

Chapter 3.1

Agriculture, Communication, and Socioeconomic Development: A Proposal for e-Agriculture in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study explores Nigeria's e-agriculture policies and those of other African governments. It also proposes what e-agricultural strategies these governments could adopt to enhance their agricultural output by examining the history of agriculture in Nigeria; the current status of Nigerian information and communication technologies and e-government policies with emphasis on agriculture. The analysis addresses the role of communications as instrument of national development. In view of the economic status of African countries, the study calls on Nigeria and other African governments to adopt a cautious approach as they embark on e-agriculture policies and acquisition of information and communication technologies to promote national development. The study calls on African governments to liberalize their agricultural policies, establish agricultural cooperatives, educate rural farmers and offer telecommunication services in the rural areas if they hope to raise their agricultural productivity.

INTRODUCTION

With a population of about 140 million, Nigeria ranks as the tenth most populous nation in the world (*The Guardian Online*, 2001, Aug. 13). Barring wars, political disintegration, and social upheav-

als, Nigeria's population will surge to 204 million by 2025, thereby making it the world's seventh most populous nation. By 2050, the population will soar to 337 million to become the fourth most populated country in the world while India, China, and the United States will be the top three (Eribo, 2001). If so, a great challenge faces this diverse nation where national coherence remains fragile

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and where food scarcity and economic deprivation could lead to national upheaval. This situation possesses international implications because Nigeria is regarded as one of the two economic anchors in sub-Saharan Africa. But Nigeria may not reach her promise without returning to agriculture as its economic mainstay.

It will be a shameful thing and a very unfortunate scenario to see a prince of a well-known, highly influential, connected king with unquantifiable and stupendous wealth begging for food or crying of hunger despite his father's wealth and popularity. (Adeniyi, 2008a)

Foluso Okunmadewa, a Nigerian professor of agricultural economics and World Bank consultant, used this illustration to explain the precarious situation facing Nigerian citizens who reside in a nation blessed with abundant agricultural, natural, mineral and human resources, but has found it increasingly difficult to feed her people (Obi, 2008; BBC News, 2007, July 12). Okunmadewa offered this perspective while addressing the press after delivering a paper entitled "Food prices crisis and the challenge of sustainable development in Nigeria" at the 40th Interdisciplinary Research Discourse by the Postgraduate School of the University of Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria.

Critics contend that despite the nation's massive wealth—especially the wealth generated from oil over the past 50 years—about one in three of Nigeria's 140 million people goes to bed hungry every night. To promote awareness about widespread hunger in Africa's most populous nation, ActionAid, a Nigerian non-governmental pressure group, organized a march in Abuja, the national capital. During the march, Action Aid described the plight of Nigerians who suffer from hunger as "an indictment of those who have more than enough to eat in a country with more than enough resources and potential to banish the hunger it breeds," (BBC News, 2007, July 12). Like other marches to raise awareness on social issues, the

police dispersed the march before the protesters reached their goal of presenting petitions to President Umaru Yar'Adua and parliamentarians to encourage policies to end hunger in the country, which ranks fifth in the world hunger index (Punch On the Web, 2008, Oct. 8) despite her rich natural resources (Obi, 2008; BBC News, 2007, July 12)

Nigeria has earned about \$340 billion from oil revenue in forty years (IRIN, 2002, July 4), but she has been ranked as the 13th poorest country in world since the 1990s after a brief spur in economic vitality in the 1970s (Over, 2001). The average citizen survives on \$1 a day, however the country boasts a large number of millionaires whose wealth it has been alleged was derived from corrupt practices (BBC News Online, 2002, Jan. 16; Alozie, 2005). The wealth derived from oil has been blamed for Nigeria's economic stagnation and the prevalence of corruption (BBC News Online, 2002, Jan. 16).

Federal, state, and local governments have neglected almost every other aspect of social economic development including industrial, human, telecommunications, and agricultural. Prior to the discovery of oil, the Nigerian economy was agrarian. At the time, about 70% of Nigerians were engaged in agriculture; the sector provided more than 75% of its income and the country could feed itself and export agricultural products (Alozie, 2005). Presently, oil generates more than 85% of the nation's earning (BBC News Online, 2002, Jan. 16; Alozie, 2005), and it has become increasingly dependent on food imports (Gumm, 2008) at an annual cost of \$3 billion (*Business Day Nigeria*/Africa News Network, 2007, Nov. 22). While agriculture presently contributes 40% against oil's 13% to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), it also employs about two-thirds of the nation's total labor force (Mohammed, 2008).

If Nigeria is to produce enough food in the future to feed her growing population and overcome her dependence on oil revenue, economic stagnation, high youth unemployment, food importation and other vexing socioeconomic problems, her

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