

THE CASSAVA TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME, AGRO-BASED INDUSTRIALIZATION AND RURAL POVERTY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Cassava suddenly gained national prominence in Nigeria following the pronouncement of a Presidential Initiative in 2002. The initiative represents a bold attempt by the Nigerian state to link the country's agriculture with industry in order to make the former a major catalyst of economic growth. Its goal is to make the cassava industry serve as a foreign exchange earner as well as to satisfy national demand. The new initiative, no doubt, holds a lot of prospects for a cassava industrial revolution in Nigeria, which is bound to have a monumental impact on the Nigerian economy especially the agro-industrial sub-sector. The consequence of such a development for society will be equally enormous. This paper critically examines the economic, social and political implications of a successful cassava transformation programme and suggests that it will promote the development of capitalist agriculture and capitalist relations of production in rural areas about increased economic activities in the rural areas. Leading to the prospering of an agrarian bourgeoisie emerging out of the peasantry, this will be achieved at the expense of marginalizing and pauperizing the majority of the rural population.

1.0 Introduction

Cassava suddenly gained national prominence following the pronouncement of the Presidential Initiative in 2002. The intent of the initiative is to use cassava as the engine of growth in Nigeria. More specifically, the goal is to promote cassava as a foreign exchange earner in Nigeria as well as to satisfy national demand. The challenge of the initiative is to make Nigeria earn \$5 billion US dollars from the value added cassava exports by 2007.

Since the pronouncement of the Presidential Initiative, the demand for cassava planting material has increased sharply especially among the large-scale farmer. Small challenge of the initiative. To demonstrate the importance he attaches to the programme, the President inaugurated the National Cassava Production Committee which he personally supervises and gives all encouragement to sensitize Nigeria farmers to produce for local industries for processing into export commodities to earn foreign exchange. Certainly, the new cassava initiative holds a lot of prospects for a cassava industrial revolution which is bound to have a monumental impact on the Nigerian economy. It also has a lot of socio-economic and political implications especially with regard to rural poverty.

In examining the implications of the new national cassava production drive for rural poverty, this discusses the framework of analysis and provides a conceptual clarification of poverty. This is followed by an examination of the role of the state in Nigeria's agriculture and a focus on the cassava transformation programme of the Obasanjo regime. We then analyze the impact the programme is likely to have on rural poverty.

2.0 Conceptual Clarification of Poverty

There is no unambiguous definition of poverty. Several concepts are commonly used, the main distinction being between absolute and relative poverty (IFAD,2001:13). Under the absolute concept, the value of the minimum food intake for survival and some non-food requirements are translated into a corresponding income level that constitutes the poverty line. The relative poverty concept is based on the notion that minimum needs vary with increasing overall prosperity. Poverty is defined as the situation of households or persons with the lowest incomes or expenditure, and the poverty line is determined as a proportion of the average income per person, usually one half to two-thirds of GDP per person. The difference between the concepts is that the absolute measure ignores the distribution aspects of poverty. In some cases, absolute poverty may be reduced while at the same time inequality is rising (IFAD, 2001:13). However, defining poverty in absolute and relative terms consistently conceives the phenomenon as an economic issue (Edoh, 2003:67). Such conceptualization of poverty has been criticized as too narrow and unidimensional.

Scholars are however, increasingly seeing poverty as not just a matter of income and expenditure short falls and hence the need to broaden the definitional premise of the concept. Kankwenda (2002), for instance, sees poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by a wide array of factors. These include poor people's access to income earning and productive activities and to essential services. Scholars are increasingly seeing the importance of local perceptions and attitude as factors defining poverty and its characteristics. Aspects not commonly include such as dignity and being part of a social, mutual-help network, turn out to be as important as the income and social parameters usually considered (IFAD, 2001:13). Some scholars have developed vulnerability approaches that focus on the dynamics of poverty or vulnerability. In these approaches, vulnerability includes two elements: the exposure to risk and the inability to cope with, it which needs to be simultaneously present.

The most commonly used definitions of poverty are designed by outsiders and focus mainly on income and expenditure. Other outsiders have realized and shown that non-economic considerations are often more, or at least equally, important to 'insiders' and therefore need to be integrated into the poverty concept. Gender aspects of poverty are rarely taken into account, nor have insider concepts so far been made operational (IFAD,2001:13).

3.0 Statement and agriculture in Nigeria

The problem of agricultural and rural underdevelopment which provides the necessary background for understanding the current state emphasis on cassava production can be more fruitfully explained by locating it in the on-going historical process of capitalist development and the colonization of the underdeveloped countries by the root of the problem and hence suggest appropriate solution for dealing with the phenomenon.

The problem of agricultural and rural underdevelopment in Nigeria began with the penetration of the rural sector by capital which restructured agricultural production and subordinated the rural producers to its needs with the active support of the colonial state. The role of the colonial state in this process was to provide favourable conditions for intensified commoditization and, consequently, the appropriation of peasants surplus by international capital. Hence, the introduction of peasant commodity production and the 'cash' crop economy by the Colonial State was geared towards providing conditions under which Nigerian peasants could be exploited by capital. Similarly, state policies to boost 'cash' crop production by peasants were designed to intensify the appropriation of peasants' surplus by international merchant and industrial capital. The emphasis on 'cash' crops distorted peasant production and undermined food production and the nutritional status of the rural producers. While it promoted the unbridled extraction of surplus from the peasant sector, the Colonial State did little or nothing to promote the development of productive forces in peasant agriculture. The little attempts to introduce mechanization in peasant agriculture were half-hearted and soon failed (Forrest, 1981:233-235).

The post-colonial state endorsed the exploitative strategy of surplus extraction from the peasant sector and continued with the colonial policies with little or no modifications. As Sano (1983:14) observes, the priorities adopted in the country's development planning did not mark any break-away from the priorities that characterized earlier colonial economic policies. Resources were still disproportionately concentrated on transport and communication development to the neglect of agriculture. With this emphasis on the productive sector and infrastructural development, the country's planners had intended to 'modernize' and transform the urban economy, drawing the resource for this from the agricultural sector which was relegated to the background in allocation of public expenditures.

Agricultural development efforts were associated with attempts to establish plantation, settlement schemes and large-scale irrigation projects to boost the production of 'cash' crops. This pre-occupation with 'modernization' and the continuation of export-oriented agricultural policies which had their origins in the colonial era, led to the structural distortion of agricultural production. Export crops which provided 75% of the foreign exchange earnings were of such strategic importance to the politicians and planners that an undue emphasis was placed on their production to the neglect of food crop production just as during the colonial era (Olatunbosun, 1975, 1975; Sano, 1983).

The non-colonial agricultural policies pursued since independence themselves compounded the problem of agricultural underdevelopment. For instance, the acceleration of peasants' surplus extraction by the post-colonial state acted as a disincentive to increased production of cash crops to the neglect of food crop (Sano, 1983:126-127). Apart from rural out-migration and peasants' resilience, other factors such as the civil war, the Sahelian drought (1972-1974) and the booming oil economy of the 1970s caused agricultural production to fall, leading to severe food shortages, rising food prices and dwindling exports of agricultural produce (Sano, 1983:27-29).

It was in the wake of the food crisis of the mid-1970's that a new agricultural policy was introduced by which the state sought to increase agricultural production by promoting the emergence of a class of capitalist farmers. By the new policy, the state sought to eliminate or reduce the number of small-holders and replace them with large-scale state farms and Agricultural Development Projects established by the new policy all tended to encourage the emergence of an agrarian bourgeoisie in Nigeria whose ability to meet the country's food needs could be taken for granted (Oculi, 1975:13).

4.0 Cassava Transformation in Nigeria: The Presidential Initiative

Cassava is the fourth staple food in the world and Nigeria is the largest producer of the crop. Cassava products like Garri, Lafun (dried flour) etc are consumed by over 70% of the Nigeria population making the average demand for cassava estimated at about 12,900 metric tonnes per annum (Nigeria first, 2005). Notwithstanding the obvious importance of cassava for providing food security and its potential as a treasure crop that can turn around the nation's economy, its cultivation, processing and marketing have over the years suffered neglect like other aspects of agriculture as already highlighted in this paper. It is perhaps this neglect which prompted President Olusegun Obasanjo in 2002 to pronounce the Cassava initiative. The aim of the initiative was as well as to satisfy the domestic demand. The objective of the Presidential Initiative on cassava, among others include the following:

- (a) To expand primary processing and utilization to absorb the national cassava production glut;
- (b) To identify and develop new market opportunities for import substitution and export.
- (c) To stimulate increased private sector investment in the staple crops of export-oriented cassava industries;

Following the pronouncement of the cassava initiative, government has been considering a number of measures to encourage the utilization of cassava in the country. Already, that National Assembly has enacted a law compelling the inclusion of cassava flour in bread making and confectionaries in Nigeria in the ratio of 90% wheat and 10% cassava flour as against the subsisting 100% whole wheat bread presently consumed (Soetan, 2005:1)

The implementation of the new cassava initiative will no doubt have monumental impact on the Nigerian economy. It is believed that when fully implemented, the initiative will enhance the Nigerian cassava industry which will generate a chain of progressive activities on the Nation's economy. Certainly, such progressive economic activities which the new cassava policy will generate will have social and political implications for the country's rural population. An examination of these implications is the challenge of this paper.

5.0 Social Consequence

It is reasoned that the new cassava will operate objectively to further incorporate the peasantry into commodity relations and attempt to standardise and rationalize peasant production of cassava for domestic and international markets. The regulation of cassava production by industrial capital which the new policy seems to be promoting will dictate very precisely the forms of the labour process to be employed and preset a more direct intervention in the organization of production.

This will tie the producers in various ways to the use of particular techniques of cultivation and to a greater expenditure of labour-time. As Bernstein (1977:167) conditions of reproduction, then shortfalls in cassava production and/or income can lead to a cycle of indebtedness. This will have the effect of intensifying the labour of the household to maintain or increased the supply of commodities without capital incurring any costs of management and supervision of the production process.

The new cassava program offers opportunities and incentives for capitalist transformation of Nigeria agriculture. Rural inequalities will tend to be exacerbated as capitalist penetration of the rural societies in Nigeria is intensified. The programme offer opportunities and incentives for the exacerbation of social inequalities and social differentiation. Peasants are differentially endowed with resources and as such opportunities offered by the new cassava initiative may not be taken advantage of by every peasant and to the same degree. While the richer ones may be able to increase their productivity and income by utilizing the incentives provided by the state, the poor peasants may not, and may even be marginalized.

Since 2002, government has been considering a number of measures to provide incentives to farmers to increase yield and drive down the cost of cassava production. Such incentives are very likely to benefit the rich and powerful peasants, bureaucrat and urban-based businessmen who will use their wealth and influence to expropriate peasants lands in order to expand cassava production for capital accumulation. Moreover, the emergent agrarian bourgeois class will tend to dominate the politics to the state and control the rural population whose lands it has acquired and who have been turned into agricultural labourers.

Another issue is that of food security. Cassava has remained one of Nigeria's main staples consumed in both the rural and urban areas. With the commercialization of cassava, the new policy will tend to undermined food security in the rural areas as almost all that will be produced will be destined for the market with little or nothing left for the household for its food needs. This will tend to aggravate the food crisis that hit the country since the mid-1970s and will, undermine the health and nutritional status of the peasantry.

Also to be considered is the issue of dependency. The cassava initiative which encourages medium and large-scale production, processing and utilization of cassava will move Nigeria's

agriculture towards dependence on foreign technology due to initial and recurrent costs of machinery, spare parts and other agricultural inputs that are associated with this programme. Besides, mechanization of cassava production which the initiative seems to be encouraging, together with the commercialization of cassava by the Nigerian state will tend to facilitate the incorporation of the peasantry into the circuit of capital making them dependent on the market for their reproduction.

6.0 Conclusion

In this paper, we discussed the Cassava Initiative of the President Obasanjo regime and examined the social impact the programme may have on the peasantry in Nigeria. We regard that while the programme may help to raise cassava production, this will be achieved at the expense of marginalizing and pauperizing the majority of the rural population. We argued that commercialization of cassava may tend to encourage the further incorporation of the peasantry into commodity relations. This will have the effect of intensifying the labour of peasant households to maintain or increase the supply of cassava in industrial capital without capital without a commensurate increase in their incomes and welfare and thereby intensifying rural poverty.

Apart from intensified commoditization which the new cassava initiative may bring about, another consequence of the programme may be the exacerbation of social inequalities and social differentiation within the peasantry. As Lappe and Collins (1977:56) observe, programmes of this nature in a developing society tend to encourage the emergence of a new class of capitalist farmers who will tend to dominate the politics of the state and control the rural population.

Another issue raised in our discussion is that of food security. The commercialization of cassava which the initiative is promoting will tend to undermine food security for the peasantry. This will tend to intensify the food crisis and undermine the health and nutritional status of the peasantry.

We also examined the issue of dependency and concluded that the programme will and to compound the problem of dependence. In addition, mechanization of cassava production being promoted by the new cassava initiative will tend to promote further incorporation of the peasantry into the circuit of the international capitalist system. Our conclusion is that although the new national cassava drive may enhance the Nigerian cassava industry which will generate the nation's economic growth, this will be achieved at the expense of marginalizing and pauperizing the majority of the peasantry.

Cassava is one of several crops in Nigeria that have been neglected partly due to the advent of petroleum, inconsistency of government agricultural programmes and policies and corruption. So any attempt to neglect general agriculture and isolate one or two crops for development is an exercise in futility (Soetan, 2005). Agricultural problems need holistic approach to solve them. For any agricultural development programme to succeed, it must aim at achieving the objective of equality of access to opportunities and equal distribution of incomes. Anything short of this will compound the problem of the agricultural sector.

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