Remembering the 1992 Earth Summit

The UN Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit) was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992. The outcome of the conference was Agenda 21, a ‘comprehensive blueprint of action’ for a common future in the 21st Century. At the time, I was excited and elated when Agenda 21 for sustainable development took centre stage in almost every development-related forum. The focus was then on sustainable development through managing natural resources and the environment for the benefit of present and future generations. I didn’t at the time think that there was a greater ideal than the recommendations of Agenda 21. I also considered it particularly important for those dependent on natural resources-based livelihood systems for their survival.

Twenty years on, sustainable development is still a noble idea despite being overshadowed by a rapid economic growth agenda, which over the coming decades is expected to be green\(^1\). Regrettably, there is political opposition to green sustainable development. For example, the Republican National Committee (RNC) in the USA in its resolution of January 2012 calls Agenda 21 “a comprehensive plan of extreme environmentalism, social engineering and global political control.” This is misleading, because the argument isn’t consistent with the wider consensus that humanity, today, needs a coherent and forward looking environmental agenda without giving up the importance of meeting sustainable growth and development needs; combined with global and contextual environment protection standards and requirements.

In 1992, I worked at the Wondo Genet College of Forestry in Ethiopia. Since 1994, I expanded my professional horizon to the humanitarian sector to advance my career and help improve the lives of the underprivileged. Over the past 18 years, I have learned a lot from leading and managing multi-sector programmes in multiple country settings and working with a number of highly skilled, talented and committed individuals from different cultures and professional backgrounds.

In 1992, I didn’t have the experience and depth of understanding to share my thoughts with those who tirelessly worked to make the world we lived in a better place; by translating the abstract and complex concept of sustainability to practice. I am very happy that I made the decision to widen my scope and learn. I am now able to see development from a different perspective than I did 20 years ago – time provides wonderful and, sometimes, rare opportunities to see the world from a different vantage point. Thanks to the various people who crossed my path and my own commitment to learn, here is my humble message, concerning smallholder agriculture, to those who will attend the Rio+20 conference and to those who will be following the deliberations, debates and outcome with great interest.

\(^{1}\) UNEP defines green economy as one that results in improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcity. UNEP further states a green economy is low carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive. Source: UNEP Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction, A Synthesis for Policy Makers 2011.
It would be too bold to predict if the outcome of Rio+20 will be groundbreaking or not, but the focus on a green economy and the call for adaptive policies, practices and means of implementation to tackle climate change is timely.

This paper focusses on the need for making smallholder agriculture at the center of Sub-Saharan Africa’s (SSA) growth and development trajectory. From the outset, I would like to indicate that SSA is diverse. I, therefore, emphasize contextual diversity in the following message.

**Improving and Transforming Smallholder Agriculture**

Reports, studies and op-eds that have been issued and circulated, as part of the preparations for Rio+20, emphasize the importance of sustainable (green) agriculture. Various well known and tested approaches and practices are proposed; sometimes with large doses of generalisations and ‘missing bits’. Notwithstanding this, the various documents provide useful analytical information and recommendations that SSA countries and their development partners could adopt to materially improve and transform smallholder agriculture.

Despite the challenges that conflict, insecurity, climate change and a volatile global economy pose, SSA’s continued growth and development prospects largely depend on increasing the productivity and accelerating the transformation of smallholder agriculture. However, the Africa Progress Panel (APP) 2012 report states “smallholder agriculture has not been part of the growth surge” and urges African governments to prioritise the “development of sustainable smallholder agriculture as the single most effective way of preventing food shocks”. One of such shocks was the 2007/8 food crisis that resulted in a wave of violent demonstrations in several SSA countries.

The economic and social ramifications of neglecting smallholder agriculture have increasingly become evident – and a concerted effort is now required to abandon a ‘business as usual’ policy. Efforts to increase production and transform smallholder agriculture need to: a) address high population growth; b) protect subsistence farmers from the vicious cycle of erosion in seasonal food security gains; c) provide off-farm employment opportunities to unemployed and/or underemployed rural youth; d) put in place mechanisms and systems that can advance adaptive farming practices for tackling climate change. In this endeavor, financial resources and technology must complement pro-poor transformative polices and inclusive decision-making processes.

In implementing policies and facilitating processes, well known and locally tested drivers of change need to be clearly articulated and communicated to resource-poor smallholder framers. Most importantly, the effective involvement of smallholder farmers needs to be at the heart of the agriculture transformation agenda – throughout the design, implementation, monitoring, evaluation cycle. Additionally, the following policy instruments will be instrumental: a) scaling-up proven farming and land management practices; b) improving access to markets; c) increasing extension services; d) matching polices with financial resources and capacity to implement; e) addressing land tenure issues that create disincentives to invest in improving land management; f) unleashing the productive capacity of smallholder farmers through protective and promotional social protection interventions (cash transfers) to reduce vulnerability and marginalization.
In addition to public investment, promoting private sector involvement in increasing the productivity of and facilitating the transformation of smallholder agriculture is vital. However, strategies to attract private investment should be carefully planned and executed to protect economically and environmentally fragile smallholder livelihood systems. In my recent comment to Tensie Whelan’s op-ed, I stated the following:

“Marriage between rights and markets is an ideal that needs to be honoured by taking concrete actions to address the multitude of constraints that resource-based livelihood systems face. Given the growing natural resources related ... challenges ..., rights need to be harmonised with markets. The potential effectiveness of markets to unequivocally contribute to address rights issues needs to be at the heart of policy influence work. In this endeavour, the willingness and preparedness of markets to turn their attention to the rights of people to be productive in a healthy and safe environment will be critical. While this will, in turn, serve the interests of markets, it will also enhance environmental protection, biodiversity conservation and food security; based on adaptive practices to climate change.”

In Rwanda, support to smallholder farmers has been successful through an integrated package of interventions (facilitating access to inputs, promoting savings and loans, supporting pre-cooperatives that provided financial and psychological-social support). The APP says “it is possible to ... increase the productivity of smallholder agriculture, to expand opportunities for rural unemployment, and strengthen the economic interaction between urban and rural economies.” In other words, increased productivity will raise the stakes (benefits) for rural households in terms of providing income and, in the long-term, will narrow the gap between rural and urban areas. The net effect will be reduced rural-urban migration and a progressively widening dent on poverty and inequality.

The above indicate that change will happen overtime. Time is, therefore, crucial for realizing transformation. This reinforces the importance of a process-oriented approach to improve smallholder agriculture. Processes are necessary because: a) they are instrumental in establishing trust between state and non-state actors and the people they serve; b) they facilitate buy-in and ownership; c) taking part in open and transparent processes is the right of smallholder farmers; d) processes increase (emotionally) the relevance factor of agriculture improvement and transformation interventions; and e) a process-oriented approach demonstrates commitment to account for the outcomes of actions.

Processes are pathways for steering sustainability, but are not guarantees for realizing lasting change. This is because a process is a means, but not an end in itself. A UNDP report states “Chronic food security in Sub-Saharan Africa stems from decades of poor governance.” The report continues “Smallholder farmers ... have long been pinned between a rock and hard place. Rebuilding food security starts with liberating them from this predicament and unleashing their potential.” One element of good governance that will give new impetus to the attainment potentials of resource-poor smallholder farmers would be the realization that “locally determined solutions are ... more sustainable than top

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2 Farming for Impact: A Case Study of Smallholder Farmers in Rwanda. Concern Worldwide and Natural Resources Institute, Greenwich University UK, 2011
3 UNDP African Development Report 2012: Towards a Food Secure Future
down decisions.” The challenge for policy-makers and practitioners who, hitherto, have been deciding and speaking on behalf of poor smallholder farmers is to resolutely promote policies, strategies and programmes geared to ensure smallholder farmers “gain a voice in the decisions affecting their lives and livelihoods, [and] their capacity ... is materially enhanced.”

Adopting a process-oriented approach and focusing on “locally determined solutions” need not hamper innovation, the adaption of innovative practices and should not stand against taking urgent, but sound measures to progressively transform smallholder agriculture. In this regard, it needs to be noted that the productivity and transformation agenda will benefit from a marriage between centrally driven policy instruments and the willingness to accept and work with the grain of local reality.

Sustaining agricultural production through improving and transforming smallholder farming is not only about ensuring food security, income and enhancing nutritional status. It is also about facilitating future growth and securing a development process with long-term peace, security and stability. This implies that economic growth strategies need to put the rural poor at the center of development. The APP warns that “continued neglect of smallholder farming will undermine economic growth, reinforce inequalities, and increase exposure to the risks that come with over-dependence on food imports.” In view of the above, countries and their development partners could consider adopting all or some of the following policy options depending on the context.

- Make the productivity and transformation of smallholder agriculture at the center of growth and development policy and practice.
- Increase resources for supporting smallholder farmers.
- Revive and strengthen agricultural extension.
- Facilitate genuine participatory and consensual land consolidation for producing diversified high value crops. This is particularly important for small countries that have high population density and where there is no possibility for expanding agricultural land.
- Encourage the formation of voluntary smallholder farmers’ cooperatives and provide appropriate financial and technical support.
- Put in place safety net and social protection mechanisms and provisions to include extremely poor rural households that cannot afford to be part of land consolidation and cooperative arrangements.
- Support the construction and use of appropriate crop storage facilities where feasible and facilitate access to markets through regulating speculative middlemen and improving rural infrastructure and transport.

Ultimately, polices aimed at supporting smallholder farmers need to focus on achieving synergistic outcomes (aimed at improved human development) rather than isolated results achieved through uncoordinated and scattered interventions. In other words, interventions need to be designed in such a way that outcomes of various sectorial programmes contribute to improve the lives of ordinary people.

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5 Ibid
6 Ibid
For example, increasing food production isn’t equivalent to food security, and availability of food, on its own, cannot fulfill good governance requirements. Instead, it is a combination of improved livelihoods indicators that will demonstrate growth has benefited resource-poor smallholder farmers in meeting their basic needs, in building assets, and in becoming resilient to shocks and stresses.

I do hope that one of the distinctive outcomes of the Rio+20 conference will be to shade strong light on how we shall move forward on the way to our ‘common future’; with less unsubstantial wrangling on how each country will get there. Defining the direction of a shared path for a long and arduous journey cannot be easy. However, the evidence presented thus far by various institutions, mentioned in this piece, urge policy makers to take urgent, but sound measures with a ‘big push’. In this regard, actions that are based on local realities will have a better chance of improving the lives of smallholder farmers who represent a large majority of the rural poor in SSA.