

Ad-hoc Expert Group Meeting on Agriculture and Rural Transformation in Africa

Addis
23-25 April 2007

Ababa,

Ethiopia

Welcome address by Mr. Josué Dioné Director, Food Security and Sustainable Development Division (FSSD), UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)

Distinguished Experts,

Dear Colleagues and Friends,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure, on behalf of the Executive Secretary of ECA, to welcome you to Addis Ababa and ECA. I wish also to take this opportunity to thank you sincerely for accepting our invitation to devote some of your precious time to attend this expert group meeting on a subject of central importance for any sustainable development in Africa: Agriculture and Rural Transformation.

To stress the importance of agriculture for development in Africa to those of you assembled here would be preaching to the converted. Yet, one can hardly resist the temptation to underscore a few key features of the big picture in this regard. With some 46% of its people living on less than a dollar a day, the continent is among the poorest regions of the world. More than two-thirds of these poor live in rural areas, and their livelihoods depend primarily on agriculture and agriculture-related non-farm activities. Moreover, for the majority of African countries, particularly those south of the Sahara, the fate of agriculture determines to a significant extent that of the overall economy. This is so because of the strong backward and forward linkages between agriculture and the other productive and service sectors of the economy. Hence, rural poverty or wealth obviously feeds urban poverty or wealth, especially through rural-urban economic and social linkages and migrations. In short, through its considerable potential for broad-based income growth and employment creation, agricultural development is key to achieving most of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and beyond in Africa.

Yet, against the strong evidence of the central role of agriculture for spurring economic growth and fighting poverty in Africa, the sector has been neglected, if not undermined, over the last 3-4 decades. Needless to go through the well-known long list of shared responsibilities among African governments and external development partners for this state of affairs. There is no escape to facing up to the incontestable and daunting challenge of the paradoxical situation of a continent where the economies of most countries are still predominantly agrarian, yet, despite average annual food and agricultural imports of \$ 25 billions and food aid of the tune of \$ 2 billion, nearly one-third of the total population suffer from chronic hunger.

This, obviously, underlies why agriculture has been gaining grounds on the priority list of the African development agenda since the beginning of the current decade. And, fortunately, the momentum for a revival of the agricultural and rural development agenda has been snowballing as evidenced by:

- The choice of agriculture as key productive sector among the priority areas of intervention of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD);
- No fewer than four African Union/NEPAD Summits focusing on various aspects of agricultural development and food security;
- Recent initiatives from the United Nations and other international organizations in support of an African Green Revolution;
- The World Bank's choice to revisit the agricultural development agenda 25 years later by devoting its 2008 World Development Report to the theme of "Agriculture for Development."

Also, just three weeks ago, the ECA Conference of Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development made repeated references to agricultural development as key for accelerating growth to achieve the MDGs in Africa.

Distinguished Experts,

Dear Colleagues and Friends,

It sounds like agricultural development has finally become fashionable in the African development discourse. This expert group meeting, therefore, gives us a good opportunity to keep the momentum and give African agriculture a decisive chance to go through a structural transformation with a view to generating broad-based and sustainable economic growth and lifting millions of people of the continent out of poverty.

The NEPAD Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) offers, in this regard, a sound building framework articulated around the four pillars of:

- Land and water resources development;
- Rural infrastructure and trade capacities for market access;
- Food supply chains and responses to emergency food crises; and
- Agricultural research, technology dissemination and adoption.

Within this same framework, ECA's work over the last five years has focused on advocating for an approach to a structural transformation of African agriculture primarily articulated around systematic efforts to develop coordinated value chains for selected strategic food and agricultural commodities within a regional integration perspective. In so doing, our purpose is not only to promote the development of agriculture as a key sector of African countries' national economies, but also to use agricultural development as a conduit for broadening and deepening regional integration. The aim is to trigger a structural transformation that would enable African agriculture not only to capture the growing regional market – which, unfortunately, is presently too fragmented to provide the right incentive sets for significant market-oriented, private-business operations – but also to become a key player in the global market place. In this regard, we stress the need to address, through serious efforts at agribusiness development, the central challenge of the double disconnection of African farmers, backward from the input/factor markets, and forward from the product markets.

Distinguished Experts,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In a nutshell, the approach advocated by ECA could be labelled as one of “building regional value chains of strategic food and agricultural commodities without borders.” The AU/NEPAD Food Security Summit held in December 2006 in Abuja produced a very encouraging outcome in this regard, by adopting an explicit list of strategic agricultural commodities, including nine at the continental level and three at sub-regional levels.

During this meeting, you will hear more about this from us. But rest assured that we rather invited you to hear from and listen to you. We count on tapping the wealth of your expertise and experience to guide and enrich our analytical and advocacy work on agricultural and rural transformation in Africa. We are privileged to have partner specialists of your calibre, and confident that your discussions during these three days will yield an invaluable harvest of knowledge of the key issues, challenges, opportunities and lessons to ponder in moving the African agricultural development agenda forward.

Notwithstanding the constraint of our demand for your time, I wish you a very pleasant stay in Addis Ababa.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Source: <http://www.uneca.org/>