Developing leaders in African food systems: Implications for the African Food Fellowship

Scott Drimie

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Preamble

The **African Food Fellowship** is a collaborative, visionary leadership initiative to catalyse the widespread leadership needed to drive healthy, inclusive and sustainable food systems in Africa. Initiated in 2021 by Wageningen University & Research and Wasafiri Consulting, it aspires to grow into a continental professional movement of change agents across public, private and civic spheres. The African Food Fellowship is working with cohorts of selected leaders in (initially) Kenya and Rwanda who join a 10-month food systems leadership programme and after graduation, enter into the Fellowship.

While the African Food Fellowship is starting to deliver on this ambition, important questions need to be explored:

What type of leadership is required to shift food systems in Africa towards more desirable state? And what makes this leadership 'African', and what makes it transformative (influencing policies, power dynamics, investments and incentives)?

The African Food Fellowship is partnering with the **Southern Africa Food Lab** to find answers. This synthesis paper by Scott Drimie (Chief researcher at Stellembosch University) reflects on key reports that resulted from this collaboration so far (July 2022).

Introduction

This short reflective piece draws on the papers prepared by Busiso Moyo and Ralph Hamann commissioned by the African Food Fellowship.

Grappling with identity by engaging Afropolitanism

Hamann argues that the Fellowship can be guided by the notion of "Afropolitanism," based on the writings of prominent African authors including Achille Mbembe[1] particularly a "culture of mobility," through which African identity has been and is shaped by movement of diverse people of different races and cultures within and beyond, and into and out of, the continent. This emphasise the interweaving of African identities and practices with the broader world. Afropolitanism also eschews a "nativist reflex", an ideology glorifying differences and diversity and fighting to safeguard customs and identities perceived as threatened. According to nativistic logic, identities and political struggles are founded on the basis of a distinction between those who are from here (autochthons) and those who came from outside (non-natives).

Afropolitanism fosters a posture of "broad-mindedness" which Hamann suggests is an important underpinning of effective food system leadership and of the Fellowship.

On a related note, Moyo reflects that the term 'African Leadership' may be too broad in its ontological status for the African Food Fellowship and that a more geographically located statement like "leadership in Africa" could work better. The underlying logic being that the use of "African Leadership" raises questions about the intractable challenges of classifying leadership in the context of Africa.

Mbembe, A. & L. Chauvet (2020). Afropolitanism. Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art, 2020(46), 56-61.

Countering epistemic colonialism through dialogue

Moyo's paper is premised on the idea that the AFF should strive to lay the foundations for credible 'decolonial' insights and explorations into culturally coded understandings of leadership that are needed to drive food systems transformations in Africa. Throughout the paper, he demonstrates the ways in which contextual, cultural and historicised factors impose leadership particularities on the African continent. Moyo suggest that decolonising Africa's food systems entails a realisation that transformations will be rooted in intersectional critiques of the world-system, which in-turn should open up spaces for materially-grounded, commons-based reconfigurations of the social and the ecological dimensions of such systems.

Hamann argues that the African Food Fellowship may unwittingly and perhaps subtly perpetuate epistemic colonialism, by privileging particular forms of knowledge and denigrating others. An important response is for the Fellowship programme to put special effort into identifying indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) that may be relevant in identifying both challenges in African food systems and innovative responses.

This requires special effort because IKS are not always easily accessible in both practical and intellectual terms. Practically speaking, IKS have for a long time experienced stigmatisation, so they are often somewhat hidden. In stating this, Hamann identifies an important challenge for the African Food Fellowship to foreground and celebrate IKS, but at the same time not to romanticize IKS or to unduly contrast IKS and "Western" forms of science.

Indeed, where there are clear tensions or even contradictions between prescriptions for action based on IKS and those based on academic knowledge, these need to be foregrounded and discussed in the spirit of open-minded dialogue.

Facilitating dialogue

Dialogue offers an overarching purpose and organizing principle for the Fellowship.

This is not only between different forms of knowledge, focused on addressing food system challenges but also for the Fellowship to develop leaders' capabilities to facilitate such dialogue in their own domains.

Importantly, dialogue aligns to the concept and practice of Ubuntu, an interactive African ethic and way of being that Moyo highlights. Its underpinnings to human interconnectedness and the reciprocal responsibility held by a deep connection to others and through which people can come into their own echo the power of dialogue.

Fostering inclusion in African food systems

Moyo and Hamann both focus on power and inclusion. As Hamann emphasises, it is clear that most Africans are systematically excluded from meaningfully influencing, participating in, or benefiting from global food systems. Moyo argues that structural power asymmetries are perpetuated through the exclusion of many groups, communities, and individuals from processes of creating power, such as knowledge creation.

Practically speaking, this implies that the unequal participation of most Africans in global food systems will need explicit attention in the Fellowship programme. An important objective of the Fellowship and the capabilities it seeks to build in participants will need to be about directly addressing this global, exclusive system.

This is also explicitly about gender. Moyo argues strongly that achieving gender equality and women's empowerment in food systems will result in more just, resilient, and sustainable food systems. The African Food Fellowship has an opportunity (and obligation) to focus on increasing women's voices in envisaging future food systems, should be central to the agenda-setting for transformation and need to be recognised as leaders in the food system.

Hamann argues that the Fellowship will need to grapple explicitly with the role of powerful actors in global and African food systems, whose interventions in African food systems may intentionally or unintentionally perpetuate the exclusion of many Africans from participating in or benefiting from African food systems.

This may lead to adversarial engagement about the nature of power in food systems. Reflecting on the need for dialogue as a core practice of the African Food Fellowship, part of the initiative's mission may be the need to foster an ability and willingness to engage in "critical cooperation" with powerful actors.

The African Food Fellowship will need to be careful about encouraging critical statements or other such forms of activism in those countries, where individuals may become exposed to threats or violence.

Harnessing the diversity of perspectives on African food systems

Moyo carefully describes diversity of perspectives on the problems facing African food systems, as well as the possible responses and required interventions. He argues that a food system approach should foreground social and ecological issues alongside economic concerns. It is key for the African Food Fellowship to enable such diverse perspectives to emerge and be engaged. Hamann build on this, elaborating on the importance of developing some or other posture in responding to this diversity of paradigms.

Providing a compelling example of one such paradigm, Moyo emphasises the imbalance in power and growing corporatisation of food systems as a primary reason for the social and environmental problems in these systems. Another paradigm is the importance of fostering organisational or technological innovations, for example by adapting technologies to local contexts, or by developing new business models or supply chain arrangements. These two examples can be distilled as organizational / technical innovation or social-political advocacy.

It will be valuable for the Fellowship to include at least some Fellows who are targeting this overlap or synergy between technical, organizational, and political dimensions of food system transformation.

Returning to the issue of dialogue, discussions within the African Food Fellowship and its Fellows would benefit from having a diversity and cross-section of these overarching perspectives. Emerging tensions and vigorous contestation between members of the cohort should be handled within a generative and “safe space”, a skill that should be fostered among the participants.

Selecting Fellows as a dynamic and inclusive cohort

Moyo raises the importance of “unpacking” how leaders are identified and mentored with the intent of strengthening such leaders ability to help transform African food systems. Building on this, Hamann considers the overarching implication of selecting Fellows in that they should not just be selected on an individual basis, but as constituent participants in a dynamic cohort. In other words, it is not just the individual learning process that a fellow goes through in the Fellowship that matters, but as important are the social interactions and generative conversations among Fellows in both formal and informal settings.

In shaping a cohort, Hamann reflects that the synergies and tensions mentioned above may be useful, given that different fellow candidates may bring different emphases into the cohort and it would probably be useful to have a generative mix of perspectives.

A second suggestion made by Hamann on fellow selection relates to how people come to be defined as being a (potential) leader in the food system. In other words, to (re)-consider the boundary of the food system to encompass the finance and investment sectors and a strategic definition of state actors that includes those who do not traditionally see themselves as food system actors (beyond agriculture and health). Moyo emphasises that transformation of food systems requires action of all food system actors, across all sectors, levels, and regions extending into the realms not traditionally associated with food.

Finally (and most importantly), Hamann belies that as potential Fellowship candidates may come from very different economic contexts (some in formal employment whilst others are struggling to attract resources), the Fellowship selection process should make sure that access is enabled especially for the latter.

Building leaders' capabilities

The Fellowship is explicitly intended to build Fellows' capabilities to enhance their leadership in African food system transformation.

Moyo surmises that it is important for the AFF to highlight indigenous leadership approaches and consider their similarities and differences with other types of leadership in Africa and beyond. Hamann suggests focusing on capabilities that – premised on the Afropolitan principle – connect global and more Africa-specific considerations. These seven capabilities include:

- **Problem articulation:** Food system actors are often grappling with a diverse array of challenges, and they struggle to articulate a clear focus – and this hampers system analysis and communication with others.
- **System analysis (diagnosis):** System analysis helps Fellows consider and communicate the various factors and dynamics that influence the focal challenge / opportunity.
- **System analysis (prescription):** Systems analysis in the diagnosis phase can often be overwhelming because of the many factors and inter-relationships at play, and the resulting challenge of identifying feasible and effective action. Yet, systems analysis can also enable the identification of "leverage points" for feasible, effective, and efficient interventions.
- **Reflexivity:** Any leadership intervention in the food system will be shaped by the mental models and values of the leader. It is important for a leader to develop a capability to purposefully and effectively foreground these models and values, so as to enable more effective communication and to avoid unintended consequences.
- **Organising:** Fellows are likely to contribute to food system transformation through some or other group or organization, which may be an existing organization or a new venture. The effectiveness and efficiency of the Fellows' interventions will depend on the capabilities of the organization – so, much depends on the leader's ability to build these organizational capabilities.
- **Relating:** A powerful dimension of food system transformation involves changes in actors' relationships, including the number of relational links, the types of links (i.e., across different kinds of actors), and the quality of relationship (including aspects such as trust and reciprocity). Fellows should come to recognise the important role of relating and practice themselves in creating and nurturing diverse relationships.
- **Facilitating:** We have learnt that a particularly important opportunity for food system transformation is in the organization of collaborative processes (sometimes known as "change labs" or "innovation labs" or the like). African Food Fellowship Fellows can become impactful change agents by understanding the potential of such processes, participating committedly in them, and / or hosting or facilitating such processes.

On reflection, these capabilities would progress Moyo's concern for more effective conceptual and practical understandings of "food system governance", an enigmatic concept due to its multi-dimensional and multi-scalar characteristics. Moyo also reminds us that transformation of food systems will result in winners and losers, indicating the need to govern or manage these processes for equitable conditions and outcomes.

Building networks and partnerships among Fellows

Hamann reflects on the significant opportunity for the African Food Fellowship to build networks and partnerships among Fellows within and between countries. The interactions between Fellows during the Fellowship already provide important opportunities for such relationships to emerge.

It is often difficult to maintain networks for their own sake recognising that networks tend to strengthen if they are a means to an end, rather than an end in themselves. One option might be to explore ways to energise national and pan-African networks of Fellows by convening innovation labs focused on overarching food system challenges or opportunities that are relevant to a large proportion of Fellows.

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