

“ Human capital will play a pivotal role in the transformation of African economies ”

The potential the African food sector holds is still far too strongly associated with the continent's natural resources, Ben Leyka maintains. He seeks to change this with the African Agri Council.

Mr Leyka, what is the story behind the African Agri Council?

The African Agri Council NPC – AAC for short – was launched in 2015 to promote the development of sustainable food and agriculture in Africa by facilitating private sector investment in bankable opportunities. Our goal was to build a network of senior executives and policy-makers, provide a platform for our network to connect and share insights, as well as create a hunting ground for investment ready projects. The Council was determined to present African agriculture as a business – for far too long the industry was dominated by public sector and donor funding, while its value was often presented in the continent's availability of land and water. So the AAC partnered with financial institutions, private equity firms, asset managers and Development Financial Institutions to present a new narrative of what African agriculture could be, one that combines the availability of land and water with favourable policies and private sector investment. We started working with government officials, project owners and developers to identify bankable agricultural projects and connect them to our financial community.

What does it take to move the sector forward in this sense? And what is the ACC doing here?

First, we must change the perception of African agriculture. The AAC joined the “making agriculture sexy” campaign to attract the youth by shifting the focus away from primary agriculture presented through “pictures of women carrying a child on their back, working on a farm with primitive tools, under a burning sun” to modern and commercial agriculture across the value chain. The integration of the youth in food and agriculture can only happen through commercial activities instead of subsistence farming.

Second, emphasis on entrepreneurship. Sustainable development of the sector must be driven by agri-food entrepreneurs. However, many entrepreneurs face huge challenges – from obtaining initial funding and accessing essential skills, to understanding market access and operating a sustainable business. Africa cannot reach a food-secured status without investing in human capital development for

small and medium scale farmers (midstream), agribusiness start-ups (upstream and downstream) and co-operatives. Our project Athari Africa focuses on improving agri-food entrepreneurs' productivity, business model and access to finance.

Third, for all its potential to transform Africa into an industrialised continent, agriculture can trap people into poverty if it remains solely reliant on public sector and donor funding. Private sector involvement and investment is paramount to achieving food security in Africa – policy-makers must create conducive environments to facilitate the flow of private sector funding and expertise. The AAC has built one of the largest networks of private sector operators in Africa.

Lastly, investment in food and agriculture is particularly treacherous, with low productivity in many African countries, devastating impacts of climate change, and limited access to infrastructure and technology. As a result, institutional investors, donors and funding partners are unlikely to reach those most in need to truly ensure a food secure Africa. Agri-food entrepreneurs who are tapped into regional markets, who already have some investment capacity and are a little bit better equipped can attract the interest of the investment com-

munity. But then the most marginalised who don't have secure land rights, market access or financial access are left behind. The Council's Nexus of Agri, an upcoming digital members' platform, addresses this problem.

What does AAC's approach feature?

We believe that Africa's food and agriculture development must be based on sound economic and business principles to ensure long-term sustainability. As a result, all our programmes and initiatives are built on a solid business foundation, with an understanding that accelerated food and agriculture funding and investment can only take place if realistic fundamentals exist. The events which we run are developed through research with industry experts and organised by event experts, a combination which ensures their quality and relevance. They focus on investment, market accessibility, policy reforms and technological innovation. All our programmes and activities are closely intertwined and provide a continuous support throughout the value chain.

Could you mention some examples?

Our project Athari Africa was launched in 2021 and is working with over 600 beneficiaries in South Africa and Botswana. It houses



Participants at this year's African Agri Investment Indaba in Cape Town, South Africa.

Photo: African Agri Council

the market support programme, the co-op support programme for agricultural cooperatives and AFTI – the agri-food technical innovation programme. These programmes target the youth, with 65 per cent representing women-led and -influenced agribusinesses. Athari Africa's ambitious target is to develop and up-skill ten million agribusiness start-ups by leveraging our network of global agriculture and financial experts as well as policy-makers.

For several years now, we have organised the African Agri Investment Indaba (AII), which has brought together over 4,000 key stakeholders during the past five editions to discuss trends influencing food and agribusiness economics over the next decade in Africa. The Market Access Africa (MAA) first edition brought together 781 participants from across the globe to showcase the latest technologies and trends that will raise the continent's food and agricultural productivity, adapt to climate change, link to trading services and access new markets.

What are you especially proud of?

The AAC has successfully removed barriers that existed within the African food and agriculture value chain by bringing policy-makers, investors, senior executives from established businesses as well as start-ups and emerging ventures representing the entire value chain together, linking projects to financiers, investors and service providers.

Have the challenges which the sector is facing changed over the last few years?

The main challenges faced in African agriculture are well documented: access to finance, access to market, access to technology, restrictive policies, climate change and lack of skilled labour among others. A rising world population, a global pandemic, and a conflict in Ukraine combined with climate change impacts and increased inflation have disrupted food production, distribution, accessibility and affordability across the globe. Vulnerabilities in global food systems have been exposed, fueling further concerns about resilience and sustainability in the food and agriculture industry.

But you are nevertheless optimistic...

Yes. Africa is well positioned to become the global breadbasket; with 60 per cent of the world's unused cropland spread across the continent that can be used for farming, it has the potential to emerge as a major food supplier. African governments are prioritising agriculture on their respective development agendas, and this shift has been supported by increased access to technological innova-

tions and investments from the private sector and development partners. However, despite those positive developments, African food systems have been severely impacted by external shocks over the past three years.

How have you responded to these new challenges?

Through Athari Africa, the AAC has adapted its strategy to promoting the development of sustainable food and agriculture, by prioritising human capital development as central to building sustainable and resilient food systems. The availability of land, water and investment needs to be supported by skilled labour.

Where do you see the public sector's role here?

Whether African economies will be able to prioritise human capital in their development agendas or not will be determined by policy action taken now to address training and learning gaps. African countries unfortunately have traditionally lacked a clear human capital development plan that supports strategically identified sectors like food and agriculture. Africa is the world's most youthful continent, and its young people are its most precious resource. Human capital will play a pivotal role in the transformation of the continent's economies as well as the resilience and sustainability of its food systems. The public sector has an opportunity to establish investment in human capital as a key priority on the continental development agenda, given the current global shocks.

The 5th edition of African Agri Investment Indaba was held just a few days ago. Are you satisfied with it?

This AII edition was truly special, from the amount of networking that was conducted onsite, it was evident, after a three-year hiatus of the show, that our industry welcomed the return of this platform allowing people to connect, share insights and have important discussions around investment opportunities across Africa's agri value chain. Over the three days, we were delighted to host 800 participants from over 30 countries who engaged in more than 3,900 B2B meetings. The event welcomed over 40 representatives from global Development Financial Institutions to discuss their strategic approach to achieving food security in Africa. The "Women in Commercial Agriculture and Agro-processing" workshop welcomed over 300 attendees – once again showcasing the industry's commitment to elevating women-led and -influenced agribusinesses' status. So we look forward to welcoming our members, partners and network to the

next edition of the Agri Indaba from the 20th-22nd November 2023.

And what is happening in the meantime?

The African Agri Council is at a crossroads; it must strengthen its institutional capacity as a pan-African institution to keep up with the growing demand of ensuring a food-secured continent by strategically aligning its activities and programmes to support continental and global agendas.

Athari Africa, which will include beneficiaries from Burkina Faso, DR Congo, Namibia, Nigeria and Zambia in 2023, is well positioned to support the African Continental Free Trade Area. The AfCFTA is a game-changer as it triggers regional integration of agriculture value chains; successful integration requires qualified companies producing enough products for local and regional consumption that are able to compete against foreign products. The AAC will play an essential part in facilitating the transfer of skills and technology and launch a global PR campaign to build trust in the 'Made in Africa' brand now being developed by the African Union and the European Union in consultation with the private sector. Through its various platforms, it will connect buyers, sellers, solution providers and financial institutions.

Interview: Silvia Richter



Ben Leyka is Chief Executive Officer of the African Agri Council NPC. He has worked with global stakeholders, including the Pan-African Parliament, the crowdfunding platform Capital Surge Inc and the investment company Equitics. Ben sits on various Board Committees and is also involved with the Africa 1st Initiative and DRC Invest. Contact: ben.leyka@agricouncil.org