



"Based on World Food Prize 2013 Proceedings"

Ending African Hunger: Some Lessons For African Leaders

By Abdallah el-Kurebe

The greatest challenge in human history is before us. It is the challenge of feeding a world population that would be upped from seven to nine billion people by the year 2050. It is one of the reasons that the Borlaug Dialogue, an annual series, was organised by the World Food Foundation to discuss the way forward.

Facts

- By 2050 the world population is expected to reach 9 billion people. Most interestingly, the major part of the population growth will occur in developing countries. East and South East Asia's population will rise by 228 million people (up by 11 percent) to 2.3 billion while Sub-Saharan Africa's population is expected to grow faster by 910 million people (up by 108 percent) to 1.7 billion by 2050. Source: The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO).
- FAO forecasts that food production will have to increase by 70 percent until 2050. This means that due to the increasing consumption of food per capita as well as changes in diets, the projected nine billion people could consume the amount of food required for an astounding 13 billion people.
- There are 525 million farms worldwide. Eighty-seven percent are found in Asia. There, the average area cultivated by a farmer is 1.6 hectares. In comparison, the average crop-land in Europe is 27 hectares, in North America it is as big as 121 hectares, according to IAASTD.

The 2013 Iowa Hunger Summit held in October to commemorate with the UN World Food Day, has come and gone leaving food for thoughts for actionable leaders across the globe. This is most especially the African leaders in which continent hunger has stroke harder. Or so it seems.

With its theme tagged, Biotechnology, sustainability and climate volatility, the Dialogue recognised Marc Van Montagu from Belgium; Mary-Dell Chilton and Robert T. Fraley from the United States for founding, developing and applying modern agricultural biotechnology towards ensuring adequate food and nutrition for the world populace.

Their researches have made it possible for farmers to grow crops with improved yields, resistance to insects and disease, and the ability to tolerate extreme variations

in climate such as excessive heat and drought. The award was not only inspiring for African Scientists but also a lesson for African governments.

The Dialogue further aimed at improving food security, enhancing agriculture and nutrition, and reducing hunger and poverty globally. And the mantra of the event, which were in the form of speeches, panels and press conferences, was the ability of biotechnology to "feed the 9 billion people expected to populate the world by 2050," particularly in underdeveloped regions of China, India and Africa.

World leaders like former Prime Minister of Great Britain, Tony Blair; current President of Iceland, Olafur Ragnar Grimsson and President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Cardinal Peter K. A. Turkson, attended and delivered inspiring speeches.

Sandwiched between proponents and opponents of biotechnology at the Summit, Turkson urged both sides of the issue of whether to use biotechnology to solve the world's hunger crisis or sit down and try to find a solution that works for all. "It is not [farmers] who are missing the point. Whoever refuses to look at the whole food insecurity picture - people and their dignity and their lives as well as food production and distribution - will miss the point."

He brought up the debate between the two sides biotechnology crowd saying, "When you juxtapose the World Food Prize and the Occupy World Food Prize, at first glance the divergence can appear and sound like polar opposition. The urgency of world hunger and food insecurity certainly cries out for 'rightful betterment,' and therefore calls for dialogue. For the dialogue to progress in good faith, all the stakeholders must genuinely be represented and meaningfully take part.

But he went on to ask, "Why then is there so much displeasure and distrust today, so much scepticism and strong opposition [to GMOs]? Never before, having accepted an invitation, have I received so much mail, some of it urging me to withdraw - much of it recounting destruction and suffering in relationship with globalized industrial agriculture promoting GMO crops."

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who is the founder of Africa Governance Initiative (AGI), said: "I believe that Africa can be, for the first half of this century, what Asia was for the second half of the last. That is the goal but it will only become a reality if African leaders are able to drive the reforms their countries need, and African governments are equipped to deliver them."

In Africa, AGI is currently working with seven different governments, including Sierra Leone, Rwanda, and Liberia, and in each case ending hunger and implementing agricultural reforms to improve food security is a priority. True to it, in redefining the fight against hunger, poverty and suffering, Africa needs better governance based on prioritisation, planning and performance management.

Akinwumi Adesina, Nigeria's Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in his Keynote Address at the World Food Prize said: "I know the road map toward that

vision for Africa is challenging. It is for Nigeria as well. But as Africa's most populous country, and soon to be its largest economy, we are using the power of agriculture to create jobs, increase wealth, and promote private enterprise to ensure that growth is sustainable.

To unlock the combined potential of some of the fundamentals needed in the major transformation of Nigeria's agriculture sector, the change has to be across the entire value chain – from field to mill to table,” he said.

The minister assured that “our focus would be on creating eco-systems in which small, medium and large-scale farmers would not only co-exist, but also flourish together. We would do more than plant new fields. We would also create value-added foodstuffs from our staple crops through an aggressive import-substitution programme and policies that would encourage new investment in food production and promote agriculture sustainability and resilience.”

Project Leader of Biosciences for Farming in Africa, Sir Brian Heap; Greg Jaffe, Mark Lynas, Anne Glover and Gilbert Bor spoke on “Straight Talk on GMOs: Facts, Fiction and Food Security.” Heap has been engaged in public issues of biotechnology, population growth, sustainability and science policy with the World Health Organisation, the UK-China Forum and European Commission.

Discussions have held and lessons were learnt at the Hunger Summit on how to grow more food for the ever-growing population. These lessons should not be archived or domiciled on shelves. Practical steps should be taken by African leaders to ensure mass food production for the people of the continent. Action must be taken to see that the case of an African farmer being the hungriest, is averted. Individual and collective commitments must be seen to fruition, especially where the lives of African citizens are involved.

The African Union (AU) summit, which held in Maputo, Mozambique in July 2003, saw African leaders making commitments to reverse the under-investment, which had held the agricultural sector back.

They promised to allocate at least 10 percent of national budgets to agriculture and as well, achieve six percent annual agricultural growth. But a decade after, only about 20 percent of the countries have fulfilled either of their Maputo Commitments (10% of budget to agriculture or 6% growth).

But according to ReSAKSS, based on other national sources, the percentage of the public agriculture spending in the 2010 national budgets, only seven countries including Zambia, Burundi, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Republic of Congo, Senegal, Ethiopia and Malawi spent above 10%.

In the same vein, spendings on research and development (ReSAKSS still affirms based on World Bank report of 2012) has been the same. Only Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia, South Africa, Burundi, Kenya, Uganda and Mauritania spent above 1%.

Latest figures from the AU and ReSAKSS indicate that only 10 countries including Angola, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Republic of Congo, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Nigeria, Senegal and Tanzania, have met the six percent agriculture growth target.

The African leaders in 2012 declared 2014 as the AU's Year of Agriculture. "This represents a once-in-a-decade opportunity for a review and renewal of African leadership and commitment to an African-led decade for Agriculture, learning from the successes and shortcomings of the previous decade to accelerate the pace of progress," said Forty Chances.

But in spite of the declaration, in Nigeria's 2014 budget, which stands at N4.91 trillion, the country allocated only N31.4 billion to agriculture. This is less than the promised 10 percent (least) of the national budget that is tagged: "Budget for Jobs and Inclusive Growth."

"A one percent increase in per capita GDP in agriculture reduces the depth of poverty at least five times more than a similar increase outside agriculture," Phil Bloomer observes. Therefore, African leaders should affirm the Maputo Declaration by ensuring that 10% of their annual budgets are allocated to the sector. They should also stand up and borrow leafs from agriculturally-developed nations as well as go into partnerships with corporate organisations that are readily there to support the continent in agriculture.

As a Union, Africa should collectively consider the application of agricultural biotechnology because, according to Prof. Walter Alhassan, "Biotechnology represents a powerful tool that augments conventional approaches to tackling the future challenge of food security."

In deed for Africa, this should be the last hunger season.

Abdallah el-Kurebe is Media Fellow of Biosciences for Farming in Africa and can be reached @ www.elkurebe@gmail.com