

MSU makes a difference helping farmers in Zambia

Published: 07/14/2010 8:35pm

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Michigan has a bigger hand in helping rural farmers in Zambia than you might think.

For more than a decade, MSU's Department of Agricultural Economics has been working on the Zambia Food Security Research Project, or FSRP. Jan Nijhoff from MSU is currently leading efforts to promote regional trade and sound investment in the agriculture at the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, or COMESA's, headquarters in Lusaka, Zambia. Working together with other organizations, businesses and farmers, COMESA is paving a new road toward improving food security and livelihoods of people in Zambia.

In Zambia, most consumers buy staple foods from informal merchants, but a local market where farmers sell too much of the same product can keep prices low. Also, many farmers fetch low prices selling crops straight from the field, especially when those crops are most often consumed after additional processing. Linking farmers to possible outlets by expanding market networks beyond the country's borders and helping farmers improve their produce's appeal and value will allow them more options when prices are low or unstable. This could help farmers get a higher, steadier income and contribute to a stronger economy.

The potential of the African market is largely untapped. According to the World Trade Organization, only 10 percent of agricultural trade occurs between African countries, compared with 74 percent among countries within the European community.

And this is where COMESA comes in. COMESA, of which Zambia is a member, is a regional economic community encompassing 19 African states. Collectively, these states share a "free trade zone" and engage in discussions to develop creative policies that help smallholder farmers gain better access to markets. Nijhoff explained that through encouraging "free trade in food commodities in order to create market opportunities," COMESA gives farmers what they need — "a profitable and sustainable market to sell their crops."

While COMESA plays a big role in helping countries in the region work together, their partner, the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network, or FANRPAN, links "non-traditional" players such as farmers, businesses, academia, researchers, consumer groups and donors from field to parliament.

FANRPAN's CEO, Dr. Lindiwe Majele Sibanda, called for "innovative ways of hearing the farmer's voices." She said she feels the "major investment that is long overdue in Africa is investment in people ... dialogue ... information sharing."

Sibanda puts her vision into action through FANRPAN. Using creative methods such as Theatre for Policy Advocacy, FANRPAN helps rural people understand complicated elements of agricultural policy and bring their voices back to the government, as well as to discussions such as those on the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme, or CAADP at COMESA.

While sound policies provide an attractive environment for investors and businesses, reaching the private sector, where most buyers are found, is essential in creating new market linkages. BABA, which stands for "Buy Africa Build Africa," is an example of a successful partnership with the private sector that creates new opportunities for farmers. BABA helps African farmers reap a greater profit from agriculture by improving marketing through packaging and access to processing.

Working with COMESA and the Clifton Packaging group, BABA will be launching its first "Center of Excellence," or COE, based in Zambia. The COE will use innovative food processing technologies and packaging to add value to organically grown crops available in Africa, increasing their shelf-life and reducing waste. These valuable resources will help nurture the budding African packaging industry, and increase the competitiveness of local product in international markets.

Zambia might have found its answer through the Zambia Agricultural Commodity Exchange, or ZAMACE. Owned and self-regulated by the agricultural industry, ZAMACE facilitates the trade of agricultural commodities at regional and international levels. It opens doors to international markets with organizations such as the World Food Program, which buys food from Zambian farmers through ZAMACE. This allows Zambia to provide food aid to its own country and those around it, thus promoting local goods and reducing dependence on foreign aid.

It makes sense to grow the economy through agricultural development in a region where more than 400 million rural people depend on agriculture for their living. Continuing to create new markets and linking farmers to existing ones is one crucial step in this equation.

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