

Commentary

What opportunities do we have now to end hunger in the World?

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How come the Green Revolution eluded Africa? This is an issue that has been extensively discussed, in reference to the Asian Green Revolution in the 70s and the issue still comes up every so often.

Our [Guest Editor](#) for issue 59, Prof. Linus Opara, a good friend and a very accomplished food scientist, and a global leader in food security discourses has commented on the same. Next month, the South African Association of Food Science and Technology (SAAFoST) will hold its annual Congress in Pretoria (October 6 to 10, 2013), including a forum to discuss food security and the role Food Science and Technology can play in tackling world hunger. The same October will host more meetings to discuss the state of the World's food security; the Annual World Food Prize will be held, as always in Des Moines Iowa. Increasingly, this is becoming a Forum not to miss, as it assembles world leaders in all sectors- private sector, NGO community, government, farmers and most importantly is the very unique Borlaug Youth Institute that is hosted on the last day of the Forum. Dr Norman Borlaug founded the World Food Prize in his home state of Iowa. This yearly event is supported, even after his death, by those who value his work and are keen on keeping his legacy alive. Each year, the Forum is bigger than the previous year. Dr Borlaug valued the smallholder farmer, and believed in the youth making a difference only if we get them involved early in life. Dr Borlaug understood the value of government Ministers of finance and agriculture, and more importantly the crucial need to get political leadership onboard.

He would tell those who wished to make a difference “look, the Asian Green Revolution worked because the Indian Prime Minister assembled his Ministers to support adoption of new technologies to try and save India”(paraphrased). The common view at that time was that if something was not done, most Indians would starve. So, political will at the very highest level was secured. Even though most farmers were smallholder, they were able to quadruple grain harvests, rural infrastructure was improved, affordable credit was made available and still remains the case today, markets were created to absorb any excess harvest, and the international community was ready to invest in capacity building, major

infrastructure and research. As this was going on in India, Africa was facing its own challenges of governance and leadership, and identity. I am not making excuses for Africa and I have no reason to. But maybe, just maybe, too much time was spent on believing that what worked in Asia, could also work in Africa, at the time.

Now, more than three decades later, Africa is still on a quest for a green revolution, a revolution that could turn around its fortunes by ensuring enhanced food production to be able to feed its own people. At the end of the day, it is lack of political will, and on a continent where the citizens are influenced by politics and manipulated by the political elite, it takes some doing to convince that there is so much we could do despite the bad political environment. The politicians know that so long as the poor can be kept poor, then it is easy to manipulate them and to capitalize on their low esteem and lack of political clout to stay in power.

For the Asian green revolution, Dr Norman Borlaug, realizing the importance of political will and action used that strategy to convince the top politicians in India to get involved and to own the whole anti-hunger strategy. The Indian top leadership put in place appropriate policies and infrastructure to facilitate the realization of a green revolution for Asia. This whole era saw the green revolution spread to the rest of the Asian continent, and smallholder farmers maximize rice yields. Rice is the main consumable cereal on the Asian continent, grown mostly by smallholder farmers; rice has experienced near miraculous yield growth and virtually saved the Asian continent. This explains why Dr Borlaug came to believe in the smallholder farmer.

India still has many hungry people, so do so many other countries including industrialized ones.

There is no doubt, however, that the green revolution averted a major catastrophe that could have seen many starve. What the Indian government is doing now is to see how this major achievement can benefit the hungry at the individual level. India has also become a donor country, in terms of financing and technology. Would India have come this far if majority of its people were still facing starvation? So, always, “food first” should be the motto, and quality food at that.

Light is shining on Africa right now and one sees a window of opportunity here for presidents, prime ministers, ministers and top policy makers to hit the road so to speak, and get to work. These leaders need to go beyond rhetoric. For example, it does not make

sense for a government to pronounce its commitment to eradicate hunger while at the same time taxing the very basic commodities the poor rely on.

That is what has happened in my own country of Kenya. Kenyans are quietly suffering as a 16% VAT (value added tax) is imposed on basic goods, starting with milk, of all the items. This comes after a campaign to encourage Kenyan consumers to drink more milk as a provider of the most wholesome protein for our growing children. This comes after discouraging milk hawking because it is “unhygienic”. This comes after consumer activists protested and lobbied members of parliament not to pass the VAT Bill as it would hurt most of their voters, the low income earners. The Bill was passed, and when the President was lobbied not to ascent it in that form, he still went ahead and passed it. Overnight, the price of milk rose from 42 to 62 Ksh per 500ml (one USD= Ksh 85). As expected, unscrupulous business people went ahead to raise prices of other basic goods as well, even those which had not been affected by VAT. So what are consumers doing now? They are purchasing less milk and therefore consuming less of it, and are also reverting to the less expensive hawked milk that had been discouraged as its hygienic quality could not be guaranteed.

I was amused to see some of our government ministers in the media trying to justify the re-introduction of VAT even on basic commodities. They were arguing that it was the best way to generate resources to help cushion the poor. I have probably said here more than I needed to, about this Kenyan scenario. Anyway, I prefer to use Kenyan examples because I can vouch for the authenticity of what I am saying. The message is, I am sure, applicable in many countries. Good policies on agriculture and basic commodity prices need to work for the low income citizens who in this case happen to be the majority. The political leaders in Africa need to work to make life better for their citizens, and they could start by ensuring availability of affordable food, and affordable high quality milk. Surely, this is not too much to ask? This should be the decade for the “green revolution” for Africa, whatever “green” in this case will mean.

As we begin to mark the 100th year of Norman Borlaug’s birth, I am continuously reminded of his last known words: “take it to the farmer” and that is why I continue to advocate for the voiceless African smallholder farmer, who also happens to be at the bottom of the income ladder and cannot afford the rising prices of basic goods including milk. This is more than food for thought, right?