

Address at the opening of the 23rd Africa Regional Conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization

4 March 2004

The Director-General of FAO, Dr Jacques Diouf,
The Independent Chair of Council, Mr Aziz Mekour,
Honourable Ministers,
Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to thank you most sincerely for giving me the opportunity to address this distinguished gathering today. On behalf of the government and people of South Africa, I extend a very warm welcome to all of you.

It is indeed an honour for South Africa to join the African family of nations in hosting, for the first time, this seminal 23rd African Regional Conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

In his book "Globalisation and its discontents", the Nobel Prize-winning economist, Joseph Stiglitz, says:

"The Developing countries must assume responsibility for their well-being themselves...What is needed are policies for sustainable, equitable, and democratic growth. This is the reason for development. Development is not about helping a few people get rich or creating a handful of pointless protected industries that only benefit the country's elite; it is not about bringing in Prada and Benneton, Ralph Lauren or Louis Vuitton, for the urban rich and leaving the rural poor in their misery...Development is about transforming societies, improving the lives of the poor, enabling everyone to have a chance at success and access to health care and education. This sort of development won't happen if only a few people dictate the policies a country must follow...There must be broad participation that goes well beyond the experts and politicians." (Penguin Books, London 2002. pp251-2.)

Most of us participating in this Conference belong to what in some literature is described as the political class. We are part of the political leadership of our countries and continent. One of our responsibilities is precisely to ask the question that Stiglitz tries to answer.

That question is – what is development! In this context, I trust that we would not find it too difficult to agree with Stiglitz – that development is about transforming societies, improving the lives of the poor, enabling everyone to have a chance at success and access to health care and education, and so on.

I trust we would agree that it is not about helping a few people get rich or creating a handful of pointless protected industries that only benefit the country's elite; that it is not about bringing in Prada and Benneton, Ralph Lauren or Louis Vuitton, for the urban rich and leaving the rural poor in their misery.

We have gathered here to consider the challenges of the agrarian revolution in Africa. Writing about India, Ismail Chaudhury ("Agrarian Revolution Revisited") said: "Industry being the sole and prime concern of the government authorities everywhere, political parties now pay less attention to the peasant question. The official policy of pacifying the rural aggrieved is to distribute doles under pompous schemes, not land...In (the) curious world of (the) revolutionary strategy (even of revolutionary parties), peasants have no role to play other than to participate in voting."

We, for our part, dare not follow the Indian example, if Chaudhury is correct in his assessment of the attitude of the Indian political parties. We cannot afford to pay less attention to the peasant question,

seeing these peasant masses as nothing more than voting cattle to return our parties to power, with no other role.

Where Stiglitz has said that there must be broad participation in defining the development agenda, going well beyond the experts and politicians, the African peasant must be included within this broad participation. The objective situation on our continent and the tasks we have set ourselves within the context of the African Union and its development programme, NEPAD, make it imperative that we focus on the peasant question, working together with the African peasant masses.

According to one paper on "Africa's Agrarian Transformation", 80 percent of Africa's population is rural. This peasant population includes 70 percent of those on our continent who fall within the category of those who are extremely poor and undernourished.

The figures reflecting the incidence of poverty between the urban and rural African populations confirms the higher levels of poverty among the rural masses. Some relevant figures show that:

In 1991, in Tanzania 20 percent of the urban population suffered from a standard of living below the National Poverty Line, while the figure for the rural population was 50 percent. The respective figures for Zambia in 1993 were 46 and 88 percent. Those for Mozambique in 1997 were 62 and 69 percent.

The 1990 figures reflecting the size of the labour force in agriculture compared to the labour force as a whole, also emphasise the importance of agriculture and the rural areas. The figures for Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia respectively were 87, 83, 84, and 75 per cent.

In the book, "Can Africa Claim the 21st Century?", the World Bank has this to say about the role of women in African agriculture:

"Women play a big role in Africa's agricultural production, performing 90 percent of the work of processing food crops and providing household water and firewood, 80 percent of the work of food storage and transport from farm to village, 90 percent of the work of hoeing and weeding, and 60 percent of the work of harvesting and marketing...Despite their importance in agricultural production, women face disadvantages in accessing land and financial, research, extension, education, and health services. This lack of access has inhibited opportunities for agricultural investment, growth and income." (p196).

You are, of course, familiar with all the facts and figures about African agriculture that I have cited. But I referred to them to emphasise the centrality of the peasant question in the struggle for the renewal of our continent.

When we say we must achieve a better life for all our people, the overwhelming majority of these are the peasant masses. When we say we must alleviate and eradicate poverty, we refer first and foremost to our people in the rural areas. When we speak of changing the conditions of the working people for the better, we are referring principally to those who work in agriculture. Similarly, when we talk about gender equality and the emancipation of women, our victory can only be won when such emancipation encompasses the rural women.

We quoted Ismail Chaudhury of India as saying: industry being the sole and prime concern of the government authorities everywhere, political parties now pay less attention to the peasant question.

In their 1997 paper entitled "Explaining Agricultural & Agrarian Policies in Developing Countries", Hans P. Binswanger and Klaus Deininger wrote:

“The literature describing urban bias (Lipton 1977, 1993) provides qualitative evidence that government investment has often favoured the rural elite and the urban upper and middle classes rather than the small family operator.” (p19).

Joe Stiglitz has said that development is not about bringing luxury goods for the urban rich and leaving the rural poor in their misery.

The Kenyan novelist and writer, Ngugi wa Thiongo put this matter more starkly when he said:

“In the economic sphere, wherever the new (post-colonial ruling) class ensures control of the management of the national wealth by external Western financial factors, they do, in the political sphere, also find new trust in western governments. Their own people on the other hand are not to be trusted. The masses, the entire working people, became the enemy. Ethnic divisions, to weaken any concerted efforts against the neo-colonial order, are actively pursued. They begin to view their own society, their own history, their own efforts, their own skins, with the same kind of eye and result that we saw articulated in the literature taught in the colonial classroom. A political characteristic of the neo-colonial order is its discomfiture with the masses and its distrust of local initiatives in everything. It measures its success by how effectively it can reproduce and maintain the colonial order in everything from economics to culture.” (“Literature & Society” in “Writers in Politics”, James Currey, Oxford. 1997).

Binswanger and Deininger also explain the disempowerment of the rural masses, making it difficult for them to challenge the new masters. They write:

“Agricultural producers are separated by large physical distances, which make communication difficult, unless infrastructure – such as roads and telecommunications systems – is well developed. Furthermore, since agricultural activities are seasonal, the potential for concentrated collective action is limited to the slow seasons. These limitations are most pronounced for peasants and other small producers who are widely dispersed, produce a variety of heterogeneous goods for home consumption and the market, are lacking education and access to infrastructure, and lack strong social ties...The differences in income and wealth generated by discrimination and differential accumulation of social capital in turn reduce the political action potential of the groups suffering from discrimination.” (p27).

When Ngugi speaks about the masses and the working people he says we, “the new ruling class”, do not trust and see as the enemy, he is also talking about these disempowered people in the rural areas, who constitute the majority of the masses and the working people. And if he is right, obviously we, this “new ruling class”, work from our capitals, our urban areas, to reproduce and maintain the colonial order in everything from economics to culture.

I am certain that those of us present in this hall who are part of the African political class, will deny that we are the kind of political animal described by Ngugi wa Thiongo. But in a sense, we have a responsibility and a task to ensure that the agrarian programmes we elaborate and implement, rather than what we say, prove that we are not the creatures Ngugi sought to denounce.

In the book we have cited, the World Bank says:

“Though Africa’s agriculture has responded to limited reforms, it remains backward and undercapitalised, the result of centuries of extractive policies. Recapitalising the sector will require maintaining and improving price incentives (including by encouraging competitive input markets), channelling more public spending and foreign aid to rural communities (including for local infrastructure), and tapping into the savings potential of farmers. These changes are also needed to create incentives to reverse severe environmental degradation. Public-private partnerships can make a contribution, including in agricultural research and extension, where a regional approach

would also help. And wider access to OECD markets for agricultural products would make a big difference – at some \$300 billion, subsidies to OECD agriculture are equal to Africa's GDP." (p4).

What we had done and not done was criticised more boldly by Binswanger and Deininger, who wrote:

"A...group of countries, including Argentina, Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and many other countries, also had agrarian structures dominated by family-farms. However these countries discriminated heavily against agriculture by maintaining overvalued exchange rates, industrial protection, and export taxation. In addition, they provided little support to agriculture, and the support they did provide went primarily to relatively inefficient, but politically powerful large producers. Except in regions with especially favourable agricultural conditions, agricultural output has not kept up with population growth, and rural poverty has increased sharply. Although many of these countries have recently initiated macroeconomic stabilisation programmes and structural reforms, they are reforming agricultural policies, with some notable exceptions, only slowly." (p7/8).

The centuries of extractive policies to which the World Bank refers, which have left African agriculture backward and undercapitalised to this day, include the colonial period. We must therefore accept that during the years of independence, we have not done the things mentioned by the World Bank, including the allocation of sufficient resources to agriculture, the development of the rural infrastructure, reducing input costs to the agricultural producers, attending to agricultural research and extension, and so on.

To that extent Ngugi was correct to observe that Africa's political class has been content to oversee the reproduction and maintenance of the colonial order, at least in the area of agriculture.

For instance, we ourselves know that our budgetary allocations to agriculture have been very low. To worsen the problem, World Bank and other international transfers to African agriculture have also declined over time. During the years 1992-97, the World Bank support amounted to \$322.1 million annually. By 2000, this had declined to \$173.5 million.

We also know that because of our neglect of agriculture, paying less attention to the peasant question, as Chaudhury put it, dependence on imported food has also increased quite significantly, further entrenching our position as net importers of food. In 1990 our food exports amounted to \$6.9 billion, with imports standing at \$12.7 billion. By 2000, our food exports had increased to \$7.9 billion, while imports jumped to \$15.2 billion.

I would like to believe that the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP) and other decisions that our continent has already taken, including the African Water Vision 2025, and others that are on your agenda, seek to break with a colonial and post-colonial past that has produced the African agricultural crisis which you know very well, elements of which we have mentioned.

To that extent, we can say that, however belatedly, we have drawn the African roadmap that signifies that we are determined to break away from the neo-colonial route that Ngugi wrote about. Accordingly, we can say that we are at one with Joe Stiglitz when he says that development is about transforming societies, improving the lives of the poor, enabling everyone to have a chance at success and access to health care and education, and extricating the rural masses from the misery of poverty and underdevelopment.

The remaining and perhaps more difficult task is to ensure that we implement our decisions. Put briefly, this means that we have to work hard and consistently to guarantee the success of the African agrarian revolution.

In the first instance this is a political rather than a technical task. It is about ensuring that we break with a tradition that has marginalised African agriculture and the peasant masses from our domestic, regional and continental transformation processes. It is about ensuring that as a political class, we recommit

ourselves to the objective of advancing the interests of the masses, the working people of our country, that Ngugi said we do not trust and treat as an enemy.

It means that we must see ourselves and act as revolutionaries, determined to fight against and defeat the inertia and social forces that will inevitably work to ensure that, practically, we treat the decisions we have taken as mere paper decisions we can forget as soon as this Conference comes to an end.

It also means that we must refuse to treat the peasant masses in our countries and continent as mere objects of policies decided by an elite, striving to ensure their active and conscious engagement in a people-driven process of change. Perhaps the first thing we will have to do, is to inform these peasant masses about what we have decided, addressing them in their native languages. We must also encourage them to have their say as to what they think of our plans and programmes, committed to the view that, as Stiglitz said, that there must be broad participation that goes well beyond the experts and politicians.

In his book, "Development as Freedom", another Nobel Laureate in Economics, Amartya Sen says:

"Hunger relates not only to food production and agricultural expansion, but also to the functioning of the entire economy and...the operation of political and social arrangements that can, directly or indirectly, influence people's ability to acquire food and to achieve health and nourishment." (Oxford University Press, Oxford. 1999. p162).

"The Strategic Framework for IFAD 2002-2006" takes these ideas further when it says:

"Poverty is not only a condition of low income and lack of assets. It is a condition of vulnerability, exclusion and powerlessness. It is the erosion of (the people's) capability to be free from fear and hunger and have their voices heard."

I am honoured to have had the opportunity to speak at this important Conference attended by African revolutionaries, who are dedicated to the strategic task to end the vulnerability, exclusion and powerlessness of our peasant masses, determined to ensure that they are liberated from fear and hunger, and that their voices are heard loud and clear.

I declare the 23rd African Regional Conference of the Food and Agriculture Organisation open and wish you success in your deliberations.

Thank you.