COMMERCIAL AGRICULTURE: A NEW BEGINNING

By

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Let me first thank the organisers of this conference for giving me this opportunity not only to deliver this paper but also for the chance it has afforded me to meet with some of our colleagues after several years.

For good reasons my paper will be devoid of the usual tables and indeed will not speak on any particular research project. After all, I have for sometime left these "mundane" activities for the more boring job of pushing of files. In any case, I have often had to question the authenticity of these usual statistics and date on which much have been written and our planning based. For those who cannot do without those kind of papers let me refer you to the following authors who in their publications have analysed and discussed in detail the problems facing live stock production in Nigeria. (Oyenuga, 1975; Modebe, 1976; Ademosun, 1976; Fetuga, 1977; Babatunde, 1980; Lamorde et. al 1981; Abdulkadir 1979, 1981; David-West, 1983).

The theme of this conference, "Self-Sufficiency in Animal Protein Supply Under Changing Economic Fortunes" would seem most appropriate, reflecting the current national situation. I will want to congratulate the organisers for their choice; however I dare say that the extent of our current under-nutrition rather than malnutrition may show our title as slightly removed from reality — for are we not in search of rice, beans, maize, sugar, yams, oil, soap etc? May it be that what we should be talking about is not just animal protein, not even protein but simply talking of "food"? There is yet another angle to this. Animal protein may refer in part to MEAT as we know it in Nigeria — is it the flesh of 20 year old cows, or 80 week old birds? I am yet to be convinced that you can really derive any benefit from such meat, a good proportion of which you know is indigestible.

In any case, should we wish to plan for animal protein sufficiency such data as human and animal populations, and stock productivity are basic. As far as I know only unreliable estimates of stock populations are available. Reproductive and mortality rates cannot be said to be known on the national scale. Indeed there is nobody of commercial producers on which any national or regional policy or projection can be based. For those we refer to as farmers are persons who out of tradition and circumstances beyond their control are increasingly being kept behind in the rural communities as a result of old age, illiteracy and poverty, except for a handful of retired civil servants who have gone into agriculture as an old-age hobby.

Nigerian universities have in the past four decades produced Agriculturists on the assumption that what they are taught is likely to be useful; unfortunately, there is no clientele against whose specifications and programmes are drawn; what we teach assumes there is a dairy farm, a beef farm or piggery where graduates/diplomates will work; of course there is none; it assumes that there are feedmills and raw materials where they can apply all they learnt in Animal Nutrition — however, we also know that generally they are few and far between; in their genetics we assume there are breeders where these youngmen and women will practice their quantitative genetics, but where are they? One may be led to conclude that we are preparing our students and equipping them with techniques for the non-existent

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commercial farm. This is quite different from techniques they may acquire to pioineer Agriculture. The immediate result is the concentration of our graduates in government service where they are involved with office work, minor extension and policy formulation — which policies have no practical Agricultural experience to back them up.

A good number of these graduates escape from practical field work by their desperate scramble for post-graduate work, choosing such white collar specializations as Biochemistry, Nutrition and Physiology. Usually, Management, Husbandry and Feeds and Feeding are consciously avoided. The disaster of the situation is that it is these “evaders” who come back into the system to teach our undergraduates; formulate government policies and choose and direct research. Thus the vicious cycle of non-performers is maintained.

If we turn to research, the situation is probably more pathetic. It must be extremely frustrating, (if not for building impressive personal data) to carry on research on problems which nobody has asked for, nobody wants and nobody may want in the foreseeable future. Research we are told should keep ahead of practice, but this assumes that both are on the move. In our case the livestock industry is not at any level where research can be assimilated in any form. Indeed the body of available technology which is already well known if only they can be applied can serve the National needs in livestock for quite some time to come. At the risk of being misunderstood, what is being said here, is that inspite of all efforts and money now being spent on research, there is a need to reassess their implications in the improvement of livestock production technology. For unless finance is limitless, we cannot allow the wide gap which has developed between our research and the present level of livestock production. In other words, in as much as research has its value and should be encouraged, actual livestock production is so far behind that it has become necessary to suggest a reversal of priorities.

Sometime in 1975, an Englishman made a comment to me which at that time I considered grossly unfair. He said, and I quote, “I have observed that Africans have no cattle sense.” Almost ten years later I am beginning to wonder whether he was right. For how else can you explain the total absence of any viable commercial dairy or beef industry in Nigeria after several years of indigenous efforts. Also, I once listened to a lecture several years ago on whose theme was the relationship between the dairy industry and civilization. In that lecture a well known Cornell Professor had data to show that dairying and consumption of milk were fundamental to industrialization and national achievement. Is there really such a relationship?

It is in the context of all the above that I chose the title of this discuss — "A new beginning." For the course which we have charted and followed either as teachers, researchers and as professionals, administrators and operators, over the years does not appear to stand any chance of generating a viable Animal Industry in Nigeria. The much talked about protein deficit is likely to be aggravated. In my view we have to take a fresh start — reordering our priorities and giving due emphasis to Management, Husbandry and Feeding. For the commercial aspects of animal production has been completely neglected. The basis of our diploma and indeed degree programmes must be the production of field operators, and managers. There has been too much emphasis on the academic aspects of Agriculture; — the Chemistry, Biochemistry, the Physiology and the Genetics. By all means these are necessary but they by themselves do not solve our protein problems.

As researchers we are at a point where we must begin to feel a sense of failure for
the industry for which we are trained and for which we continue to labour and in spite of our long lists of publications, does not respond at all. What sense does it really make to continue to pile these publications; to spend so much time and money if so little is achieved. We must now review the situation and may be for a while put away the journals and pack up the sophisticated equipments and temporarily return to the basics — how to make our animals grow, reproduce. This will be a new beginning. It will certainly narrow that gap between the state of the livestock art and research. For how can I in good conscience continue to spend long hours researching on Artificial Insensation, when the best farmers around have yet to understand how to keep their animals alive? Time is spent on all sorts of biochemical analysis of feeds when the farmers are battling simply with stock survival.

Mr. Chairman, I have been deliberately frank in this talk on the assumption that we are now ready to solve our problem of livestock production. I have deliberately excluded government policies and societal aspects of this problem because in our previous conferences we have often ended up with our communique listing what who should do except ourselves. This time around instead of listing what government should do I want us to examine what we can do to help government to achieve our national objectives. There has not been any attempt to under-estimate the gravity of our problems. However, there is a need for a certain level of soul searching on our part. In doing this we must show sufficient grasp of the situation whether we talk of food, protein or animal protein. For us, to achieve self-sufficiency in any of these we must make a new beginning — both professionals, government and all of us.

REFERENCES


