

**26th Annual Ralph Melville  
Memorial Lecture delivered at the  
Annual General Meeting held at the  
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# Unlocking the potential of Africa's farmers—the art of the possible

*It is a great honour for me to be invited to give this year's Ralph Melville Memorial Lecture. Ralph Melville was a major figure in bridging the gap between practice and policy, expertise that is much needed today. In this lecture I want to briefly review where we are in African agricultural development, consider why we are where we are and critically reflect on the role of us professional agriculturists. I then want to highlight some promising options for the future.*

I have worked on the frontline of agricultural research and development in Africa and south-east Asia for 30 years. I am an animal scientist by training but having studied with Professor Sir Colin Spedding I take a holistic view of situations which led me from a life in research to one in practice. This year I celebrate 20 years with FARM-Africa, an

organisation I consider remarkable in its vision, innovation and persistence. One of the reasons I continue to work for FARM-Africa is the privileged position it gives me to have a vision, turn it into reality and see it through to maturity and beyond. This long-term view is very rare these days.

I decided to call this lecture 'Unlocking the potential of Africa's farmers – the art of the possible' because I believe there is much potential to be unlocked and much potential wasted through lack of support.

## **The situation in Africa**

It remains a fact that at the start of the 21st century most Africans (80%) rely on some form of agriculture for most of their livelihoods. About 50% of Africans (315 million) live in extreme poverty on less than \$1 dollar per day. While poverty in some

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countries is declining the numbers of people remaining poor is projected to rise to about 400 million by 2015. In short, the situation is both alarming and unacceptable, and it requires more than fine words, it requires urgent action.

The decline in overall investment in the agriculture sector in Africa over the last 25-30 years is one of the mysteries of the universe. Steve Wiggins at ODI has compiled the annual growth rates of the agriculture sector over the last 30 years and compared it with growth rates in the manufacturing sector. It is extraordinary data showing that growth rates in agriculture have in fact shown remarkable performance, ranging between 2-4% p.a., while manufacturing growth rates have declined sharply over the last 15 years. None of these growth rates is enough to keep pace with the growth in the population, of course, and poverty levels continue to rise, but one has to wonder what could have been achieved if agricultural investments had not declined?

Why has there been this extraordinary neglect of Africa's farmers? There is no doubt that the focus on the social goals embodied in the Millennium Development Goals has played a part in skewing the first generation of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, and therefore donor and national government investment towards the social sectors of education and health. One has to question the sustainability of achieving these goals without investing in the productive sectors that underpin African economies; agriculture being, in most cases, the main one.

It is obvious to me that there are many influential people in donor agencies that have given up on agriculture. Why? There is certainly a perception of past failure and let's be honest we agriculturists have not made a good enough case for that investment. I believe that we must reflect on our own performance and indeed our failings in marshalling arguments and communicating them in a compelling manner. Where, when and how did we lose the argument? Why did

we not have the evidence we needed to make the economic, social and environmental arguments for investing in good responsible, evidence-based agricultural development? Our monitoring and evaluations systems have simply not been good enough and it sometimes appears that we do not like to justify our existence, believing perhaps that farmers and their supporters have a right to exist.

In Africa what we now see is increasing expenditure on food aid, cash transfers and other welfare programmes focused on the poorest members of rural communities. For example in Ethiopia, 7.4 million of the poorest people are now part of the Productive Safety Net programme receiving 6 months worth of food or cash equivalent each year. Last year USAID spent \$700M on food aid and \$7M on agricultural development. Is there any wonder that agriculture is not performing and farmers are getting poorer and in increasing need of welfare payments, when the root causes of poverty are not addressed?

And yet every day in grassroots organisations such as FARM-Africa we see lives transformed through improved agricultural production and the improved management of natural resources. We see localised success and wonder why more can not be done? Why is there so little investment at the grassroots and why is it so hard to get backing to scale up successful work?

## **Chickens coming home to roost**

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The spike in the prices of fuel, fertilizer and food last year began to stimulate more discussion about the fundamentals of the global economy and how we are going to feed ourselves in the long term. This in turn encouraged donors and African governments to look again at investment in the agriculture sector. The World Development Report 2008 and the IAASTD reports were some of the major documents in recent times. At present there seems to be a document a week on the food crisis, food security and related matters.

Some of the new thinking and proposed plans may have been knocked off course by the financial crisis but fundamental concerns remain over how the world will feed itself in the long term and in particular when faced with a changing climate.

However it seems to me that just at the moment when the now predominantly urbanised world reconsiders agriculture, the current debate is polarised by unhelpful false dichotomies between extremes of caricatured options and positions. Examples of this are High-input ‘Green Revolution’ agriculture versus Low-input organic agriculture, or indigenous (southern) knowledge versus outside technical ‘western’ knowledge. Another common one is biodiversity conservation versus genetic improvement, as though it can only be one or the other and a balanced approach to pursuing both objectives is inconceivable.

The recent attack by some NGOs on the Bill and Melinda Gates and the Rockefeller Foundations’ Alliance for the Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) is a classic example of this. Some NGOs have formed an extreme characterisation of an important new initiative of massive potential benefit to millions of farmers and sought to undermine it, without bothering to understand what AGRA is actually doing, and the investments they are making in soil fertility research, for example.

It seems to me that there is an urgent need for rational evidence-based debate and we must not allow the discussion to be hijacked by ideologues promoting their own personal agendas. It is surely time for rational discussion and more importantly action.

## The art of the possible: some examples

I want to move on from unhelpful debates to give some practical examples of what we, in FARM-Africa, have found to work on the ground in Africa and some promising areas of potential investment.

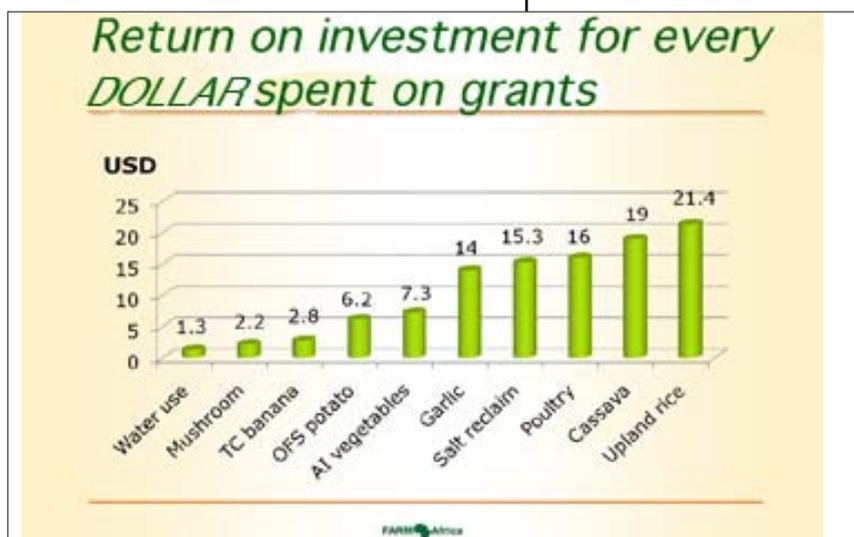
FARM-Africa focuses its work on marginalised groups of farmers, pastoralists and forest dwellers who have the potential to respond to new opportunities when offered. Our strategy is to innovate through our grassroots projects, develop models of good practice that others can adopt and disseminate these models to potential adopters. We take delight in showing to doubters what poor people are able to do when given half a chance.

Six years ago we were approached by the Gatsby Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation to manage a new competitive grants fund, now known as the Maendeleo Agricultural Technology Fund. Since that time we have funded 67 projects giving small grants to farmers’ organisations, local and international NGOs and government organisations to work in partnerships to test a wide range of new agricultural technologies. Fig.1 shows the significant returns on investment from these grants.

We have found that challenge funds can be a very effective mechanism for reaching the grassroots, by-passing blockages. The trouble can be in finding continuity of funding to support the testing of new technology and the scaling-up of successes. That is why we are looking for new funding to do just that and take the best projects to scale.

The problems confronting farmers on small plots of land are manifold. One option for them is to develop a more intensive dairy goat system. Dairy Goat development is another

Figure 1. Return of investment for every dollar spent on grants



area where FARM-Africa now has a tried and tested approach to supporting farmers living on very small farms of 1 ha or less. A more intensive stall-fed system of feeding improved dairy goats offers significant benefits to poor farmers. The goats will supply milk and manure. Nitrogen-fixing fodder trees and crops will improve and stabilise the soil as well as feed goats. Male goats can be sold for high prices for slaughter or breeding. This has lifted farm incomes from about \$98 p.a. to close to \$1,000 p.a. FARM-Africa has been developing this hugely popular system over for 20 years. We now find ourselves in the extraordinary position of having a technology that is so popular, with demand far outstripping supply, that there is a danger that the original achievement will be undermined and exhausted of breeding stock!

In parallel with the dairy goat system FARM-Africa has also developed a financially viable private veterinary system that delivers affordable animal health care to even the poorest livestock keeper. This system is in response to the decline in state veterinary

services and the slowly emerging private sector, which is mainly focused on commercial farms in higher-potential areas, leaving the vast majority of livestock very poorly served. NGOs have played a significant role in pioneering community-based delivery systems, which are as yet not recognised by most veterinary authorities in Africa.

FARM-Africa has found a way to meet the legal requirements of regulatory authorities as well as delivering veterinary services deep into rural areas. Through the GALVmed project, Protecting Livestock Saving Human Life, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, we are now developing a business plan to look at scaling up this system through a franchised business model. Franchising offers quality assurance, scalability and significant economies of scale. This social enterprise could potentially change the landscape of service delivery in rural Africa.

The principles of social enterprise have also been applied in Ethiopia where FARM-Africa works in partnership with the Oromia State Forest Enterprise to conserve indigenous forests in the Bale mountains of southern Ethiopia, through the involvement of communities in managing the forests on which they depend. We are now looking to secure financing for this conservation work



over 500,000 ha, through the Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) voluntary carbon market. This could raise very significant funding to support these community conservation measures.

## Action now

There is an urgent need for effective and efficient support services for farmers and pastoralists in Africa. We know that farmers can respond to opportunities but need support to do so. There remain huge gaps in service provision due to the withdrawal/decline of state services. The private sector will not spontaneously and miraculously fill this gap, without encouragement or incentives to reduce their risk and secure investment costs. The private sector will naturally concentrate in the higher-potential, lower risk, more commercial environments where money can be made, more reliably. A major role for NGOs is showing what the commercial potential of smallholder farmers is and showing the untapped business opportunities, of which there are many.

It is time for African governments to back their farmers in a constructive and consistent way. They need performance-driven extension workers that really deliver and are accountable for the advice they give. African governments need to learn to play a proper facilitating role that enables other non-state actors to play their part, to regulate the

behaviour of their own staff and others, which ensures high-quality affordable services are delivered to farmers in an accountable manner.

Africa desperately needs responsible leadership at all levels in its society. What a difference it would make if resources were allocated in this way and grants were treated like investment finance with a focus on performance and returns delivered over a defined period. Community-embedded enterprises could thrive and, at last, Africa's farmers would have their destiny in their own hands. The potential of Africa's farmers could be unlocked and the world would, at last, see what is possible.

## In Africa...anything is possible.

