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EDITORIAL

Talking to the World Economic Forum on Africa (2010) Press Release

The World Economic Forum on Africa, whose theme was **Re-thinking Africa's Growth Strategy** just ended in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania (May 5-7, 2010), and in their press release pointed to agriculture as the key to economic development. Women smallholder farmers were mentioned only in passing, as main producers of food in Africa. Yet, that is the truth in most of Africa. This acknowledgement remains just as such, an acknowledgement, with hardly any resources availed to support the women farmers in their painful quest to feed their families. These women farmers need training, technical and credit support for their very unique situations. Land tenure and access concerns for women continue to be elusive. Poor African women carry multiple burdens with little appropriate technology to ease their burden.

World Economic Forum Foundation is an independent, well renown international organization founded in 1971 and incorporated as a Swiss not-for-profit foundation. The organization strives towards a world-class corporate governance system where values are as important a basis as rules, according to information found on its website. The motto 'entrepreneurship in the global public interest' is based on the premise that **“economic progress without social development is not sustainable, while social development without economic progress is not feasible”**.

The conclusion of the Africa forum 2010 recognizes Agriculture as a money maker and an engine of economic growth for the continent. Many of us have known this for decades. But who undertakes most farming in Africa? It is the women. Who supports the women? No one. On many smallholder farms, it is the women and children, who toil away with minimal returns at the end of the day. Is it then surprising that Africa cannot feed herself? Based on the values and principles of the World Economic Forum, there is need to understand the socio-cultural landscape in Africa's farming systems, which is by no means homogeneous. There are those of us who have observed that most of the aid that has come to Africa all these decades has been misdirected, and mostly because no one bothers to understand the environment in which the resources will be used. The result is many years of plunder, where the more aid that is given, the poorer the majority of the population becomes, and the greater the increase in the gap between the poor and the wealthy. Who is accountable? It saddens me that we appear to be losing the war against child malnutrition in Africa; my own country Kenya is included. We should ask ourselves: WHY? My message of late has been: let us give the women a chance, let us target them, let us hold their hand and walk with them and help them to eradicate child malnutrition. Surely no woman wishes to see a child she has carried for nine months and given birth to look malnourished! Our leaders at such events as the World Economic Forum should be shown pictures of their malnourished citizens and especially children; they should be shown pictures of their struggling poor, women multi-tasking looking for fuel and water, and women carrying out agricultural chores as they struggle to take care of their families. No wonder the children are malnourished.

There is need to encourage innovation and promote knowledge-based technologies to develop industries that support agriculture, ease women's drudgery at the household level while supporting the many unemployed youth we have on the continent. It is important to interest the youth in agriculture. It is ironical to have a continent that is food-deficit while large tracts of land lie unutilized and millions of youth remain unemployed. The average farmer in Africa is not young, yet it is in agriculture that opportunities exist for job creation and economic development.

This is also a continent where tariffs between countries constrain trade. In fact, it is easier for African countries to trade with Europe than with each other. For example, West African countries import milk and eggs from Europe when Kenya's farmers pour out milk and lose incomes for lack of outside markets and internal milk processing capacity! One can imagine all the possible industries that could be established to support the dairy sector: turning liquid milk into powder, developing cheese, icecream and yoghurts and even just exporting fresh milk to countries where Kenya Airways flies. Climate change is another challenging phenomenon; how much do our farmers know of this? It is important that farmers are helped to understand how to manage their produce during these unpredictable times. Farmers need to know when exactly to plant, and how to manage their harvest. Currently postharvest losses abound.

Then there is lack of support for the more nutritious indigenous foods, which with value addition

could fetch premium incomes for African farmers in overseas markets as well as promote health locally.

Working with private sector will support value addition to agricultural products, to make them not just safe but also nutritious; many times Africa is a dumping ground for outside products that are heavy in sugar and fat and which sometimes are not acceptable in countries of origin.

We have a continent that is currently plagued with disease, under-nutrition and also obesity and associated diseases like diabetes, cancers of all types and heart disease. These so called diseases of the elite are also affecting many of the poor people, especially urban based who eat fried, heavy starchy foods and little inclusion of fruits and vegetables.

It would be nice to see agricultural research support teff, millets, sorghums, nuts, wild fruits and vegetables high in antioxidants, and technologies which can support Africa's production of healthy foods.

I AGREE WITH THE conclusions at this year's (2010) World Economic Forum on Africa, THAT IT CANNOT BE THINGS AS USUAL. We have a God given, rich continent and it is not acceptable that we continue to rely on food aid, and that our farmers are amongst the poorest of the poor on in the world. In any case, Food is not just MAIZE! Food safety issues, with up to 40% postharvest losses, and infestation of grains by carcinogenic compounds should concern policy makers. Events organized by well recognized institutions such as the World Economic Forum Foundation can do a lot to advocate for important issues as child malnutrition that rarely find their way in news headlines except in cases of emergency.

By
Ruth K. Oniang'o
Editor-in-Chief
AJFAND

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