

Nigeria Can Learn From China's Rural Reform Policies

LSE's Zainab Haruna argues that a more holistic view of sustainable rural transformation is required for Nigeria.

In 2006, the Hu Jintao/Wen Jiabao-led Chinese government initiated a new set of reforms to foster rural growth and transformation in China. The move became necessary after unrest in the rural countryside, which had been left behind in the Asian giant's move for economic growth leading to widening inequality. Hence, the reforms also referred to as the “new socialist countryside” (NSC) policy, were to implement strategies that would shore up the capacity of the rural regions, instigating faster development.

Some points of the reform policy **included increase in central government spending on rural areas, shift in government spending on infrastructure towards rural areas, scrap of agricultural tax and extension of health-care insurance to more counties.**

As **Ahlers and Schubert** documented in their findings, the NSC policy offered counties the opportunity to determine their own implementation strategy. Most of the implementation process favoured a bottom-up approach where villages designed their own plans, chose their own projects, the township screened the applications and the county allocated funding. Ultimately, selection was based on developmental impact, population size, capability of village leaders, enthusiasm of village residents and project sustainability. Although, the success of the policy itself is not well documented, there was a rise in the income of rural farmers and China boasts one of the highest literacy rates and life expectancy today.

Nigeria has 36 states (plus a Federal Capital territory) and 774 local government areas (LGAs). As a general rule, many local governments in Nigeria are poor and underdeveloped the further you progress inland. **The more prosperous local governments such as Ikeja, Obio Akpor and Kurmi** are characterised by strong infrastructure, budding commerce, public goods and highly coordinated economic activities. The challenge is supporting other LGAs into a similarly favourable upward growth trajectory.



This computer village in Ikeja, Lagos State, is an example of a more local government area making good use of its resources
Photo Credit: Venture Africa



The task of managing rural growth is vested in the **Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development** (FMARD). However, the ministry considers its mandate to be strictly agriculture-centric with goals of achieving food security and poverty reduction. It is unclear how rural development will be achieved by focusing solely on agriculture when not every rural area possesses the fertile land required for commercial agriculture. Another major concern is the poorly-developed road network within Nigeria as vast amounts of agricultural produce perish before reaching the markets.

Basic infrastructure remains either dilapidated or nonexistent. Most villages lack necessary public goods such as clean water, healthcare, schools and even financial institutions. Inhabitants of these areas travel many miles to the nearest towns to access these services, consequently a major driver for the mass migration of youths to urban centres in Nigeria leaving villages sparsely populated. It is impossible to consider improving the welfare of the rural population without addressing all of these issues.

In all of this, the role played by the LGA chairmen is really unclear. Most do not develop the districts which they manage, no capital projects are undertaken and even when they are, they are rarely completed and if completed, they are not managed by their successors.

FMARD has taken steps to concretise its agriculture and rural development agenda with a policy tagged "**The Agriculture Promotion Policy 2016-2020**" initiated by the new government as an effort to promote growth. It is doubtful how effective this policy will be if underlying problems remain the same.



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A more holistic view of sustainable rural transformation is required along the lines of China. To boost agriculture, consideration should be afforded to increased collaboration among different ministries especially those of science and technology, youth and development, trade and investment and women affairs. The need for better roads along major trade routes cannot be overemphasised. Alternatively, FMARD might engage Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) to set up regional warehouses (multiplexes for storage of major regional agricultural produce) which ensure that farmers will travel reduced distances to offload their products. PPP should also be further exploited to secure buyers for major agricultural produce to ensure farmers income.

Beyond agriculture, officials must commence local government plans per jurisdiction. These plans must be time bound for the duration of their stay in office, articulate and measurable. Among other things, provision of public services, inclusion and job creation must be included in these plans.



Each local government area should be answerable to the state government, which in turn should be accountable to the federal government in evaluating success of project implementation.

As the rural community remains the unit of nationality, we cannot afford to shelve its growth or merely pay lip service to it. In the long term, to transform the rural landscape, Nigeria should move strongly to consolidate agriculture but also look beyond it to other sectors and with firm goals in hand.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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