

## Helping Developing Nations Improve Their Agricultures Requires Humility And Focus



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**M**uch of the time this column focuses on the current issues in US agricultural policy – food safety rules, farm program payments, crop insurance, ethanol, and CAFOs, among others. But one of the things that we try to keep at the forefront of our analysis is that policies that are good for US farmers must not come at the expense

of farmers elsewhere in the world.

The reason for this is that the dynamics that determine the nature of US agriculture and agricultural markets are the same dynamics faced by farmers in other countries as well – to start with one could identify weather determined variability in production, diseases like Asian Soybean Rust and bovine spongiform encephalopathy, long periods of low prices punctuated by a sudden peak and subsequent decline in prices, and international markets that are controlled by a relatively few firms on both the input and marketing sides.

We recently attended a meeting where the concerns of farmers in developing countries were the focus of the discussion. As we listened and talked, it became apparent to us that if we were asked to help a country become more food secure so that it could ensure that its citizens had access to a reliable supply of nutritious foods, our answer would be the same whether we were asked the question two centuries ago, two decades ago, or two weeks ago.

Task one is to become thoroughly knowledgeable about the country's agriculture. That includes understanding what, how, and why farmers produce the food they do. It also includes being grounded in the heritage of its agricultural past.

Being the stereotypical "ugly American," who purveys a large dose of one-size-fits-all practices regardless of local relevance, gets relationships off on the wrong foot at best and at worst breeds resentment and may even violate the "do no harm" principle.

Culture and context are important. One does not have travel out of the country to see the importance of this.

Farmers in one corner of a county may be wedded to the use of liquid UAN (a liquid mixture of urea, ammonium nitrate, and water) while farmers 30 miles away might not even consider using it.

Each of us in farm country knows of agricultural practices that are well entrenched in one area that are considered unacceptable in another. We also know that it is not within the psyche of farmers to kindly accept suggestions to change specific agricultural practices just because those practices are used by farmers elsewhere.

Considering culture and context are especially important when working with farmers in developing countries. Attempts to get farmers in developing countries to switch over to US agricultural practices are often met with varying degrees of resistance. We have read of well-meaning projects in developing countries designed to modernize agricultural practices that were quickly abandoned when the outside experts and their money moved on to another area.

Outside of a few developing countries, a large portion of the world's population consists of small-holder agriculturalists and pastoralists. In developing international agricultural and

trade policy, we must remember that it took this nation four centuries to move from one dominated by small farms to one where less than 2 percent of the population feed the other 98 percent and have a surplus left over to export around the world.

Given that history, it makes little sense to think that this shift can take place in developing countries in a generation or two because the change is not simply technological, it is cultural as well. Farming involves a close tie between the farm family and their community and the land. Those ties only change slowly.

That suggests to us that if one wants to help a country improve its level of food security, one needs to start by taking the local farmers and their farming practices seriously. In many cases the ancestors of the present-day farmers survived on that land for centuries and passed their knowledge down from one generation to the next. Agricultural practices that do not make sense to an outside expert may take into account conditions, both social and agricultural, that are not found in the expert's home country.

Early extension agents in this country often faced a similar situation. They needed to become familiar with local agricultural practices in order to be trusted by the local farmers. As they built trust among the farmers in their county, they could then identify those who were looked up to by their neighbors. With patience, the agents identified those who would set up a demonstration plot to see if a change in practice would be beneficial – a picture is worth a thousand words.

The work is often slow and tedious, but taking local farmers and their practices seriously is the key to long-term agricultural productivity and social stability. Small-holder producers are not easily transformed into international agricultural moguls, but they can be given the support they need to improve their productivity and thus the food security of their family, community, and country.

Okay, in our view being respectful of the developing nation's culture and agricultural heritage so as to become a trusted helpmate rather than irrelevant know-it-all is critical. But then what? Well, that will be the fodder for future columns.

In general terms, it will take a unique combination of policies and investments coupled with enlightened international organizations that become newly obsessed with taking countries from where-they-are to being food secure.

Decisions of all involved should be laser focused on needs of the country, independent of other considerations. For example, if multinational supplied products and services and/or imports from other countries fit the short-run and long-term development plans for a country, great.

But doing what needs to be done to stabilize food security in a developing country may conflict with certain mindsets – mindsets such as maximization of international trade and what-is-good-for-multinationals-is-good-for-all. If that turns out to be true, the collective answer should be: so be it.

Maximization of international trade and multinationals' profits are perfectly acceptable goals in certain contexts but in the context of helping developing countries achieve food security, they clearly should not be dominating forces. △

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