

DARTMOUTH BUSINESS JOURNAL

USHERING IN A NEW VISION FOR GLOBAL AGRICULTURE

Posted by [Daniel Bornstein](#) on Sunday, November 20, 2011 ·

Ever since the 2008 global food crisis put agriculture back in the spotlight, the international development community seems to have zeroed in on three key themes—smallholder farmers, higher investment in agriculture, and increasing productivity.

Hardly is this approach more evident than Pepsi Co.'s involvement in chickpea production in Ethiopia, a project focused on increasing chickpea yields and helping smallholders get access to markets.

“What’s exciting about this is that in order to manufacture the product, they will buy from smallholders,” said Ertharin Cousin, the U.S. ambassador to the UN Food and Agriculture agencies in Rome.

“In those same places you have jobs being created that are off farm jobs that exist for unskilled labor that was previously unemployed. Those are the kinds of collective partnerships that smallholders benefit from and that the private sector helps drive.”

Yet if the Pepsi project is evidence of the increased attention to African agriculture, it also points to a fundamental problem: multinational corporations are able to legitimize their role in agricultural development by devoting their resources to boosting smallholders' yields. But all this really does is perpetuate the myth that increasing yields will reduce hunger.

In fact, it is the large seed and agrochemical companies that benefit from the narrative that higher yields will solve world hunger—precisely because they can use that narrative to justify their highly technical approaches. These actors are able to gain acceptance by framing their initiatives as “development,” which inherently becomes associated with “goodwill” and “compassion.”

Yet despite the huge gains in productivity throughout the 20th century, there are nearly one billion hungry people in the world today—stark evidence that enhancing yields and ending hunger are not so closely correlated. To me, this suggests the need for a fundamentally different vision for global agriculture. Most important, food systems must center on the multi-functionality of agriculture: nutrition objectives, rural livelihoods, climate change mitigation, and adaptation.

This vision was precisely emphasized by the International Assessment of Agriculture Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) — considered the most comprehensive review of the current global agriculture situation. Altogether, IAASTD represents a stark rebuttal to the highly reductionist approaches that assume yields to be the sole factor in improving food security.

However, the U.S. government refused to endorse IAASTD, largely, I suspect, on the basis that the strategies embraced by IAASTD may pose a threat to U.S. economic interests—namely the large seed and agrochemical companies that the U.S. government believes should be beneficiaries of U.S. international development policies. Thus the U.S. government's failure to endorse IAASTD essentially says something more broadly about agricultural development: corporations' agricultural approaches are incompatible with the equitable model of agriculture espoused by IAASTD.

The agricultural transformation needed today should be anchored by "food sovereignty"—the idea that local communities have control over their markets, their farming practices, and their nutritional adequacy. Locally-led agricultural innovations—relying on agro-ecology—should be at the forefront, rather than the technical approaches often propagated by multinational corporations and the U.S. government. Beyond their inherent environmental sustainability, these local knowledge-based practices are more socially inclusive and pro-poor, in the sense that farmers aren't dependent on external inputs. One recent effort to spotlight such small farmer-centered food systems can be seen in the Worldwatch Institute's Nourishing the Planet Project, focused on sub-Saharan Africa.

"Part of my job with Nourishing the Planet has been to highlight the things that funders and donors don't know about—the innovations that farmer organizations without fancy websites are doing to prevent soil erosion in Mali, the work being done by ProInnova in Ethiopia to make sure water gets to crops, the market garden projects in Niger that have helped women boost their incomes from \$300 per year to more than \$1,500," Danielle Nierenberg, co-director of the project, told me. "These innovations are overlooked and they have a lot of potential to be replicated and scaled up all over Africa and beyond into Asia, Latin America, and even the United States."

The challenge now is to redirect agricultural investment away from merely increasing yields and toward the IAASTD report's idea that agriculture has a wide array of objectives.

"One of the biggest things I learned is that agriculture and farmers are often blamed for things [such as] deforestation and climate change," Nierenberg said. "I think we're seeing this shift that agriculture is emerging as a solution to the world's most pressing environmental and social challenges."

The shift toward more pro-poor agriculture requires a fundamental rethinking of the neoliberal free market agenda that for decades has dominated the global food system. The result is that food systems are in some cases tailored more toward commodity production than toward guaranteeing food as a human right (this explains why some communities in Africa may export cocoa when they themselves are food insecure). Free market advocates assume that income generation will enable Africans to purchase food produced anywhere, and largely neglect the importance of food self-sufficiency. The fallacy inherent in this ideology came into sharp relief when the 2008 food price spike triggered riots in over 30 countries.

Indeed, the overemphasis on free market agriculture was embedded in European powers' colonial structures in Africa, according to Macalester College geography professor Bill Moseley.

"The colonial powers in a sense changed local economies from ones largely based on subsistence or engaged in local regional trade, to ones that move away from subsistence production and start producing crops useful to the core

powers,” Moseley said. “Related to this was the notion that colonies should be not a burden on imperial powers but be generating enough revenue to be self-sustaining. There was a big push for them to be more export-oriented.” It appears that African countries’ subordination to Western powers, however, didn’t necessarily come to an end despite the dawn of independence. In response to the debt crisis plaguing many African countries in the 1980s, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund implemented structural adjustment programs, forcing African governments to slash their investments in the agriculture sector. “In theory governments had a choice, but if you wanted any access to international credit you had to adhere to this set of reforms—cutting back on government civil service, cuts to social services, and freer trade,” Moseley said.

The pitfalls of the structural adjustment programs have been acknowledged even by the World Bank itself. But at the same time, the ability for corporations such as Pepsi to legitimize their role in agricultural development suggests that the free market agenda underlying structural adjustment is still very much prevalent today.

That’s why we have to embrace a type of agriculture that suits the needs of the world’s poorest. This movement is going to have to be bottom-up, led by African smallholder farmers who push their governments to make food a human right.