

Why International Development in Agriculture Matters

As we move into 2014, we'd like to salute those who work in international development. And, if agricultural development flies below your radar, we'd like to touch upon the importance and changing nature of their labor.

Consider cassava. A major staple food in the developing world, providing a basic diet for over three quarters of a billion people, it barely registers on the radar of consumers in the northern hemisphere. Should the viruses that plague cassava ever become pandemic, the consequences could be catastrophic; not just for the millions of smallholder farmers who depend upon it for their livelihoods, but for the countries as well who would have to deal with massive hunger and the cross-border migrations it would precipitate.

Such are the challenges international research-for-development organizations face: to equip smallholder farmers with the tools, training, and linkages to markets they can use to grow their way out of poverty. When subsistence farmers reach true food security, they begin to invest in their children, their farms, and their communities.

Farming is the dominant economic activity of the world's poor. Historically international development was often viewed as public sector or philanthropy, but today's agricultural development model is one of public-private partnerships, with governments, transnational organizations, and private sector organizations large and small working together to foster food security for nations and families alike. It is a recognition of the virtuous spiral in which those with the least, freed from hunger, malnutrition, and poverty, contribute to economic well-being, environmental stewardship, and global stability.

Reaching that goal requires 'enablers' of many kinds, usually only possible through partnerships. Contrary to the view of some, aligning the interests of the public and private sector is not a far reach. Of course, the private sector wants a level playing field and open markets. But it would be wrong to dismiss their participation in development efforts as simply a means of creating a positive climate good for business, as it overlooks the hearts of the people working in those companies. They care because it is the right thing to do.

Many of our corporate clients, Land O' Lakes and Syngenta to name just two, have long had their own international development foundations. Today, those development arms are deeply entwined within their organizations and international efforts, facilitating an integrated market-driven approach. They provide infrastructure and technology to help meet the challenges development organizations face. For example, in the case of Land O' Lakes, one of the specific objectives of their dairy development projects in Africa is help to foster gender equality and improve women's access to agricultural assistance and credit, as women (and children) often bear the primary responsibility for farming and the care of livestock.

Development organizations, meanwhile, are uniquely positioned to play a catalytic role. With their focus on the poorest of the poor and hungry, they advocate with governments to set policy, provide a platform that transcends intellectual property concerns among competing corporations, conduct research into under-investigated Ag issues, and facilitate local access.

We see the current emphasis on measurable goals, evidence-based decisions, and impact evaluations playing out within our development clients. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, for example, exemplifies the comprehensive approach to agricultural development that includes access to improved seeds, more effective tools and farm management practices, locally relevant knowledge, emerging digital technologies, and reliable markets.

Additionally, the partnership paradigm is leading our development clients to look beyond traditional arenas for their leadership. The Centro Internacional del Papa (International Potato Center) works with partners to achieve food security, well-being, and gender equity for poor people in root and tuber farming and food systems in the developing world through research and innovation in science, technology, and capacity strengthening. The organization's new Director General, Dr. Barbara Wells, is an experienced scientist and executive from the private sector who also understands the cultural context of smallholder farmer through her childhood spent in several South American countries.

Looking forward, we see more of this cross-pollination on the horizon, strengthening the alignment between the private sector and international development. The most attractive candidates will have diverse experience, and demonstrate the ability to work collaboratively in complex, cross-cultural environments.

We are experiencing a second Green Revolution. While the first revolution was built around technical innovation, this revolution is more evolved, more melded, more interconnected. It is a scenario attractive to the young scientists and MBAs who want their work to matter. Agriculture matters. Agriculture welcomes them. The world welcomes them.

About Kincannon & Reed

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