

## Commentary

### Of Meetings, Women and Agriculture:

#### Women's access to productive resources is a necessary precondition to achieving global food security and peace



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*The Author's presentation to the "Seed Security for Food Security Panel" at the World Food Prize, Borlaug Dialogue in Des Moines, Iowa, Oct 13 2015.*

A meeting recently took place in Des Moines, Iowa under the theme "Borlaug 101: Fundamentals of Global Food Security" to celebrate the 101<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the birth of Dr. Norman E. Borlaug, the father of the Green Revolution. The 2015 World Food Prize Borlaug Dialogue was convened by the World Food Prize Foundation from October 14-16, 2015 at the Des Moines Marriott Downtown, Iowa. The attendance register read like the who is who in agriculture debate and practice from across the globe and included policy and research gurus and institutions, as well as farmers and students.

I had a chance to meet with Pedro A. Sanchez, the Director of Agriculture and Food Security Center at the Earth Institute, Columbia University, but probably more associated with Millennium Villages and Per Pinstrup-Andersen, Professor Emeritus at the Cornell University Division of Nutritional Sciences and former Director General of International

Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) whose tenure at the helm of IFPRI is credited with the conception of IFPRI's Vision 2020. It is instructive that the concept was adopted indiscriminately by government and corporate entities as a tool for strategic planning without regard to the twin pillars underpinning the vision; that of clarity and focus as denoted by visual acuity 20/20, being the perfect vision; and the temporal consideration of strategies to the year 2020. Most of these visions, such as vision 2030, vision 2040, and even vision 2063, have temporal considerations as to date targets, but lack clarity in strategic thinking that would propel them to fruition.....but I digress.

It is interesting to note that between October 4 and 7 2015, another meeting, the First International Congress on Post-harvest Loss Prevention took place in Rome, Italy. Rome, which hosts three major UN food and agriculture related institutions, FAO, WFP and IFAD, is the undisputed food meetings capital of the world. It goes to demonstrate just how much agriculture and food development are inextricably connected with meetings, a situation that has persisted for over six million years of mankind's existence on earth, the other part of the agriculture and food security equation being the role of women and the support they require to ensure that the food security challenge is consigned to the dustbin of history.

Let me illustrate with an adaptation of a story from one of the 1970s or 1980s issues of Readers' Digest, (with acknowledgement to and kind permission.)

"Man has always been a hunter gatherer, and early man (six million or so years ago), wandering around Olduvai gorge in the plains of the Serengeti, a few hundred kilometers to the south west of Nairobi as the eagle flies, was no exception. In these hostile but wildlife rich environments, it was the duty of man to hunt and bring home the beef from the abundant antelope, gazelle, deer, buffalo etc. for woman to cook (some smart fellow...could have been a woman...had earlier discovered the art of making fire by brisk rubbing of two dry sticks)

As long as the numbers were for domestic consumption equilibrium was maintained hence no cause for alarm. Then population growth, trade and climate change happened and numbers of relevant prey started to dwindle. In the interest of self-preservation the deer *et al*, crafted strategies for ensuring survival and learned to run much faster to escape capture. As a consequence it became increasingly difficult to bring home the 'beef' and the human race started to starve. Starvation was a serious thing and could lead to destabilization of community peace.

The men therefore decided to address this problem with the seriousness it deserved, convene a meeting under some choice acacia tree to "brainstorm status, causes, effects and implementable solutions to mitigate the current precarious status of community food security". As with such meetings, options were in abundance and promising one were teased out and put on top of the agenda at the next meeting. It is evident these endless meetings were not yielding the necessary interventions and full blown famine was staring man and womankind in the face.

It has been a tradition that woman is not part of these meetings except to offer some form of relief through provision of food and drink. Since both were in short supply, woman was not part of the arrangement and therefore whiled away in the fields seeking some form of nourishment for the children. She experimented with varieties of plant leaves, nuts, berries, roots and tubers to see if some nourishment could be supplied through these alternatives. This was a risky undertaking as some plants were poisonous and fatal accidents did occur. Suffice to say that, after eons of this experimentation, promising plant varieties were selected and made available for use as food. With time, production of better pasture and grains made it possible to lure the antelope, deer and buffalo back to the cave for domestication.

Thus agriculture was invented. It wouldn't have happened without women and meetings"

And so once again, due to the current global food security crisis, the world headed to the American corn and wheat heartland, for another meeting to “.....brainstorm on the status, causes, effects and implementable solutions to mitigate the current precarious status of global food security”. It is significant however that this time round, as is its tradition, the Borlaug 101 recognized the roles and achievements of women in the agriculture and food security discourse. Through special presentations and exhibitions, the roles and achievements of women were celebrated.

- A large banner on the second floor landing of the Des Moines Marriott Downtown, showcased the Svalbard Seed Vault, supported by the Global Crop Diversity Trust, with in 2006 Nobel Laureate Prof. Wangari Maathai and Norwegian Prime Minister partnering to deposit seed in the vault for posterity.
- There were panel discussions involving African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD) with the Director, Wanjiru Kamau-Rutenberg, articulating practical options for advancing agricultural research in Africa, and AWARD’s catalytic role in equipping top women scientists across sub-Saharan Africa to accelerate gains by strengthening their research leadership skills. It is noteworthy that since the early man days, the majority of those who produce, process, and market Africa’s food are women, while only one in four agricultural researchers is a woman. It is time to aggressively give recognition and support to the role of women in food production research. This, as amply illustrated above, will be a necessary precondition for survival of mankind.
- This adaptation of “evolution of agriculture” was part of a presentation at the seed side event; “Seed Security for Food Security” panel discussion convened by DuPont Pioneer. Pertinent issues on structural, policy and administrative challenges constraining access to improved quality seed by smallholder farmers were elaborated by Dr. Ed Mabaya of Cornell International Institute for Food, Agriculture and Development (CIIFAD) and Principal Investigator of the Africa Seed Access Index (TASAI); and a panel comprising Dr. Monty Jones, Special Advisor to the President and Ambassador at Large for Sierra Leone; Lystra Antoine, Global Director for Sustainable Agriculture Development at DuPont Pioneer among others.... It was noteworthy that the TASAI identifies bottlenecks in diverse national seed systems, including policy and structural constraints that must be addressed if a majority of smallholder farmers in Africa who are marginalized women, are to access quality seed for the required productivity improvement.

In this and other regards, the “Borlaug 101: Fundamentals of Global Food Security” made a strong statement...“Empowerment of women in all spheres of the agricultural value chain is a precondition for sustainable agricultural development and enhanced food security incorporating freedom and stability”. This includes actionable policies and strategies to improve women's access to land and other productive resources, including finance, seed, fertilizer, and extension service and irrigation technology.

Having acknowledged and indeed accepted this reality, we would certainly remove the headwinds that limit growth in Africa's agriculture ("Africa's Potential for Agriculture 2015", Howard G. Buffett Foundation); eventually creating a stable and enabling environment for agriculture to thrive and contribute to Africa's and Global Food Security and peace. To paraphrase Claude Bernard, 1865, *La fixité du milieu intérieur est la condition de lavie libre'*