EDITORIAL

Do we really care for the Smallholder Farmers we keep talking about?

Below are some of the women Ruth Oniang'o is always talking about. These women are now keen to learn how to improve their local dishes so they can provide healthier meals for their families: increase consumption of African leafy vegetables, which are rich in beta carotene, ration amounts of sodium chloride, sugar and fat in their diets, and incorporate some meat, especially from small livestock reared in the home in the diets, and make sure fruits are part of the family diet. More than 50 women’s groups participated in this competition and in the end 9 entered the finals. This is a cost effective way of getting women happily involved in something they already do as a matter of daily duty to nurture their families. The women were happy and asked for more; we at Rural Outreach Programme were also happy. Oh, the men around were also happy, and the children too. The full report will come later. These women are in a densely populated region of Western Province, Vihiga, where landholdings are less than one hectare on average.

They know they can "cook for money" and that such food does not necessarily have to come from their own farms. How can they be helped? These women do not know about Millenium Development Goals. But they know that they must do whatever they can to feed their families, and to provide for their other needs as well.


Most smallholder farmers in Africa are women. Of course, the situation varies from one region to another, and from country to country. We may not have the exact figures but the fact is that Africa depends on the sweat of smallholder farmers, who face innumerable problems as they struggle to feed not only their families but whole communities and countries as well. As interest is renewed in African agriculture, these unique circumstances of have to be understood. There is growing talk that Africa must move the way of Europe centuries ago, to consolidate small land pieces rather than subdivide available land into uneconomic sizes. Where land tenure has been legalized, land is sub-divided into individual holdings for which people receive title deeds. Land is a form of wealth, with a value to it that owners can use as collateral for a bank loan to do business or buy a house or other property. As such, a land title deed is extremely valuable, and as such any strategy designed to consolidate small landholdings in the custody of some 30,000,000 or so smallholder farmers in sub-Saharan Africa needs to be handled with care. Any reforms require support of the masses, of the stakeholders. Right now, we are putting pressure on smallholder farmers to produce more, to toil more, to use inputs and borrow against the very little wealth they have (the tile deed of their small piece of land).

The recent review of the UN Millenium Development Goals shows that most countries, let alone in sub-Saharan Africa, are unlikely to realize the goals that are related to human development- halving hunger by 2015, for example ,which is Goal number 1. We also know now that elimination of hunger by itself does not necessarily mean nutritional status of communities will be enhanced. So what will it take? What will it take to spare the world’s poor from the scourge of hunger and the indignity of child malnutrition and related deaths? Do we lack resources? I doubt. Do we lack ideas, I doubt. Are we interested in getting people from poverty and hunger? I am not sure. My own country Kenya is one of those that have received considerable resources from external sources. Kenya is not the only one. There are all manner of non-governmental organizations around, both local and international which operate as a parallel government.

These organizations target small areas, oftentimes work outside of government policies and systems and so when a national survey is carried out on livelihoods indicators, it is no wonder that no positive impact is seen from all these activities of the multitude of organizations.

The corruption Index Report 2010 is out. Transparency International Programmes Director Christiana Poortman is quoted saying “Corruption is a tax, and adds to the overall bill of development efforts - the percentage of resources could be as high as 20 or 30 percent”. According to IRIN LONDON, 27 October 2010 (IRIN) – “Corruption siphons off 20-30 percent of funding for basic services.

2010 Perceptions of Corruption Index. “It will hamper the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals,” he added. www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?ReportID=90898. So, as I said, it is not necessarily for lack of resources. Those who are entrusted with these resources clearly use little to achieve impact where it is needed. We need to start addressing the issue of good governance (transparency and accountability) in a way that tracks development aid and taxpayers' money, to ensure efficient use of these resources. By so doing, all these toiling smallholder farmers, wherever they may be, whether in my village or elsewhere, will be assured of some support, to not only increase the efficiency of their chores in food production, marketing and preparation, but to be able to enjoy what they do as well. The definition of Food Security by FAO includes being able to enjoy life.

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