Flashback: Fifty Years of Donor Aid to African Agriculture

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In our work, many interesting and intriguing books, articles and other publications manage to cross our desks, and as much as we would enjoy reading them, there seldom seems to be enough time. I urge you to find the time to read this one. Not only is this a well researched and comprehensive report, focused and straightforward, but within these 25 plus pages of historical summaries and case studies are also personal observations and explanations of events. Although a bit long (32 pages of text with 12 pages of Figures and Graphs), it is very easy to read and quite thought provoking. The references alone would be an interesting read for researchers in our field.

The article has several sections including a summary of international donor activities during the decades of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s and also covers the shifts in development thinking and practices during the 1980s and 1990s. The section on Aid Reform Issues focuses primarily on policy issues, while the Lessons from Experience provide a summary of eight lessons flowing from 50 years of donor aid to African Agriculture. Within this section you will find summaries of experiences on such topics as: (1) Institutional Building requires a Multi-generational Time span; (2) Agriculture and the Rural Economy: Policy Vacuum; (3) Time, Evaluation and Learning by Doing; (4) Seeking Policy Coherence; (5) Changing Public and Private Sector Roles; (6) Food Aid Subscriptions; (7) Return to Regionalism; and (8) Getting Agriculture back on the Agenda. However, I found the most interesting section to be the Summary entitled: Dreams and Deeds.

As this is a review of a substantial amount of subject matter, there are bound to be omissions. In my opinion there are a few facts missing, such as why were (are) African economies encouraged to ‘catch up’ with industrial nations when agriculture in industrial nations is not sustainable. We seem to have created a Catch 22 for African economies encouraging them to strive for living standards that are not neither obtainable nor sustainable, as the United States alone consumes roughly 1/3 of the world’s energy resources (MMS, 1998). Other issues that seem to be missing in this review are some of the social and cultural issues that have impacted upon development aid during the past 50 years. And one last comment is that it would be useful if the author could distinguish between national and international NGO’s when referring to NGO’s in his article. The roles and responsibilities of each can vary a great deal.

Each reader will find sections of this article more applicable to their particular interests. However, I am sure that most readers will find something in this article that will assist them in their research and/or challenge their thinking of development aid. I greatly appreciate the work of this author in writing this article.