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(O.M. Atoyebi, SAN & Partners)



Introduction

Agriculture largely contributes to the Nigerian economy accounting for over 25% of the Nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), it is also responsible for 30% of the existing employments in the country. However, the country remains behind its counterparts in developed countries as it still relies on crude implements and obsolete technology in the agribusiness, a practice fuelled by Nigerian farmers opting for subsistent agriculture as a means of survival and not with the goal of contributing to the nation's economy.

Therefore, the "International Bar Association, 2020: Virtually Together Global Influential Session" hosted by Omaplex Law Firm was indeed timely as it provided an avenue for speakers from various sectors of the Nigerian economy to speak on the modalities necessary to make agribusiness in Nigeria technology driven. It is indeed against the backdrop of this enlightening session that this article is written with a view to ensure that innovative ideas do not terminate at the point of mere intellectual discussions, rather, that they are to be dissected and elucidated for proper implementation.

This article shall be giving an insight into the transformation of the Nigerian agricultural sector from 'cutlasses to drones' as expounded by the speakers in the convention, highlighting the challenges the sector faces and finally making recommendations on probable steps required to develop an agricultural sector that can compete globally.

THE FUTURE OF AGRICULTURE IN NIGERIA: FROM CUTLASSES TO DRONES

Some Challenges Faced by Agriculture in Nigeria

Africa indisputably has the largest arable land in the world. It is therefore rather surprising that more than 50% of Africans go to bed hungry. The reason for this sad reality is not farfetched: a lot of indigenous farmers are still confined to the use of ancient farming tools used by their forefathers. In the opinion of Mr. Kingsley Okorie, the Deputy Governor on Economic Policy of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), the deplorable state of the Nigerian agricultural sector, has prompted CBN to develop programs and projects geared towards empowering local farmers and those interested in using technology to improve agriculture in other to develop a system of farming that can compete favourably globally.

Dr. Manzo Daniel Usman, the Director General, Nigeria Agribusiness Group when speaking at the convention pointed out in detail the failure of Nigeria as a country to meet up with international best practices in Agriculture globally. As a country, Nigeria is far from where it ought to be as a leading country in agriculture

despite having at its disposal favorable climatic conditions and massive lands good for crop production and animal husbandry. The country suffers a major setback because of its failure to harness these God given blessings optimally. A lot of countries with smaller lands for agriculture like Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia are thriving in world markets through rice production and other countries like Libya, although located in a desert region dominates the wheat and barley market by employing irrigation. It therefore rests with Nigeria as a country to set standards that in turn form specifications across the board that can be certified as the ideal to which every agribusiness enterprise must attain in order to scale this industry to a more befitting place in the agribusiness world over.

In Africa, agriculture is approached merely as a means of survival. Small scale farmers that make up 80% of farmers in Nigeria engage in farming as an avenue to feed themselves and their immediate families and sometimes in good seasons of harvest, to sell what is left. This is however a very myopic approach to agriculture. According to Dr Ikechukwu Kelikume, the Programme Director, Agribusiness Management, Lagos Business School, agriculture is a business and farmers are to see themselves as entrepreneurs who must approach the business of farming as such. He further reiterates that 50% of the output gotten yearly from crop farming in Nigeria is lost to postharvest mishaps because the 80% of farmers that make up the upstream of the Nigerian agricultural sector are small scale farmers who are not enlightened or welcoming of the basic technologies necessary for preserving their crops. Regrettably, farmers in this part of the world have not fully accepted the use of technology in agriculture for two major reasons namely: illiteracy and lack of capital.

Law is an important factor in any thriving sector. It is the laws and policies available that gives any sector in which it operates the leverage to grow and expand. Lamentably, majority of the Nigerian lawyers have failed to make their input in boosting the country's agricultural sector which has resulted in the stagnant growth currently plaguing the sector. In the opinion of Mrs. Onyinye Chikwendu-Ikechebelu, International Trade and Commerce Expert of O. M. Atoyebi, SAN (Omaplex Law Firm), lawyers play a key role in using their legal and business know-how in bringing policy makers, agribusiness owners and end-users together to match value and in that wise arrive at the desired goals of each stakeholder.

A lawyer is properly placed amongst other agriculture industry professionals to understand the agricultural industry, and the value chain that it operates under. We understand the need for finance and favourable

governmental policies, and the indisputable role of technology to increase productivity while also being cognisant of the role of education and knowledge sharing to ensure that the ultimate purpose of growing the agricultural industry, is achieved.

Our role is vital not only because we understand the challenges that the sector faces but we have the legal proficiency to provide and create solutions to these challenges which we have done in the Oil and Gas sector, as a result of which the industry has seen tremendous growth over the years because of the input of lawyers, while the agricultural sector has been relegated to a pastime for the uneducated and elderly.

The Future of Agriculture in Nigeria

It is certainly not implausible to desire a nation with an economy empowered by different sectors. Agriculture has proven in the years past and even in present times to hold amazing potential if adequately harnessed. The deplorable state of the agricultural sector in Nigeria currently denies Nigerians the opportunity to harness the boundless possibilities within the sector. Indeed, agriculture in Nigeria has the capacity to become a profitable and powerful sector with the capability to feed the nations ever growing population and significantly contribute to global trade.

The future of the Nigerian agricultural sector as such is one which ought to be characterized by policy adaptation and technological improvements that will transcend the present reality of things, literally taking it from an era of cutlasses to one of drones. An age where there will be increased productivity through the use of technology. Some instances that comes to mind, is the use of technology to prevent postharvest losses by monitoring climate change, using drones for soil and field analysis by producing precise maps for early soil analysis, using drones to plan seed plating and gathering data for managing irrigation.

The future of the Nigerian agricultural sector can be one in which our youths develop genuine interests in farming, availing the industry of the manpower and innovation that comes with the input of the young and we can harness the diversity in growing this sector of the Nigeria economy.

Recommendations

No doubt, turning back the clock by embracing agriculture is one of the best solutions that can help reposition Nigeria's fragile economy. With food insecurities on the rise in Nigeria, small scale farmers are encouraged to accept technology in improving their products. With global population predicted to grow by 2 billion in 2050 and with more than half of that

growth from Sub-Saharan Africa, it a necessity to improve food production through the use of technology in agriculture.

If the nation continues in the use of hoes, cutlasses and other crude implements, it will one day ultimately depend entirely on other countries to feed. For this reason, there is an urgent need to embrace technology. Dr. Francis Dubem Chizea, the Acting Director General National Space Research and Development Agency (NARSDA), in making his contributions to the convention, encouraged the government to relax the strict rules and policies surrounding the use of drones, so that farmers can enjoy the benefits drones and technology in general can offer agriculture.

Agriculture remains one of the most unregulated industries in Nigeria, in the circumstance, the need has arisen for lawyers to make their input in facilitating the growth of the sector. In this regard, Mr. Kingsley Okorie in sharing his thoughts emphasized the need for lawyers to look into the legal aspects of agriculture by developing effective legal frame work to ensure data privacy/security and intellectual property protection to budding technology driven agricultural start-ups which is necessary in safeguarding and promoting investor interests in the agribusiness.

Lawyers have a role to play in stabilizing the agricultural sector in numerous ways which include: obtaining licensing and permits that agricultural entities may need to operate, such as setting up corporations and partnerships; assisting in succession planning to help preserve agribusinesses for future generations, provide information to those in agriculture on labour and employment laws; provide guidance to ensure regulatory compliance; give general legal counsel to individuals, companies and organizations on agriculture related matters etcetera.

In the opinion of Mrs. Onyinye Chikwendu-Ikechebelu, the time has come for lawyers to input their expertise to ensure that Nigeria's agricultural sector grows into one capable of competing globally.

Additionally, it is necessary for the upstream stakeholders in the agricultural sector, namely government and policy makers to develop policies that are not only workable but also in tandem with modern realities. In the opinion of Dr. Monzo Daniel Usman, such policies should be developed to encourage cost sharing and clustering because it is more beneficial and ensures the increase in co-operation as well as competition amongst farmers.

Lastly, it is pertinent to buttress the growth and innovation the active participation of youths in the agricultural sector

can bring. Youths can be encouraged to invest in activities that support agricultural production, capacity building and the improvements of goods and services in the agricultural sector.

This can however not be achieved in isolation, therefore, it lies on the government to develop incentives to attract the youths to this growing sector. It is also necessary to fuel as well as build the drive and enthusiasm for agriculture from the early years of education by inculcating in the formative years of the Nigerian child, the importance of agriculture as well as providing avenues for them to practice agriculture and agribusinesses.

Some decades ago, Agriculture was central to Nigeria's Economy, until the oil boom in the 1970s. However, the time has come to create a stable economy that thrives on various sectors, since the Nigerian economy cannot thrive on one sector, there is an urgent need to develop a system of agriculture that can be welcomed by all and sundry.

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