of African farmers are illiterate who cannot read or write in any language.

- Farmers in Africa live in areas, where there is lack of basic infrastructure, such as telephone, electricity, piped borne water, good road network, etc.
- A large number of inhabitants are ravaged by HIV/AIDS in Africa, majority of who live in rural areas, who are mainly farmers, thus resulting in declining productivity.
- Agriculture contributes substantially to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of many countries in Africa, and it is the main foreign exchanger earner of most countries.
- Dissemination of information on innovations in farming practises to farmers in Africa is low. Farmers depend mainly on agricultural extension workers through face-to-face contacts for information on agriculture. Unfortunately, because of the low numbers of agricultural extension workers, farmers hardly obtain new information. This is because the ratio of agricultural extension workers to farmers is low.

Agriculture, Globalisation and Information in Africa

This section aims to discuss how globalisation has attempted to solve the perennial problems of agriculture in Africa.

According to Rado and Sinha (1977) Africa is well endowed with land, in relation to its size of population, containing nearly 23% of land area and about 14% of its agricultural area, with only about 10% of the world population. But it suffers from excessive drought. According to FAO (1990) 61.9% of the active labour force was in agriculture in Africa, unlike Europe (8.6%), North America (10.3%), South America (22.1%) and Asia (58.6%), where the proportion of active labour force is considerably less, yet Africa imports most its food needs. It is expected tat globalisation would ameliorate food shortages in Africa.

Globalisation of food security is based on comparative advantage. It is expected that a nation should produce crops in which it has a comparative advantage and should import those that could not be produced efficiently, from countries where such crops could be produced at cheaper prices. It also promotes integration of small-farm holdings into a larger mechanised farming. Another aspect of liberalisation is the removal of subsidies on farm inputs, such as fertilizers, etc.

In order to benefit from globalisation, many countries in Africa are signatories to General Agreement of Trade Tariffs (GATT) and World Trade Organisation. Thus, many countries in Africa have liberalised trade in order to export agricultural products. This has resulted in many farmers abandoning food crops and opting for cash crops, which will yield them greater earnings on the world market. This is a serious threat to food security. Integration of small farm holdings into larger mechanised farming has not worked well because of the strong attachment of inhabitants in Africa to land, and possibly the ignorance of benefits that could be derived from the integration of small farm holdings into a larger and mechanised farm. Also, the low purchasing powers of most African

farmers prevent them from purchasing farm inputs that would accelerate food production, thus the removal of subsides on farm inputs by governments has resulted in many farmers abandoning the farms. All these factors combine to make agricultural productivity decline in Africa.

Also, globalisation is expected to provide efficient and instant information on any activity. Thus, it is expected that small-scale farmers would have instant access to latest innovations on farming practices.

The Role of Information Centres

For African farmers to benefit from the gains of globalisation there is a need to provide regular information to farmers in a format that would be comprehensible to them, taking into cognisance the prevailing high illiteracy rate, cultural divergence and limited technology. Information infrastructure in many Africa countries is abysmal, thus farmers still grope in the dark when it comes to latest innovations in farming practices.

Griffith and Smith (1994) has described global information "as a telecommunications infrastructure that links homes, businesses, schools, hospitals, libraries to each other and to the vast array of electronic information resources". Thus, telecommunications infrastructure constitutes an important component of global information. According to Internet World Stats (2006), there were 33 million Internet users in Africa compared to Europe (315 million), North America (233 million) and Asia (399million). While Africa constitutes 14.2% of the World population, it constitutes only 3% of the world usage but it has the highest proportion of growth rate between 2000 and 2007 (638.4%). It is therefore expected that Internet use could be extended to the rural areas where farmers in Africa reside. There is no doubt that there is a big digital divide between the rural and urban areas in Africa, but extending telecommunications to rural areas could become realistic, if efforts are made to develop rural telecommunications infrastructure.

Farmers would benefit from global information, if information centres, are cited in rural areas complete with all information and communications gadgets. Such equipment would include computers with Internet access, local area and wide area networks, radio and television sets, telephones and fax machines, multimedia projectors, video and audio recorders, etc. Such centres would provide global information to farmers. It is expected that such centres would recruit skilled professionals in library and information science, who would be responsible for capturing relevant information from the Internet, respective ministries of agriculture and other agricultural-related organisations. The information would be processed and repackaged in a form that would be usable by non-literate farmers. The centres would also acquire documentary films, CDs, audio and video cassettes, on how agriculture is practised elsewhere and show such documentaries regularly to farmers on request. Thus, once they avail themselves of the various documentaries, they would be able to translate whatever learnt to practice. For example if integration of small farm holdings could be demonstrated and how it has benefited farmers in other countries, African farmers would be willing to reconsider their strong attachment to their land and opt for integration.

Also, such information centres could disseminate relevant information on agricultural practices, as well as locally generated information, to rural farmers. A co-operation could be also be forged between the information centres and the respective Question and Answer Service (QAS) focal point of each country. The Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Co-operation (CTA), Netherlands has established several focal points for answering queries on agricultural-related problems in African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries. The objectives of CTA's Question and Answer Service are among others, "to improve access to agricultural information in a timely and cost-efficient way; identify information needs of users of market prices and on research and developmental activities; identify sources of agricultural and rural development information, particularly publications." (CTA, 2006)

For rural information centres to function effectively, various governments in Africa must, as a deliberate action, embark on rural telecommunication development. For example, in Botswana, the Government is about to launch a rural telecommunication policy, the objective of which, is to" bring rural communities into the main stream of society and provide telecommunications infrastructure for potential economic activity outside the major population centres (Botswana. Ministry of Science and Technology, 2007). At the moment, a government parastatal in Botswana, the Botswana Technology Centre (BOTEC) launched Community User Information System (CUIS) in three villages of Botswana (Letlhakeng, Hukuntsi and Gumare). According to the Project Co-ordinator, Mazhani, (2006), the main objective was to "develop computer network system that will provide e-mail and on-line information in rural areas with emphasis on collection, processing and distribution of locally generated information". This project has rural community, health, agriculture, trade and industry information as its coverage. Some of the services performed by these centres include surfing the Internet, accessing locally generated information and information hosting for government, parastatals, individuals and local businesses. Many countries in Africa can borrow from the Botswana experience. This will no doubt boost access to agricultural information.

Conclusion

In spite of the criticisms of globalisation as not benefiting Africa, I still believe that if every stakeholder plays its part well, African farmers wound benefit tremendously from globalisation. The road to success is through information centres in rural countries in Africa. These centres are expected to provide relevant and timely information to rural communities on all aspects of their communities. Without appropriate and regular dissemination information to rural communities, the gains of globalisation would never be realised in Africa. If various countries in Africa would embark on rural telecommunications development, so that the basic global information infrastructure would be available in every rural community in Africa, then many viable information centres in rural areas would be established. Thus, it behoves on every government in Africa to liberalise telecommunications so that private organisations could be involved in rural telecommunication strategy, thereby creating an information society that includes both rural and urban communities.

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