

United Against Hunger: 29th World Food Day

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THIS year, many world leaders met at the United Nations to evaluate the challenges and achievements in respect to the eight millennium development goals (MDG's) and its related 18 targets.

It is against this backdrop that the world observes World Food Day (WFD). WFD was proclaimed by the Conference of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in 1979 to mark its founding on October 16, 1945. The aim of the Day is to heighten public awareness of the world food problem and strengthen solidarity in the struggle against hunger, malnutrition and poverty.

The objectives of WFD are to among others to encourage increasing agricultural food production to stimulate national, bilateral, transnational and non-governmental initiatives to this end and to catalyze economic and technical co-ordination among developing nations. WFD also seeks to enhance the participation of rural people, particularly women and the underprivileged strata, in decisions and events impacting their living conditions and to create public awareness of the issue of hunger and food security in the world.

A recent report from the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) shows that there are more than one billion people around the world who suffer from hunger every day. This staggering figure is partly due to soaring world food prices and the financial crisis. Other reasons such as climate change, flooding, earth tremors, wars account for this figure.

That is why it is worth commemorating World Food Day (WFD) that was instituted by the FAO the United Nations about 30 years ago.

World Food Day has disseminated different themes every year. This year's theme is "United against Hunger". This is to recognise the efforts made in the fight against world hunger at national, regional and international levels.

This theme calls for a partnership at all levels, between, state and civil society organisations and the private sector to defeat hunger, extreme poverty and malnutrition.

In connection with food security, it is important

to mention that this year, Ghana hosted the first ever African Green Revolution Forum. This was an initiative of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). It was attended by about 600 delegates from all over the world.

At this forum, the World Food Prize Foundation, headquartered in Des Moines, Iowa, presented its Norman E. Borlaug Medallion to Dr Kofi Annan in recognition of Annan's international leadership as Secretary-General of the United Nations and as chairman of the board for the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa. In both roles, Dr Annan has brought significant attention to the issue of global food security, most notably in establishing the UN Millennium Development Goals during his time at the United Nations.

The World Food Prize Foundation was founded by the late Dr Norman Borlaug, a Nobel Peace Prize Winner, who has been called the "father of the Green Revolution" for his breakthroughs in wheat production that helped save over a billion lives, and who had a passion for ending hunger in Africa.

AGRA works to achieve a food secure and prosperous Africa through the promotion of rapid, sustainable agricultural growth based on smallholder farmers. Smallholders, a majority of who are women, produce most of Africa's food and do so with minimal resources and little government support. AGRA aims to ensure that smallholders have what they need to succeed: good seeds and healthy soils; access to markets, information, financing, storage and transport; and policies that provide them with comprehensive support. Through developing Africa's high-potential breadbasket areas, while also boosting farm productivity across more challenging environments, AGRA works to transform smallholder agriculture into a highly productive, efficient, sustainable and competitive system, and do so while protecting the environment.

AGRA was founded in 2006 through a partnership between the Rockefeller Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Today, AGRA also receives core funding from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID).

AGRA has launched special partnership initiatives organisations such as the Africa Enterprise

Challenge Fund (AECF), funded by the Consultative Group to Assist the Poor, DFID, the International Fund for Agricultural Development and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and the Coalition for African Rice Development (CARD), funded by the Japan International Co-operation Agency. In the G8's 2008 and 2009 communiqués, AGRA was singularly recognised as an effective public-private partnership for improving smallholder farming.

AGRA advocates for policies that support its work across all key aspects of the African agricultural "value chain", from seeds, soil health, and water to markets and agricultural education. AGRA is chaired by Kofi A. Annan, the former Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Dr Kofi Annan noted that in Ghana, "we are making great strides in putting farmers and agriculture at the centre of our development. Public and private partners are working closely together to transform Africa's agriculture to benefit smallholder farmers and increase food security and nutrition in Ghana and across the continent".

Dr Kofi A. Annan chairs the AGRA's board. A team of distinguished African scientists, economists and business leaders guide its day-to-day work. With a budget of close to US\$400 million, as of June 2009 AGRA had approved 116 grants valued at US\$83 million in 14 countries. Grantees operate across the agricultural value chain, laying the basis for the kind of comprehensive, integrated change needed by Africa's smallholder farmers.

This involves the dissemination of technologies to the developing world, revitalise international and national solidarity in the combat against hunger, malnutrition and poverty and attract attention to accomplishments in food and agricultural development.

In Ghana, innovative efforts are being put in place to transform the agricultural sector into a vibrant and high-yielding sector. The Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MOFA) has chosen block farming as a key strategy to increase food production and achieve food security. The total area under cultivation across the country is about 12,000 hectares of both grain and seeds. It is estimated that so far the block farming project has created about 46,000 jobs in the regions. The target is to provide jobs for 250,000 youth farmers.

The main objective of block farms is to put farmers together based on interest. They can easily be mechanised and take advantage of economies of scale, reduced operating cost and increased farm yields. All across the country large tracks of farm land have been identified and released for this new farming project.

The perennial problem of bumper harvests and cheating by middlemen could be eliminated. This could be done through guaranteeing the prices of the produce of the farmers.

Government is in the process of rehabilitating silos and storage houses to storage produce of farmers and block farming programme with the objective of achieving food security.

The government is also trying to revamp run-down infrastructure such as silos and housing for settler farmers. Farms such as Ejura Farms, Aveyime Rice project, Tono & Veve Rice fields are being revived. Projects at Komenda-Eguafo District and Damango are also being revamped.

Over the years, governments have been bringing in combine harvesters and offering training to Ghanaian operators.

Ghana has seen a lot of agricultural projects. Useful lessons could be learnt from these past projects. A particular project revealed that farmers prefer subsidised inputs such as fertiliser. Project impact waned soon after it ended. Integrated programmes in seeds, soils, irrigation, market access, policy and partnerships and innovative finance work to trigger comprehensive changes across the agricultural system.

It is now for a united effort to put all the things that can make for a permanent green revolution in place in order to end hunger and poverty for even the rest of Africa.

Agriculture has always been the mainstay of Ghana's economy. About 60-65 per cent of the country's labour force is employed in agriculture that contributes about half of the country's foreign exchange earnings. However, if the nation is to rise to new levels of prosperity, there must be transformation in the agriculture sector into a vibrant and high-yielding sector.