

Taking Action for the World's Poor and Hungry People

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SPEAKER SUMMARY NOTE

Session: Building the Social Capital of the Poor and Hungry
Speaker: *Bernard Njonga, Secretary General, Service d'Appui aux Initiatives Locales de Développement (SAILD), Cameroon*
Title: How to Foster Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship, Particularly by Among Farmers, and What Roles the Poor Themselves Can Play in Social Innovation

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I will first of all like to express my gratitude to those who invited me to take part in this conference and more so being given the opportunity to talk on one of the aspects of the main theme.

Considering the theme which I was suggested, it is evident and we all know that in Africa poverty is most remarkable in the rural area and mostly affects women. I would further affirm that capacity for innovation and entrepreneurship of farmers are the keys in the fight against poverty.

I laud this initiative which aims at promoting innovation and entrepreneurship in the rural area.

This initiative is well-timed if we consider that innovation can be defined as a new combination of production factors. This economic approach of innovation which leads to particularly consider its impact on revenue, work and natural resources has its repercussions on the socio cultural environment of farmers.

In the rural area we meet farmers who innovate, who try new methods and develop their activities in order to draw the best from their environment or to adapt to the evolutions of the latter. In this case, they operate on their own in an isolated manner. They can also benefit from external supports.

Facilitating the introduction of innovation in the rural area will aim at improving on production and revenues, as well as a greater sustainability of activities with positive impacts on society and ecological environment.

Unfortunately, the number of farmers who innovate and the quality of innovations are very poor—so poor that they cannot have real and positive impacts on the living conditions of the rural population.

Why is There Poor Capacity for Innovation and Entrepreneurship in the Rural Area?

The following are some of the multiple and varying reasons:

Psychological and cultural barriers

The rural population is essentially conservative. Ancestral practices (traditions) are sacred. These beliefs go as far as limiting them in their agriculture and pastoral space such that certain surface areas are not exploited due to their sacred nature. Ex: Sacred forests, all kinds of prohibitions, witchcraft/mystical practices (real and fake) are some of the hindrances to life in society, to creativity and even to innovation.

Mental and geographical enclave

Farmers in African villages are very often enclave and isolated such that many of them spend all their life without leaving the rural area. It is therefore difficult to talk about any other thing to these persons than what they know from birth. Enclosure or enclave is not only geographical, but also cultural. The world is limited to the village. It is therefore impossible to copy examples from elsewhere because we do not know. Reflection horizons are therefore limited because there is no reference and no model to refer to.

Lack of management

In most villages, the management and training system is failing. Nothing or very little is being done for the training of local human resources in order to increase farmers' capacities. Schools are insufficient, poorly equipped with poorly qualified and demotivated teachers. Besides, villages are losing their most valued hands and the structure of the population is extreme: on one hand we have unproductive old men and on the other hand we have youths who only dream of leaving and therefore become candidates to rural exodus.

Inexistent basic equipments

Some villages have never had the opportunity to see electrical facilities, potable water or even telephones. They have probably never heard of these facilities except those who have visited cities. This is just to show that the minimum conditions for innovation are not met in the major part of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Organisational limits

Speeches made on the structuring of the rural world in the last twenty years have produced very little or concrete impact even though we have to acknowledge that steps have been taken in some rural areas. Isolation, lack of training, human conflicts and political manipulations are permanently present to draw back every work of producer organisations. Embryos of producer organisations are smashed by human quarrels and opportunism of one another. The first consequence is the fact that the rural area often lacks a speaker, no pressure group, no trustful or respectful interlocutor.

A political context

The inexistence of real development policies and poor sense of responsibility and participative political systems are some of the slowing factors of farmer innovation.

Economic limits

Access to loans difficulties, permanent survival situation, fear of risk and the unknown and the absence of an insurance system are more reasons that prevent innovation and rural entrepreneurship.

The Way Forward

Act on farmers' environment

We observe that curbing factors to social innovation and entrepreneurship in rural areas are of various natures: Macro-economic, sociological, political, etc.

We cannot deny the positive influence of good governance (transparency, change, decentralization, etc.) in the rural area.

We cannot deny the positive influence of a good agricultural policy with a good management and training system in the rural area.

We cannot deny the positive influence of social infrastructure in the rural area.

We cannot deny the positive influence of a good institutional framework in the rural area ... just to name these few examples.

Promoting innovation and rural entrepreneurship

Innovation is very linked to the characteristics of a given society at a given time. Its appearance and adoption by a great number of farmers depends on the economic, social, cultural and institutional context. It therefore has to be considered as a complex process.

Innovation can be:

- either the fruit of a copied example, that is, the farmer tries to copy something he saw elsewhere;
- either a transfer, that is, contribution of something new by external contributors like NGOs;
- either the fruit of an invention or a creation of the farmer himself.

In any case, for innovation to spread, it should enable to better value the resources of the rural area; provide a gain of revenue or productivity of work and reduce risks faced by farmers.

Some principles for support to innovation

- Working in the rural area

If innovation is technical, it is imperative to work on the field and directly with farmers

- Starting on a small scale. "Small is beautiful" should be the rule.
- Be credible to farmers. The first actions carried out should have convincing results. Risks incurred by farmers participating in the process of innovation should be minimised;
- Be open to all sources of ideas. New technical invention at the origin of the innovation process can have many origins: (i) Copying a technique that has already been set up by farmers in another region; (ii) Invention of a farmer; (iii) Results of scientific research; and (iv) Results of collaboration between scientists and farmers.
- Insist on the necessity of dialogue.

The role of farmers

Considered as beneficiaries of fruits of innovation and entrepreneurship, farmers should be driving forces and full actors of innovation. This role goes without saying that it will be a question of: A self-centred innovation and entrepreneurship. That is: *By farmers and for farmers.*