H.E Kofi Annan| 1 September 2008 | University of Wageningen, The Netherlands

Remarks to the University of Wageningen

Thank you Dr. Aalt Duijkhuizen for your warm words.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be here with you, and the many esteemed guests gathered today.

My warm appreciation goes to Wageningen University & Research centre. You stand at the helm of one of the world's premiere universities dedicated to agriculture – to "healthy food and living environment."

This is a vision we at the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, AGRA, share.

But it is a vision under assault.

Today, healthy food – indeed any food at all – is nearly unattainable for 854 million people around the world, who go hungry every day.

The living environment is also losing ground: to deforestation, to desertification, and to the impacts of unsustainable practices, from agriculture to industry.

Today's theme "Feeding the World" makes clear that we are here to find solutions to these problems.

Our mission is made all the more urgent by the current global food crisis.

This year we have see the price of food staples rise by 50 per cent, price rises which disproportionately affect the world's poorest citizens. The political, social and economic cost of this crisis is being felt around the world, with people taking to the streets in over forty countries to protest for their right to food.

The Food and Agricultural Organisation notes that of 37 countries hardest hit, 21 are in Africa. Far from being a bonanza for African small-holder farmers, higher food prices mean yet more hunger.

Farmers with poor soil, who cannot afford fertiliser or high yielding seed, and who have no way to get their harvest to market, cannot benefit from higher food prices. Instead, when their own food stores run out, they must spend even more of their

money on even less food. Poor farmers were in dire straits before and now the situation is worse.

This crisis has arrived quickly, but it has been long in the making. Africa has faced widespread hunger for decades. Even before the current crisis, 200 million Africans were hungry. In the past five years the number of underweight children has increased by 12 percent.

We can do better than this. We must address the root causes of this crisis.

Surging fuel prices; increased food demand; diversion of food crops to biofuel production; and extended droughts all contribute to the global crisis in Africa. But there is another cause.

The underlying cause of hunger and poverty in Africa has been the long-term neglect of agriculture, on national and international levels.

This neglect followed a dramatic decline in Official Development Assistance dedicated to agriculture, which fell from over 16 percent in 1980, to under 4 percent in 2004.

Simultaneously, African governments neglected agricultural development, often in efforts to comply with misguided policies of multilateral funders, such as the structural adjustment programmes of the World Bank.

This neglect impacted every aspect of food production in Africa: from agricultural Research and Development to the construction of roads connecting rural areas to markets, to basic services available to farmers.

As a result, today the African farmer is the only farmer who takes all the risks herself: No capital, no insurance, no price supports, and little help of any kind from government.

The cost of neglect has been high. African food production per person has actually declined by 12 percent since 1980. This makes Africa the only region in the world where per capita food production is in decline.

But, today, in part because of the global food crisis, the world has reawakened to the work of agriculture. We are glad they have.

We must seize the time to tackle the very roots of this crisis.

As Secretary-General of the United Nations, I worked with Wageningen University to commission a report: "Realizing the Promise and Potential of African Agriculture." It was co-authored in 2004 by Dr. Rudy Rabbinge for the InterAcademy Council. And its findings still hold true.

The advancement of agriculture, with a focus on small-scale farmers, is central to economic progress in the developing countries of Africa.

The tides are changing. African governments are reasserting their commitment to agriculture. In 2005, the African Union's the New Partnership for Africa's Development united around a Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme. This aims to achieve six percent annual increase in agricultural productivity.

The World Bank is also reappraising its policies, and its World Development Report 2008 was dedicated to agriculture.

But in many cases, bilateral assistance from developed countries still lags behind.

Yet these same countries provide support to their farmers. Governments from Beijing to Berlin are re-investing in agriculture, finding ways to support their farmers by pushing farm support policies that boost agricultural productivity and ensure cheap food.

Today farm support under the EU´s Common Agricultural Policy is the single biggest spending item in the combined EU budget. It accounts for about 43% of the whole – around 40 billion.

Government led farm support is happening in every region of the world. Except in Africa.

Today we must reverse the policies of abandonment. We must help Africa's smallholder farmers – the vast majority of whom are women – to attain what has eluded them for so long: fully productive and profitable farms, healthy food, and a healthy living environment.

An African Green Revolution

For Africa to again feed itself, and rejoin the league of agriculture-exporting regions, we need an African Green Revolution.

Our Green Revolution must embrace a comprehensive programme of support for Africa's smallholder farmers. It must recognize and protect the great diversity of Africa: our environments, crops, and cropping systems.

AGRA has such a programme. Its scope is broad, and aims to revolutionize the entire food value chain in Africa. Its accomplishment will require one of the largest efforts in human history.

Most of our small-scale farmers work one hectare or less of land. They face depleted soils, crop pests and disease, and unreliable rain. Only five percent of arable land is irrigated. Only 20 percent of people living in rural areas have access to electricity. In addition, most farmers can neither afford nor gain access to high-yielding seeds and fertilisers.

Meanwhile, climate change is increasing both drought and flood, and threatens even more severe challenges to farming.

All of our work is carried out through partnerships: with governments, universities, scientists, farmers' organizations, donors, private companies and innovators across the food value chain.

In less than two years, we have committed US$330 million to our comprehensive farmers support programme, beginning with six areas:

1) Development of higher yielding, disease-resistant and climate-resilient varieties of African crops;

2) Seed multiplication and distribution systems;

3) Improved soil health;

4) Agricultural education;

5) Agro-dealer networks that get inputs to farmers in remote areas;

6) Development of policies that benefit smallholder farmers. From "smart subsidies" to make farm inputs available, to financing tailored for small-scale farmers and small agri-businesses, to policies that link African farmers to global and regional markets.

We are also looking at issues that include water use, food storage and processing, and market development.

Today, AGRA is working hard to realize the promise and potential of African agriculture.

We are working partnership with among others:

- The New Partnership for Africa´s Development
- The African Development Bank
- The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
- The International Fund for Agricultural Development

- The World Food Programme
- The United States' Millennium Challenge Corporation
- The Japan International Cooperation Agency.

Through these partnerships AGRA aims to promote agricultural growth in Africa's breadbaskets and boost yield of our staple crops.

Today, I would like to share with you AGRA's work in two specific areas: agricultural education and soil fertility.

Agricultural education

African agricultural education has been left behind. We are trying to change this.

I recently visited our partners at the University of Ghana, where an AGRA-supported programme to train PhD crop scientists was launched last March. The university's West African Centre for Crop Improvement (WACCI) aims to train 40 crop scientists over the next five years.

It addresses Africa's dire need for highly trained crop breeders who can develop high-yielding, hardy, and nutritious varieties of African crops, adapted to the wide range of local conditions.

Such varieties are essential to farmers' ability to raise yields and incomes, and to end poverty.

Until now, most African crop scientists have been trained at universities in Europe or the United states, on crops that were largely irrelevant to Africa.

PhD candidates at WACCI, and its sister programme at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, the Africa Centre for Crop Improvement, or ACCI, are part of a new approach. They are committed to improving the crops important to students' home countries--crops like cowpea, millet, sorghum, rice and cassava. Many of these are "orphan crops," ignored by most modern-day agricultural research.

The two programmes are a critical piece of AGRA's work to improve agricultural education. In addition, we will be supporting the education of hundreds of students at a Masters level, and strengthening agricultural extension systems to provide farmers with in-field training.

Ultimately, AGRA envisions plant breeding stations located in every agricultural zone, populated with skilled, knowledgeable plant breeders, working on locally important crops to meet local food needs.

To realize this vision we need a bold effort that transforms our agricultural universities into engines of innovation, community development and entrepreneurship.

Wageningen University provides one of the world's finest examples of what an agricultural university can be and can do.

From preparing students to lead agricultural development through the next century, to collaborating with industry in your own "Food Valley," to partnering with universities in developing countries. In addition, Wageningen encourages and supports international students who return to their home countries to apply their skills.

Thus, agricultural education is directly connected to capacity building.

We must stop the African brain drain. Today there is a generation of young Africans who want to study at home and use their knowledge to help their people. To help end poverty and hunger and improve the lot of our small-holder farmers.

They need options – to study, to learn, and most of all to develop the knowledge and skills that can end the desperate poverty and gross inequality that abounds in this world.

We need international partnerships to bolster all phases of African agricultural education, from vocational schools to higher education focused on generating technological innovations for agriculture. Long-term development in Africa depends upon it.

Soil Fertility

Crop breeding is not the only area of agricultural science that lags in Africa. In many countries, soil fertility experts are few and far between. At the high end, Nigeria has some 2,000 soil scientists, while countries such as Malawi, Sierra Leone and Mozambique have about four soil scientists each. And this is on a continent with some of the worst soil in the world!

Global average agricultural productivity is 3.2 tonnes per hectare, and scientists say this can be doubled. In the Netherlands, my friend Dr. Rudy Rabbinge tells me that 10 tonnes per hectare is achievable. In Africa, the average is a dismal one tonne per hectare.

Our low productivity is a direct result of poor soils, along with insufficient access to improved seeds and reliable water. Much of Africa's soil is ancient and weathered.

On top of this, land is cultivated season after season, with each crop mining more nutrients from the soil, leaving it depleted. With seventy-five percent of African farmland degraded, AGRA launched an ambitious soil health programme.

It is a US$180 million effort to work with farmers to regenerate more than 6 million hectares of farm land. It promotes balanced approaches to improved soil management. These approaches combine the use of organic and mineral fertilisers, crop management systems, and sound water use.

Its success will depend critically on increasing the availability of affordable fertiliser in Africa, and ensuring that fertiliser is used in efficient and environmentally sound ways.

African farmers use one-tenth the global average of fertiliser. And they often must pay up to six times the global price—at a time when the global price of fertiliser has tripled.

We've seen farmers ready to plant, needing to grow food for their families. But planting a fraction of their field because that is all the fertiliser they can afford, and without it, their land is useless.

There is an urgent need for African countries to band together for bulk fertiliser purchases at lower costs. Governments and companies also need to take steps to ease the food crisis and help farmers get next seasons' crop into fertile ground.

Longer term, African governments need to invest in infrastructure to support the transport and distribution of fertiliser, and to develop the continent's own fertiliser manufacturing capacity.

Countries need comprehensive fertiliser policies to ensure that fertiliser reaches farmers. One option is the use of "smart subsidies", targeted at farmers who otherwise would be unable to purchase fertiliser and delivered through the private sector.

Another option is providing small-scale farmers who already have some means with access to affordable credit and loans. AGRA is working on innovative financing programmes, beginning in Kenya and Tanzania.

In Kenya, a US$50 million loan programme through Equity Bank was made possible in part by a US$5 million loan-guarantee fund set up by AGRA and the International Fund for Agricultural Development.

The programme will accelerate access to affordable financing for 2.5 million farmers and 15,000 agri-businesses.

In Tanzania AGRA was able to provide a $1 million cash guarantee to leverage $5 million in loans to rural agrodealers from the National Microfinance Bank.

Many consider soil health the weakest link in the food production chain. We must strengthen this link for the chain to be strong

Conclusion: policies and partnerships

Feeding the majority of the poor and vulnerable populations in Africa, while preserving the natural resource base and the environment, is one of the most pressing development challenges of the century.

Resilient and flexible partnerships are key to success, and universities such as yours have a critical role to play.

AGRA advocates for national and international policies that support Africa's smallholder farmers, are economically and environmentally sustainable, promote equity, and protect the most vulnerable.

We have started to make progress, but we have much more to do.

The international community must take decisive action to aid those hungry today, while also reinvesting in long-term agricultural development to avoid hunger tomorrow. Only in this way will we speed Africa's overall economic development, foster rural investment, create jobs, and restore the dignity in farming.

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