

What Role for Ministries of Agriculture in the 21st century?

Narratives on agricultural policy

Different 'narratives' – or storylines – about agricultural policies are being pushed by different actors in the policy process, each envisages a different kind of ministry of agriculture. Three different versions are elaborated. One sees the return of the hey-day of the sectoral ministry with capacity and policy clout – to address the major constraints of agriculture, it is argued, what is required is a strong, well-funded line ministry, and the challenge today is to rebuild such an organisation. A second – at the other extreme – sees such sectoral ministries taking on a minimal role, focused on oversight and regulation, as the private sector takes on a more substantive role in a 'free-market' environment. A third, perhaps less stridently articulated than the others, sees an important role for the state – and the ministry of agriculture, together with other state agencies – in addressing the coordination and intermediation roles of getting markets to work effectively, while ensuring at the same time public efforts are targeted to poverty reduction.

Which of these models – or hybrids and variants of them – make sense today? In the twenty-first

century, ministries of agriculture are no longer the key architect and driver of agricultural policies and policy reform. Other public sector agencies and non-state actors play, increasingly, a more central role in the reform and development of the agriculture sector.

Under existing policy frameworks emphasising liberalisation and structural adjustment, important areas of state intervention and spending in agriculture are often no longer within the mandate of ministries of agriculture. With the state removed from agricultural production and marketing, the key areas of public sector intervention are now rural infrastructure development (construction and maintenance of roads, transports, communications and irrigation), stabilising the economy (managing the exchange rate and maintaining fiscal discipline and low inflation), contract enforcement, and negotiating trade conditions with commercial partners (tariffs, bio-safety standards, etc.). Hence, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the role of ministries of agriculture seems to be no longer that of 'transforming' the sector, or indeed the whole economy, as they had been expected to be before, but one of 'regulation' and 'facilitation', in a context where they act merely as 'part players'.

Alternative visions for ministries of agriculture?

What is the state of play today?

There are signs that old-style, top-down, hierarchical ministries are still desperately clinging to their vision, making the case – often in nationalist terms – for state commitment to agriculture as a core sector (for growth, food security, etc.). On the other hand, there are also signs of concessions to elements of liberalisation and structural reform, although there has not been an entire buy-in to the 'free market' vision, where the state's role in agriculture would nearly disappear. The result is, it appears, often a poor compromise. There is neither the capacity to deliver on conventional roles (extension, research etc.), nor the agility or responsiveness to be the new-style regulator, coordinator or facilitator. Also, ministries often become, at the admission of their own staff, unable to function effectively, and so fail to respond effectively to the many challenges and opportunities of the sector and beyond.

This has been exacerbated by a range of other factors, including declines in available financial resources, from government or donor coffers; the impacts of

structural adjustment on state capacity and functioning; efforts at decentralisation which have resulted in deconcentration and dissipation of effort and competence; shifts in the aid framework towards direct budget support reducing the role and influence of sectoral ministries; the loss of technical capacity within sectoral ministries to other jobs in the NGO sector, and the on-going and devastating impacts of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on all public services in Africa.

Beyond the impasse?

The confusion on roles and responsibilities has not been clarified by the recent statements by aid donors on agricultural development directions by donors and others, who have offered ambiguous messages as to what is expected of the state. We seem to be at an impasse. What are the next steps? Reforms since the 1980s have mostly been premised on a 'free-market' narrative of agricultural development; they have sought to down-size, restructure and change functions radically. While this was resisted and often very incompletely implemented,

the result is often a dysfunctional organisation, ill-equipped for new challenges.

What has not been tried – and is still not part-and-parcel of most reform initiatives funded by donors – is trying to maintain strong state capacity, but refocus attention on key roles – including investment in state-led reforms to help create the structural conditions for a kick-starting the agricultural economy. This requires on-going investment in coordination and intermediation functions to ensure emergent agricultural markets function effectively, especially for the poor and in more marginal areas. This is not a small, down-sized state function as envisaged by the peddlers of much 'good governance' and 'public sector reform' interventions, but a substantial state function, requiring a professionalized, skilled, and well-paid staff base situated within the state.

What is the likelihood of such a shift in emphasis? Moving the locus back towards now financially, professionally and politically weakened sectoral ministries (even with a new look) will not be easy.

There are plenty who benefit from the new status quo, and the actor-networks that have formed around the new aid modalities are strong and influential. With weak, often poorly articulated, agrarian political constituencies, the opportunities for advocates of agricultural development to emerge within the state remain limited too.

But a reinvigorated ministry of agriculture, one capable and willing to synchronize different interests, provide a sense of direction and ensure that policy choices on the ground are actually consistent with the collective rhetoric on poverty and inequality reduction, is critical. With agriculture such a crucial sector in Africa, providing the source of livelihoods for more than two thirds of the poor and for the majority of the chronically poor, reimagining a developmental state with a strong Ministry of Agriculture is a critical challenge for governments and donors alike.

by Lidia Cabral and Ian Scoones

*Correspondence to:
i.scoones@ids.ac.uk and
l.cabral@odi.org.uk*

