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Q&A: 'Agriculture Key To Food Security And Climate Change'


IDN-InDepthNews Service interviews IFAD President Kanayo F Nwanze

BERLIN/ROME (IDN) – "Agriculture is the vital link between the two burning issues of feeding a growing population and preserving the planet we live on," says IFAD president Kanayo F Nwanze.

It is crucial, therefore, that the deal expected to emerge from the landmark climate change conference in Copenhagen recognises that connect, Nwanze says in an e-mail interview with IDN-InDepthNews Service and Global Perspectives – a journal for international cooperation.

Keen to drive home the point, Nwanze adds: "Agriculture is the key to food security and a fundamental engine of economic growth and wealth generation. It should always be at the heart of the international agenda and requires consistent investment and commitment."

"I can affirm that finally, after decades of neglect, world leaders have stepped in and made firm commitments to ensure food security for all," Nwanze notes with obvious satisfaction -- some six months after taking over as president of the International Fund for Agriculture (IFAD) for the next four years.

Since starting operations in 1978, IFAD has invested some US\$ 11 billion in grants and low-interest loans to developing countries for 805 projects and programmes, empowering 340 million people to break out of poverty.

IFAD is considered a unique partnership of 165 members from the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), other developing countries and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

It was established as an international financial institution in 1977 as one of the major outcomes of the 1974 World Food Conference, organized in response to the food crises of the early 1970s that primarily affected the Sahelian countries of Africa.

Nwanze, a Nigerian national, is the first African to head IFAD, a specialised agency of the United Nations.

INTERVIEW

Following is the full text of the interview by Ramesh Jaura ahead of the World Food Day on Oct. 16 and in run-up to the UN climate change conference December 7-18 in Copenhagen.

Question: Agricultural and rural sectors suffered from neglect and underinvestment for 20 long years until the World Development Report 2008 advocated a new 'agriculture for development' agenda. How far do you see this new agenda in action?

Kanayo F Nwanze: The World Development Report 2008 made a strong case for making agriculture a higher development priority. The food, fuel and later the financial crisis were a wake up call for the international community to increase investment in the sector in poor countries. Aid to agriculture had dropped from 18 per cent of total assistance in 1979 to 4.6 in 2007.

In the same period in developing countries government investment in agriculture had fallen by one third in Africa and by two thirds in Asia and Latin America. For IFAD, agricultural productivity and increased investment in smallholder agriculture have always been at the core of our work and concerns.

Since the eruption of the crisis, world leaders have met several times to discuss food security and the key role of agriculture in tackling this pressing issue -- most notably at the FAO Conference in June 2008, the Food Security for All meeting in Madrid this January, the G20 meeting in London, the G8 Summit in L'Aquila and the most recent G20 in Pittsburgh -- to name but a few. The upcoming World Summit on Food Security in Rome in November will be another important step. These meetings have built momentum, but now more than ever, we all need to work for the pledges and discussion to be transformed into action.

Q: Accepting your election as IFAD President in February this year, you vowed to "make agriculture the central focus of governments, reduce poverty and hunger and achieve the Millennium Development Goals". Are you satisfied with the support that you have received from the international community in the five months since taking office in April?

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KN: When I became President in April 2009, the world had already woken up and agriculture was already high on the agenda of the international community. For IFAD, this meant a significant increase in the commitment from its member states through increased membership contributions and this has been the case as we reached a 67% increase for the 2010-2012 period.

I have since taken part in a number of the international meetings on food security earlier this year and I can affirm that finally, after decades of neglect, world leaders have stepped in and made firm commitments to ensure food security for all. We recognize that a lot has already been done, but more action is needed as it is estimated that US\$17-20 billion per year are needed to be invested in agriculture to ensure food security.

The US\$20 billion G8 L'Aquila Food Security Initiative shows that governments have woken up to the vital importance of investing in agriculture, in particular sustainable smallholder agriculture. This pledge is an important step, and IFAD stands ready to support all such efforts, but even more will need to be done if we are to double food production in developing countries to meet projected demand by 2050 and meet the MDGs targets by 2015.

Agriculture is the key to food security and a fundamental engine of economic growth and wealth generation. It should always be at the heart of the international agenda and requires consistent investment and commitment.

Q: Meanwhile it is not about MDGs alone. Are you satisfied with the outcome of recent summits as far as world food security and the role of agriculture in tackling climate change are concerned?

KN: First, let us recognize that agriculture is both a cause and a victim of environmental problems and climate change. Agriculture is where two of the world's biggest challenges -- climate change and food security -- intersect. Recent Summits have made clear that food security and the growing impact of climate change must be addressed through a comprehensive approach, but so far have failed to clearly state what needs to be done and how.

On the occasion of the New York Summit on Climate Change in September, the UN Secretary-General said "Failure to reach broad agreement in Copenhagen would be morally inexcusable, economically short-sighted and politically unwise". Time is running out.

If the fundamental goals on climate change are to be met it is critical that developed and developing countries act together. It is crucial that the Copenhagen deal be credible and it must recognize that agriculture is the vital link between the two burning issues of feeding a growing population and preserving the planet we live on.

Q: You have been calling for a "new global partnership to protect core investments in agriculture" to avoid the combined food and economic crises of the last two years. What does such a partnership entail?

KN: I called for this partnership on the occasion of the G8 Finance Ministers meeting in Lecce last June. We have seen that the global economic downturn had further exacerbated the food crisis as the fiscal pressure on developing countries was putting at risk government investments in their agricultural sectors.

Such a global partnership should help developing countries improve food production by supporting sustainable smallholder agriculture. By saying this I mean that it should give special attention to the sustainable use of scarce natural resources. Extreme water scarcity, climate change, desertification and land degradation are obstacles to reaching the agricultural potential of many countries.

This has been reinforced by on-going discussions on the reform of the Committee for Food Security (CFS) at FAO, the call by European partners for a global partnership which should be at the centre of a reformed CFS.

Q: How far has your tenure as Director-General of the Africa Rice Centre (WARDA) been helpful in your mission as IFAD president? As WARDA DG, you introduced and promoted New Rice for Africa (NERICA) -- a high-yield, drought- and pest-resistant rice variety developed specifically for the African landscape.

KN: When I headed the Africa Rice Center, one of the fifteen international agricultural research institutes supported by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) -- no longer to be referred to as WARDA - I saw for myself the extraordinary changes that can come about when poor farmers are given the means to improve their lives. My experience makes me an even greater persuasive advocate for the 2 billion people in developing countries who depend on smallholder agriculture. This is at the heart of IFAD's mission of enabling poor rural people to overcome poverty.

Q: Last February, you said that you would like to see IFAD "grow to be an ever-stronger ally for poor rural people". Have you already initiated some essential steps to achieve that goal? Are you satisfied with the progress achieved?

KN: When I was elected as IFAD's President, I pledged to do all I could to convince governments to make smallholder agriculture and rural development a high priority. I also promised to be a tireless advocate for poor rural people. In my first months, I have seized opportunities provided by a number of regional and global meetings to begin fulfilling these pledges.

We have begun to re-locate some of our Country Programme Managers to the countries where we work. They are already giving us first-hand feedback on the impact of this in reinforcing our ties with the governments, with local partners and -- most importantly of all -- with the rural poor people themselves.

I strongly believe that it is fundamental for IFAD to be able to measure clearly the impact and effectiveness

of our work. For this reason I am encouraging the use of monitoring systems that are results-based. We are seeking significantly improved results qualitatively and in scale.

We are in an important window in time, when smallholder farmers are starting to be recognised as those who can make global food security a reality. IFAD can design programmes and projects to catalyze funding from other donors and work through initiatives such as the UN High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis to help coordinate assistance to agriculture and rural development.

IFAD will continue to support the growth of agricultural and farmer organizations and institutional development at the grass roots level and expand its work in natural resource management, land issues and remittances, which are a powerful tool for development. (Global Perspectives* | IDN-InDepthNews 09.10.09)

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