

Why Agriculture Keeps Getting Output Scrambled

The recent scarcity of eggs in parts of the country is indicative of just how much the poultry sector is in disarray. Is this symbolic of a deeper malaise in our agriculture industry as a whole?

The egg drought, as it has been dubbed in some quarters, has captured the interest of Nigerians from all walks of life as one would imagine; this is attributable to the fact that apart from being a dietary staple, eggs are versatile and have a large variety of functions in food production. There have been several discussions in various media on this confounding situation and most of them rightly attribute it to the hike in the cost of poultry feed.

The egg scarcity is indeed a direct consequence of the production (cost, and poor quality, of available feed) and marketing of the product. Poultry farmers had previously sounded alarm bells over this situation, stating that the escalating prices were adversely affecting poultry farming and it was becoming near impossible to produce and deliver quality eggs to consumers. It stands to reason that if the birds are not properly fed they are neither able to develop well nor able to lay eggs. From climate change to supply chain disruptions there are several factors that can potentially affect feed prices. The crux, however, is the availability or lack of inputs used in the feed production.

According to the February 6 publication of Premium Times, the cost of soybeans, which is a crucial component of the feed, rose by almost 100 percent in the space of one year, the high rise in cost a clear consequence of its scarcity. Soybeans and maize which are currently in short supply are the main ingredients for poultry feed in Nigeria and constitute about 75 percent of the feed composition. The scarcity of these grains has compelled feed manufacturers to reduce the soybean content, which is a rich source of protein for birds. This has in turn affected the output of the poultry subsector: reduction in yield of lean meat from broilers and poor-quality egg from layers. This translates to output shortage in the market for consumers.

When considering the extremely low yields of the grains (in subsistence farming that dominates agriculture in Nigeria) and its attendant disruption to the entire value chain, which spells suboptimal production and attendant losses to the economy, it is clear that the agriculture sector is in very dire straits. Despite the number of government schemes and initiatives the sector has witnessed, low output and inefficiencies still characterize agriculture, it would seem that it must therefore be a function of inefficiency on the parts of

the farmers. However, these schemes such as the Agri-Business/Small and Medium Enterprise Investment (AGSMEIS), under the auspices of The NIRSAL Agric Loan, and the Anchor Borrowers Programme have been far from impactful on a large scale. There have been isolated cases of success but these are negligible in terms of the big picture. The bulk of rural farmers do not have access to these loans and do not sell their produce to 'anchor' processing companies. In many cases, there are no roads in place to enable the very transportation of produce. In other words, the realities of farming and the challenges faced will not be resolved by merely making some capital available to 'anchors'. Private-sector initiatives such as Babban Gona, Crop2Cash, or FarmCrowdy all prove that less centralization and less government delivers greater results.

Looking at the situation holistically, there are number of factors that affect farming and in particular, the cultivation and successful yield of the grains in question in the country. From insecurity and its attendant consequences on farmers, banditry and kidnapping, the drought in the soybean-producing states in the North Central, and of course the pandemic, these shocks to the agriculture industry, in addition to the resurgence of the pathogenic avian influenza (bird flu), have effectively crippled the poultry subsector.

Attempts have been made by the Federal Government to alleviate the situation by releasing five thousand metric tonnes of maize, a step in the right direction but a drop in the proverbial ocean, as grossly inadequate as the quantity is insignificant in the scheme of things considering that the annual maize requirement for the poultry industry is about 1 million metric tonnes. The Central Bank of Nigeria also weighed in by causing maize importation to be halted in the hope that local productivity would be boosted, again a rather premature decision. Although in the long run, importation of this fairly simple to cultivate grain should not be an option, a prudent stance could be to gradually phase out importation whilst putting measures in place to tackle local production issues and other efficiency challenges that render outputs uncompetitive. Research by the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) indicates that maize production could be much higher and efficient than the current yield of 1.77 tonnes per hectare, peer countries such as Indonesia yield 5.33 tonnes per hectare. This can easily be replicated in Nigeria were the political will and market structures present. Production of soybean on the other hand is not as low in comparison with peer countries but could also benefit from implementation of research.

Yield in tonnes per hectare

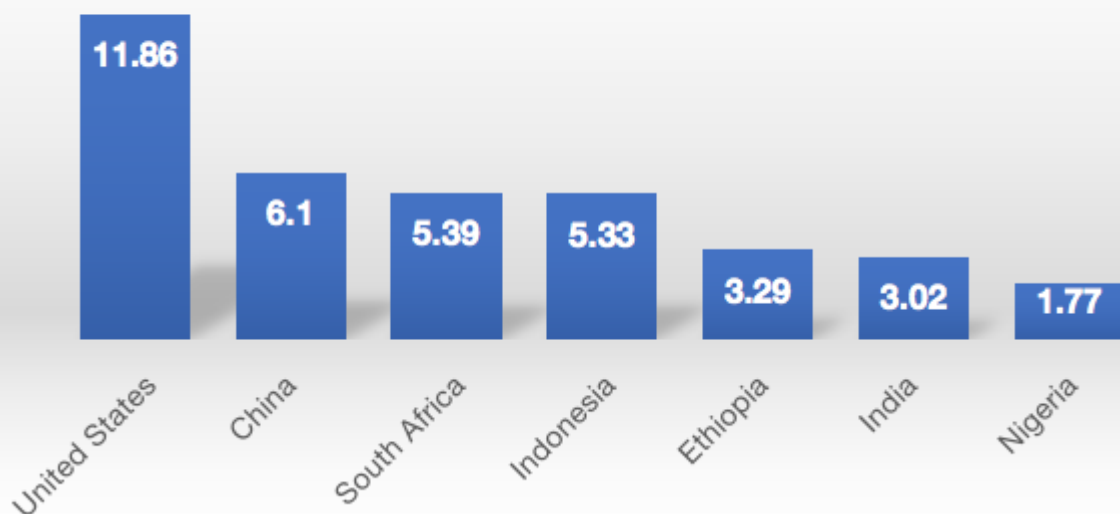


Table 1: Maize production yield in tonnes per hectare

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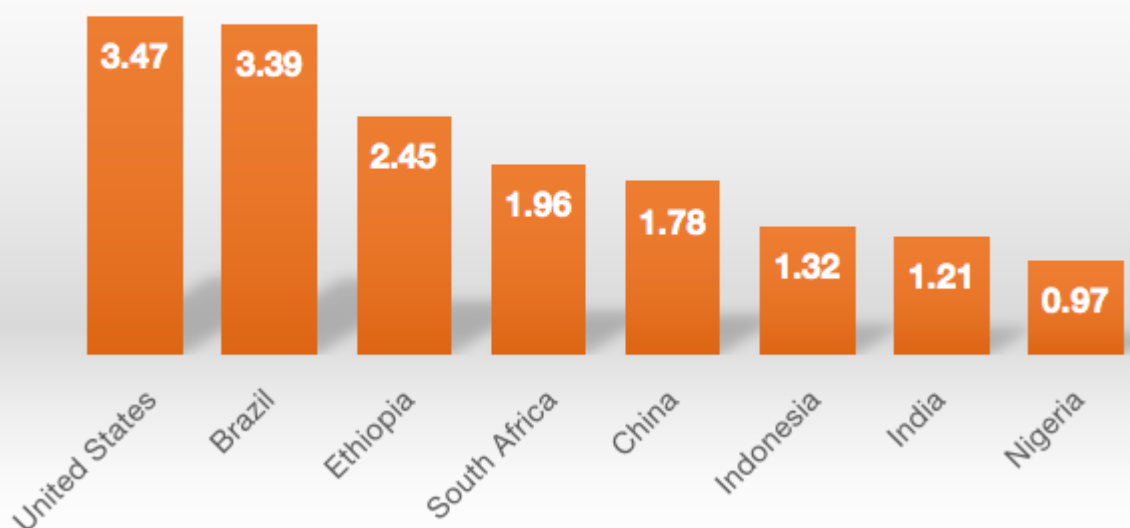


Table 2: Soybean production yield in tonnes per hectare

With the ever-expanding global narrative on agriculture as a vehicle to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal of food security and Nigeria's failure to attain the same staring the nation with deepening of poverty and sceptre of hunger; disturbing statistics from

UNICEF reveal 37 percent of children under 5 are stunted due to malnutrition and 14 percent suffer from acute malnutrition. This situation can only be rectified in the long term if the stability and expansion of the agriculture sector in the short- and medium-term, respectively, are foremost in the plans of policy makers. In order to attain this stability and food security, the following solutions must be implemented:

- Insecurity in rural and agrarian communities must be tackled once and for all.
- Promote efficient production and expansion of key inputs for animal feed.
- Increase research on other options of protein and carbohydrate components of poultry feed should be undertaken by appropriate institutions in the country.
- Formulate appropriate initiatives for climate change and effective soil and water management should be factored into the cultivation and harvest of crops.
- Wastage in agriculture should be cut down by adopting efficient and sustainable storage and transportation mechanisms.
- Introduction of sustainable farming practices should be made to farmers.

These issues besetting the agriculture sector should be properly deconstructed and dealt with otherwise the country may not be able to achieve food security, a situation that would worsen the poverty crisis. Today, it is eggs that are in short supply; this feels fairly harmless and there is in fact a somewhat light-hearted, mirthful air about it. However, as the poultry farmers who already feel the direct impact of this situation would attest to, there is nothing remotely amusing about this state of affairs, as it is symbolic of a deep-seated malaise of low productivity and high protectionism in Nigerian agriculture sector. It needs to be addressed with the urgency and pragmatism required by a sector that is central to the economy.