Several clauses in the American Trade and Development Act, also known as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) relate to agriculture. Agriculture is a major component of the Zimbabwean economy, employing more than 70 percent of the population. Agriculture contributes at least 40 percent of merchandise exports and provides raw materials for at least 60 percent of the manufactured products.

Section 130 of AGOA gives authority to the US secretary of agriculture, in consultation with American Land Grant colleges, universities and not-for-profit international organisations, to conduct a two-year study on ways of improving the flow of American farming techniques and practices to African farmers. The Secretary of Agriculture is to submit the study to the relevant committees in both the Senate and House of Representatives not later than September 30, 2001.

The majority of farmers in Zimbabwe are in the smallholder (communal) sector. Ninety percent of communal areas are located in low rainfall areas, in Natural Regions III, IV and V. There are substantial differences in the production systems within the Communal Areas. For example, agro-pastoral production predominates in Matabeleland, while the production system in Mashonaland is agricultural. Crop planting per farmer involves less than five hectares and family labour is generally used. It is highly questionable whether the highly industrialised agricultural system in the US would be appropriate for these farmers.

The study is expected to examine ways of improving and utilising among other things knowledge of insect control and sanitation procedures.

The US is the world’s leading user of pesticides. These include insecticides, herbicides, fungicides and nematicides. Although there are benefits derivable from the use of pesticides, they can also lead to crop damage, through phytotoxicity as well as ill-health or even death to the user. There is also the problem of pollution of water sources emanating from pesticide use. Some pests, particularly insects and weeds, have developed resistance to many pesticides currently in use. Excessive pesticide residue in agricultural produce is often a cause of concern to consumers and has a negative effect on trade. For example, European Union markets do not accept any pesticide residue on mange tout peas, one of Zimbabwe's most important exports.

The American farming techniques and practices that will flow to African farmers are expected to encourage use of pesticides. A lot of the multinational companies that produce agro-chemicals are based in the US. Encouraging use of these pesticides would also create a market for these products, one likely outcome is that farmers would be discouraged from using the traditional knowledge and practices in crop production and
protection, which they have employed for decades. The traditional knowledge would be relegated in favour of imported technologies.

Farmers in the US have also been leading the way in embracing biotechnology and genetically modified crop plants. These crops have been developed, grown and marketed in the US for several seasons now. Some of these crops have been genetically modified to incorporate genes for insect control. Some plants have been modified to incorporate genes, which impart herbicide resistance. These Roundup ready crops have been grown extensively in the US. Because these plants have a gene that imparts herbicide resistance to them, an American farmer is able to spray these crops with the broad spectrum herbicide (a herbicide that kills a wide spectrum of plants). The herbicide would kill all the weeds, while sparing the crops. The farmer would not need to have a complicated spray programme incorporating pre-planting, pre-emergent, post-emergent, grass-killing as well as broadleaf killing herbicides as would be the case if conventional crops are grown.

However, Africa (with the possible exception of South Africa) has not rushed to embrace genetically modified plants. Zimbabwe insisted on having biosafety regulations in place before any genetically modified organisms could be allowed into the country, or developed within local laboratories. Biosafety regulations have now been promulgated and have been in force since February 2000. A Biosafety Board is now in place, and is tasked with, among other functions, reviewing project proposals and deliberating on the release of genetically modified organisms. A lot of debate is going on regarding the issues surrounding biotechnology in Zimbabwe, and the authorities appear to be proceeding with caution.

The study is also expected to examine ways of improving and utilising "modern farming and soil conservation techniques". American farmers practice monocropping, using certified hybrid seeds, which require high levels of inputs. Many smallholder farmers in Zimbabwe practice mixed cropping and inter-cropping, depending on the purpose of the crop. As much as 90 percent of seed of some so-called "minor" crops, which are important in the smallholder sector, are not certified, as farmers save their own seeds for use in the next season. Recently, the government has initiated steps towards allowing the marketing of open-pollinated maize varieties in response to demands by farmers and civil society. Some of the modern farming techniques that flow from US farmers may therefore be irrelevant to Africa's present circumstances.

The other areas that the study is to focus on are:

- modern farming equipment (including maintaining the equipment);
- marketing crop yields to prospective purchasers; and
- crop maximization practices.

This basic assumption is that US industrial agriculture is appropriate for the vast diversity of land tenure and eco-systems within Africa. This ignores the call of the Conservation of Biodiversity (CBD) for the transfer of appropriate technology from industrialised to the developing countries. The US ignores this requirement since it is not signatory to the CBD, while most African countries are. The sustainability of this arrangement with regards to capital inputs, food security and environmental concerns is questionable.

Section 409 of AGOA relates to agricultural trade negotiating objectives of the US with respect to the current WTO agricultural negotiations. The highest priorities are given to:
the "expeditious elimination of all export subsidies worldwide, while preserving US market development and export credit programmes (both of which are forms of subsidies) that allow the US to compete with other foreign export promotion efforts";

- eliminating blue box subsidies while allowing the preservation of non trade distorting programmes to support family farms in the US; and

- elimination of state trading enterprises or the adoption of "rigorous disciplines" to end "discriminating pricing practices".

There is no acknowledgement that for decades the US government offered extensive price support schemes for farmers to keep the cost of food down for the growing urban population. It was only in the 1980s that the US reduced price supports as such, but it still offers a variety of subsidies to agribusiness, ranging from funding research and development to paying for land to be left fallow. There is no acknowledgement that US practice, while it was developing agriculture, is vastly different from what it is requiring of developing countries today.

In that same section there is an affirmation of the WTO agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures as it applies to new technologies, including biotechnology. However, the statement goes on to say that labelling requirements may not be used as disguised barriers to trade. It is common knowledge that the US has, at many fora, vehemently opposed the labelling of products containing genetically modified organisms. However, in Zimbabwe, the Consumer Council is lobbying that any products containing genetically modified organisms should be labelled. This is to enable consumers to make informed choices.

Another objective of US policies is to increase opportunities for that country's exports of agricultural products, by reducing tariffs to the same levels that exist in the United States or to lower levels. This is also to be achieved by eliminating all non-tariff barriers, such as restrictions or commercial requirements affecting new technologies, including biotechnology. The emphasis on biotechnology is probably because the EU market has dragged its feet regarding consumption of products of genetically modified organisms. Africa is therefore seen as a possible market (or dumping ground) for such products.

A quote from a statement made by Dr Kwabena Duffuor, the Governor of the Bank of Ghana, in April this year, is self-explanatory: "There has been a serious downturn in the United States economy this year. The possibility of exporting trouble to the rest of the world is a danger stemming from this sharp downturn, with obvious implications for sub-Saharan Africa, encouraged by recent liberalisation measures such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act".


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