

Editorial - AJFAND Volume 13 No. 3 (2013)

G8's New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition: Is Africa ready for all this attention it is receiving?

The New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition was launched in Camp David in May 2012, at a G8 conference, under the chairmanship of US President Barack Obama. Also hosted during that time at a Chicago Council forum were 4 African heads of state, from Tanzania, Benin, Ethiopia (late Prime Minister Meles) and Ghana (late President Atta Mills). This was deliberate and intentional. This new initiative was to target Africa, and to get start-up countries on board, they needed to understand the issues. There is no doubt this strategy worked. A year later, President Jakaya Kikwete of Tanzania is talking food and nutrition security, Ghana has become a favoured country by donors and very welcoming of this attention and the new Prime Minister of Ethiopia (now the Chairman of Africa Union) is spearheading the efforts of his predecessor. Remember, there are 54 countries in the AU, about 40 South of the Sahara. We need them to be on the same page.

It is awful to be a beggar, and worse, a beggar of food. The words of my late mother as I grew up always come to me as I remember her, sometimes with sadness but mostly with admiration: “**my child, never beg for food; it robs you of your dignity**”. How has Africa found itself in a situation where we now carry most of the world's poor, and receive most of global food aid? How come it is only African children that we see on TV, hungry, emaciated and in torn clothes, and sometimes with jiggers and extended tummies full of worms? How come the international media never shows healthy African children? Do they exist? Why are our leaders and especially political ones not embarrassed by all this? I am not sure whether the African heads of state that were in Washington in 2012 were shown these pictures. I have no doubt they were made aware of the grim statistics. We need this information to be brought to the attention of these leaders, because each one of them heads a country where help is needed to curb infant and under-five mortality, maternal mortality, micronutrient deficiencies and in some cases kwashiorkor (protein deficiency) and marasmus (acute undernutrition), and in most cases stunting (slow growth).

These are questions that have been going through my head, recently, over and over again.

Lately I have been associated with a number of events that have focused on food security, nutrition and development. I can understand why. The G8 has taken this on as an initiative to give real attention to the problem and so in the past year, there has been a flurry of activities related to the same. For the first time nutrition has gained recognition, as a more holistic approach is sought to ensure whatever is consumed is enough, nutritious and safe. As the current compact of Millenium Development Goals (MDGs)is set to end in 2015, we start asking ourselves: what next? One of the most important goals in the MDGs was halving world hunger by 2015. Some of the events in which I have been involved have discussed what should happen after 2015. What all these countries should be examining is, to what extent they have achieved the targets set for the MDGs.

This year the United Kingdom assumed the one-year Presidency of the G8, with the Leaders' Summit taking place from 17 to 18 June. Prime Minister David Cameron's priority during the G8 Presidency will be the global economy. He will use the Presidency to help generate **"growth, jobs and prosperity for the long term. To achieve this, the UK G8 will focus on open economies, open governments and open societies to support free trade, tackle tax evasion and encourage greater transparency and accountability"**.

The 2013 G8 Summit was hosted by the United Kingdom. The Summit was preceded by a *Nutrition for Growth* event on June 8th in London, just a week before the Summit. This event built on the 2012 Camp David event and subsequent meetings. I did not attend the June 8 event in London but clearly it generated considerable media coverage, under the leadership of UK's Prime Minister David Cameron. I was, though, invited by the BBC, on their Swahili program to provide insights into some of the issues that emerged from the London meeting. A question that kept recurring on the BBC Swahili Program was: **"is it true Africa cannot feed itself? If so, what seems to be the problem?"**.

My repeated response was that Africa **could** feed itself if only it could get its priorities right.

The citizens of one East African country who contributed to the program concurred. We are a rich continent. So why do we allow our children to go hungry and get malnourished? All of us, both of us on the show and the contributors agreed that our governments on the continent need to do more. At the June 8 Nutrition for Growth Summit in London, more countries and companies signed on the pledge to address food insecurity and malnutrition, and to tackle poverty from its core.

I then attended the TICAD (Tokyo International Conference on African Development) early June. TICAD brings African heads of State and Government to Japan every 5 years to discuss collaboration in development. More than 40 of the 54 African heads of state attended the conference, hosted by the Japanese Prime Minister Mr Konzo Abe. This was the 5th TICAD. I attended as Chair of the Sasakawa Africa Association, together with 12 senior personnel that work in Africa. It was a great event, coming on top of the Addis 50 year celebrations of the Organization of African Union, now African Union (AU). At the TICAD in Yokohama, I participated in a panel discussion hosted by GAIN (Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition), and graced by the President of Tanzania, His Excellency Jakaya Kikwete. Clearly President Kikwete has got it and I gathered the courage to urge him to carry these issues to the African Union and share with his colleagues. He now talks of food security, and Nutrition security. In his address in Dar es Salaam this past week, jointly with President Obama, he used the same words. Other meetings have been in Nairobi convened by AGRA, the World Bank in Nairobi also but for the 5 countries in the region. And my message has focused on good governance as priority, putting resources towards women's activities, and towards getting the youth into reformed agricultural sector. So far it is just rhetoric! We need to all work on food security, and nutrition security, and food safety as all these go together. Then, there are those farmers who can market their surplus, or those people who can go into farming strictly as a business.

These are farming entrepreneurs and should be allocated high potential available land, on long term lease, advanced credit facilities, and given appropriate training and linked to markets or to

industry to buy their produce at competitive price. So far, Africa has not been serious with its agriculture, nor has it been serious about ensuring the citizenry are well fed.

The question then is: with all this new interest in Africa, are African leaders ready to absorb it, and prepared to engage in a meaningful way? Remember, to date, there are allegations of land grabbing without the public's knowledge. One cannot even track the records. Who is consulted when a government leases its expansive land to foreign powers for decades beyond the life of that government, when in the meantime masses are landless and without any other source of livelihood?

Where natural resources exist and gas, oil and minerals, who benefits? Who controls them? Look at the countries with oil, and those with diamonds and other minerals, they still have some of the worst poverty in Africa. And now land is being leased away and leaving citizens further impoverished.

What I am saying is that the people anywhere can no longer be taken for granted. People need to be involved, they need to be consulted, they need to feel included and if there is any time when words like transparency, accountability, and participation and inclusiveness ever made sense, this is the time. Well, these are the times and so the African leadership needs to prepare and get its people ready if we have to reap the benefits of all his interest from different corners of the world.

Good luck to all of us.

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