

JEAN-YVES CARFANTAN

Senior consultant, AgroBrasConsult

Just to start, I would like to explain why we decided to have that discussion about cooperation between Asia and Africa in the field of agriculture. In the small group that was present at the workshop, we did believe that increasing production in the farm sector in Africa is one of the main challenges the world is faced with in the coming years. We do believe that with respect to agricultural development, Asian countries have made considerable headway on many fronts that are relevant to Africa. These include agri processing, drought and famine management, water harvesting and agricultural and research technology transfer. There is the establishment of a rural and agricultural credit mechanism and the setting up of micro credit, financing systems and farm policies.

Successful economies in Asia have implemented policies and strategies that boost the development of the private sector and the farm sector. The first part of our workshop was dedicated to the introduction of different cooperation programmes that exist between Asian countries and different African countries. We all have been told and we all know that Chinese cooperation is very important in different African countries.

However, one of the Indian speakers that we had in our workshop gave a very comprehensive description of the different actions and programmes implemented by different Asian countries. These include Japan, South Korea and Vietnam. This is not very well known, but Vietnam is a very active country in the agricultural sector in Africa, as well as India and China. Dr Suresh Kumar, one of the Indian speakers, gave us a very comprehensive description of the historical context in which that cooperation took place. He helped us to better understand the main challenges and problems this cooperation is faced with.

In the second part of our workshop, we focused on some concrete programmes that are currently being implemented by Asian stakeholders in some African countries. Due to the experience and competencies of some of our speakers, we focused mainly on the financial sector. We had a very important contribution by Mr Krishan Jindal. He is currently the Chief Executive Officer of NABARD Consultancy Services (Nabcons), which is a consultancy service. It is a wholly owned subsidiary of NABARD, which is the national bank for agricultural development in India. More than 7.4 million groups of farmers or rural inhabitants are supported by this institution. It has a huge depth of experience in giving micro credit and financial support to rural development in India.

Mr Jindal introduced the different programmes that Nabcons, this specific subsidiary, has implemented in Africa, in cooperation with various local development agencies. These programmes can be classified in three different groups. Nabcons is providing support to African farmers for the promotion of microfinance, by undertaking capacity building assessments of local banks. It is providing initiative loan products and conducting studies and the strengths and weaknesses of the local rural financial institutions.

As a second field of action, Nabcons also arranges field visits of African delegates in India, so that they can discover and understand the best practises that exist in the Indian farm sector in terms of financial institutions and financial support to farmers. The third activity of Nabcons is a new project in some African countries, specifically in Malawi, with the creation of a new institute for agricultural development in that country, with the support of the Government of India.

We discussed the example of Nabcons with the help of other speakers, specifically Mr Meksem, who is from Morocco. He has wide experience of rural development in African countries. We discussed the way this financial support could be improved. The last part of that workshop was dedicated to what I would call a prospective approach, regarding what could be done to improve the cooperation between Asian and African stakeholders in the field of agricultural and rural development.

We were very lucky, because we had two speakers who gave us a very original approach, with two different issues. We focused our discussions on one issue first, which is scientific cooperation between Asian and African countries in the field of plant biology and agronomy. I would say that they discussed plant quality improvement. The second topic that we decided to focus on was the question of farm policy.

We had Philippe Chalmin with us, who is French and is well known in France. He is one of the most important experts in world commodity markets. We had a deep discussion on the question of farm policy and what Asian countries could do to help African countries implement new farm policies. I wanted to give you some details about those two very important issues, because this could be a proposal for upcoming discussions at future World Policy Conferences.

We had Professor Rod Wing from the University of Arizona with us. Professor Rod Wing is a geneticist and probably one of the most important experts in rice production in the world today. He has been appointed as the AXA foundation endowed Chair in Genome Biology and Evolution Economics. This is at the International Rice Research Institute in Los Baños, The Philippines. As you probably know, this institute has played a significant role in over 30 plant and animal genome sequencing projects. These include both Asian and African rice, maize, boli, soya beans, pine oil and tomatoes.

Rod's research interest nowadays centres on the use of genome biology to discover and implement sustainable solutions, to help solve world hunger and to feed the planet. His current focus centres on understanding the genome varieties of the wild relatives of rice. These possess many important biotic and stress traits that have been lost in present day cultivars as a consequence of domestication.

Rod told us about a very important programme, which is the international Oryza map alignment project. This involves the development of a wide comparative genomic platform to help solve the issues of 9 billion people. As you know, rice is one of the most important food crops in the world and provides half of the world's population with 20% of its total calories. As the population will increase by more than 2 billion by the year 2050, we must find solutions to grow enough food to feed the world in a more sustainable and environmentally sound manner. This programme is an international cooperation programme that would help farmers in Africa and producers in Asia to cooperate in the sense of improving the quality of the different varieties of rice used in the two continents.

Finally, we had a very important discussion on farm policy, initiated by some comments made by Philippe Chalmin. Philippe Chalmin noticed that in all Asian countries, the growth in local farm production has been closely linked to one fact. The Governments implemented farm price policy supports and price guarantees, at least in the first period at the start of development in those countries.

He said that one of the most important contributions Asian countries could make to the increase in agricultural production in different African countries could be to help African countries implement such farm policies. These would stimulate farmers to produce more and to invest in new technology. He noticed that in all Asian countries, the take up of local agricultural production has been closely linked to guarantees of prices provided by the government. This is also true in Brazil, where I am from.

He also recognised that the challenge was more difficult to address in African countries than was the case in Europe when the Common Agricultural Policy started in the '60s. In many African countries, most of the population is more and more urbanised, and urban dwellers have very low purchasing power. We have to design a very sophisticated and well balanced policy that could provide farmers with the stimulus to produce. That could keep the capacity of consumers to buy the food.

In that sense, there could be international cooperation. For instance, he mentioned the experience of the Bill Gates Foundation, which has already provided support to such initiatives. This is in the sense of providing the financial resources that local governments need if they want to build such support policies. These are costly and cannot depend only on local taxpayers or local consumers. To sum up, I would say that we had a small group, but we had a few people who were very creative, and we had a very interesting new proposal by the end of our discussion.