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Embracing diversity in agricultural policy making is critical, writes Wandile Sihlobo

08 December 2016 - 06:28 AM Wandile Sihlobo

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Policy and investment decisions should be informed by the realities on the ground. This perspective resonates with the findings of the recent Africa Agri Investment Indaba organised by the African Agri Council — a network of global executives, decision makers and key interested parties in the agricultural industry.

The indaba took place in the context of growing optimism about agriculture's potential contribution to economic growth, job creation and poverty-reduction in Africa, as well as growing investment interest in the midst of all these initiatives.

The discussions covered a wide range of topics, from policy to technical challenges on farms and agribusinesses, all in an attempt to establish practical solutions that can make African countries attractive to investors.

Similar to many agricultural engagements, the indaba had few female and youth participants, particularly among the panellists. This is regrettable as women's role in African agriculture is significant, in the labour market and farming. United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation data show women make up almost 50% of sub-Saharan Africa's agricultural labour force.

Moreover, the World Farmers Organisation posits that women are responsible for a large part of the 80% of Africa's agricultural production by smallholder farmers. It is therefore counterintuitive to continue seeing male domination in agricultural policy engagements. Besides the gender equality argument, Africa is missing out on the potentially rich diversity of views and vital learning that would otherwise emanate from the people who work the land in most African countries.

In addition to this gender inequality challenge in the African agricultural policy environment, discussions are continuing about the need to attract young talent to maximise the sector's potential and continuity. Some captains of industry wrongfully place the blame on young people for showing little interest in the sector, preferring sophisticated office jobs. However, over the years I have often encountered young South Africans who are eager to join the agriculture sector and they all ask the same questions: where do we start? Is it possible to access productive land and mentorship? How can I access potential funding and financing?

This raises the question whether enough is being done to support the aspirations of the youth. Similar questions arise because South African (and African) policy makers have not clearly articulated the path for young people who are interested in joining primary agriculture.

To suggest that young people are uninterested in agriculture is misplaced. Universities and technical colleges around the country struggle to accommodate all the potential young students of agriculture.

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There seems to be no clear path or support mechanism to allow students to contribute economically to farming. Subsequently, after obtaining university degrees, many join agricultural institutions and government agencies.

Africa has the potential to become the breadbasket of the world in a few decades. The continent has vast tracts of unused land and a wealth of young human capital. In SA, most of the unused land is in the rural areas of the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo. Although rural communities in these provinces have continuously been involved in farming, there has been limited growth and expansion due to the dearth of investment. This is partly due to laws governing communal land that affect women and the youth adversely.

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Some African countries have recognised women's role in agriculture and have adopted new land laws that reinforce women's land ownership rights. This is a positive development in unlocking investments in the sector and strengthening women's participation, and should be replicated throughout the continent.

Overall, discussions and planning about investments and other policy debates in African agriculture should mirror the actual structure of the sector. In that way, policy makers will be able to calibrate well-informed development programmes for the sector.

Similarly, for investors to maximise the opportunities in the sector, they should engage directly the people who are working the land — their potential clients.

Embracing diversity in agricultural policy making is critical. The need to recognise and promote it should be embedded throughout the sector's value chain. That needs to start at the top, with policy makers engaging women and the youth directly in their policy discussions and plans for the sector's future.

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