

Agriculture is key to unemployment reduction

Investments in agriculture research and development backed by favorable government policies will help Africa to tackle unemployment.

"Such policies should help farmers gain easy access to markets for their commodities," says Director General Hartmann, during the visit to IITA of Governor Rauf Aregbesola of Osun State, a south western state in Nigeria.

Although bestowed with rich and diverse agroecology, Africa is yet to experience the much-awaited Green Revolution owing to low investment in agricultural research, inconsistent policies, and porous infrastructure.

Governor Aregbesola, who sought ties with IITA, says he intends to tackle the challenges confronting agriculture in his state and to make farming an attractive and lucrative investment alternative.

The government, under its ambitious program plans to boost agricultural productivity by opening up more land, providing inputs to farmers, and facilitating access to markets.

The plan is to tap at least 10% of the food market in Lagos state—the second most populous city in Nigeria, according to latest census figures.



Aregbesola exchanges pleasantries with Hartmann

"Our strategy is to make the farmer richer so as to attract more people to agriculture," says Aregbesola.

"What we do not want to happen is price fluctuations that discourage farmers," he added.

The governor appealed to IITA to help the state in the area of geographic

information systems, the development of high-yielding crop varieties, and improved agronomic practices.

The visit to IITA gave the governor the opportunity to also interact with researchers at the International Livestock Research Institute and the Africa Rice Center.

Tackling cassava disease in Malawi

A team of international and Malawian researchers and agriculturalists have developed an action plan to guide the country's efforts in tackling the most important disease threat to the country's cassava crop, the Cassava brown streak disease (CBSD).

Although the disease has been in Malawi for more than five decades, new outbreaks in neighboring countries coupled with the increasingly important role that cassava plays in assuring

food security in Malawi, make the effective monitoring and management of CBSD vital.

While opening the workshop, Patrick Mviha, the Assistant Director of the Department of Agriculture Research Services (DARS), noted that CBSD seems to be increasingly damaging to cassava in Malawi, although the disease was first reported many years ago. Most importantly, he said, CBSD affects the quality of roots, making them unusable for either household or industrial applications.

He thanked IITA and USAID for the work they are doing to help mitigate this scourge and encouraged Malawian scientists to collaborate closely with the IITA team to improve their understanding of the disease and develop new resistant varieties to prevent production losses.

In addition to brainstorming on how to improve the disease control in the future, participants at the meeting held on 4 March at the Chitedze Research Station, reviewed progress of an ongoing USAID-funded project on CBSD titled 'Addressing Cassava Brown Streak Disease in Malawi', and about the work in other parts of Africa.

The Project is jointly implemented by Chancellor College, Zomba and IITA. For additional information on the Project, contact James Legg (j.legg@cgiar.org).



Participants at the CBSD meeting in Malawi

Mozambique: Making women's life easy



Macuacua-Pinto with her processed cassava products

Judith Celeste Macuacua-Pinto from Nampula in Mozambique, founder of Wissa Ltd. says she wanted to make women's life easy; to have them spend little time in the kitchen but still be able to provide their families with tasty and nutritious meals. This is what led her to start making and selling ready-to-cook blended cassava leaves mixed with garlic and raw paw paw (papaya) which are then cooked in coconut milk and ground peanut sauce into 'mathapa' a popular local delicacy.

Today Wissa Ltd. has grown into a small cottage industry offering a diverse range of ready-to-eat and cooked products.

The 56-year-old widow says she closed her kindergarten school in Maputo and moved to Nampula three years ago when her husband died. She first started processing castor oil but the company buying it was offering a very low price and so she changed to processing cassava leaves.

In 2009, she attended a series of training organized by IITA's UPoCA project on processing cassava into highly marketable items such as high quality cassava flour, rale, and starch and making a diverse range of products from the flour.

She was also trained on maintaining hygiene and safety standards, packaging and labeling, marketing, and preparing a business plan, and says she has tried to implement everything she learnt. For example, she approached a designer in Maputo to make neat labels for her products and she also sent samples to the government laboratory to get feedback on their nutrition and safety.

She also worked with UPoCA's Agro-Enterprise Specialist, Melba Davis-Mussagy, to develop a business plan which she says helped her to correctly price her products and project future growth.

"From the business plan, I discovered I was selling a kg of cassava flour at 15 Mt but that barely met the costs of the packaging material, the content, and the labor costs. There was no profit. So I adjusted my price to sell at 25 Mt," she said.

She currently has 4 full time employees but hires many casual laborers during processing. She has also benefited the local farmers who no longer have to travel long distances to the market where they are not always guaranteed a market or good prices.

DRC: Young entrepreneur with a big vision

Four years ago, Mafuta Kany Veronique, 34, from Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo, quit her job as a secretary with a telecom company to go into business because of low pay. She tried her hands in a few enterprises before landing on cassava processing. A family friend, formerly trained by IITA, introduced her to it and even donated to her some processing equipment to start her off.

She has also received training from the UPoCA project on processing high quality fermented and unfermented cassava flour, business

planning, packaging, and marketing. After the training, she is now planning to change the design and size of her packaging. Currently, she is packing 7.5, 15, and 30 kg which she sells to supermarkets, market stall owners, and individuals who come to purchase at her home. She will include smaller packages to give people more choices.

When she started, getting markets was the biggest challenge but not any more. With the improved quality of her products, her customers seek her out and she is sometimes not able to keep up with their demand especially during the rainy season. She says she has customers from as far away as Lubumbashi, which is 2,000 km away.

She is processing 40-75 t of fresh cassava per month with a monthly income of US\$2,000 to 5,000. The income is low during the rainy season due to difficulty in drying.

She has developed a 5-year business plan to guide her business and now hopes to supply raw material to



Kany shows her tanks for fermenting grated cassava flour

industries. However, to do this, she will need a mechanical drier for all-weather processing.

She has four full-time employees and nearly 50 temporary ones, mostly women, hired during processing time. This can be once a week during low production season and up to up to three times when it's high.

She says it has not been easy but the support she has received from her husband and the capacity building from IITA has contributed to her success.

Help conserve electricity!

Before leaving the workplace at day's end, make sure that you have:

- (1) Powered off all unnecessary electrical office/lab equipment;
- (2) Turned off air conditioners; and
- (3) Switched off all lights.