

NIGERIAN AGRICULTURE AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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This paper has x-rayed Nigerian agriculture and highlighted the problems that have constrained performance. To the casual observer, it would appear that Nigerian agriculture has done well in spite of the problems. After all, it is said that over 70 million Nigerians (about 70 percent of the population) derive their livelihood from agriculture.

For those of us who have the responsibility of studying and operating the system, the danger signals should be clear. The first danger signal is that the productivity of agriculture has not grown but has declined in some sectors: consequently Nigeria has been unable to feed its population. The second danger signal is that the population is growing rapidly at the rate of about 3 percent which surpasses the rate of growth of food production. The third is that our foreign exchange earning is declining such that we cannot afford to supplement local food production with imports. The three factors have combined to cause acute food scarcity which is currently felt more in spiralling food prices than in non-availability of food. This is why currently, the average salary earner spends an unduly large proportion of the monthly take-home pay on food alone.

If agricultural productivity does not increase considerably in the next decade, and our foreign exchange earning capacity continues to decline as it has done in the past two decades, while the population continues to grow at the current rate, then Nigeria will face a situation of absolute food scarcity. The giant of Africa may be forced to go cap-in-hand begging for food aid. The prospect of this occurring necessitates that action should be taken to transform Nigerian agriculture fast as we make efforts to reduce our population growth rate. Agricultural professional organisations and institutions must rise to the occasion to ensure the sustained and efficient production of food, a resource of critical importance to the security and integrity of Nigeria. Cognisant that Nigeria, the Giant of Africa, has immense human and material resources, it therefore has the potential to utilize these as envisioned “to achieve food security, produce raw materials for industry and raise the level of foreign exchange earnings” and make Nigeria “Africa’s leading economy”. The challenge is ours.