

2014 BORLAUG DIALOGUE

October 16, 2014 - 10:00 a.m.

Keynote Address: *H. E. Ernest Bai Koroma*

Introduction:

Ambassador Kenneth M. Quinn

President - World Food Prize Foundation

Now it is my privilege and my honor to introduce the president of the Republic of Sierra Leone, His Excellency Dr. Ernest Bai Koroma was elected in 2007 and then reelected to the leadership of his country in 2012. And, through an Agenda for Prosperity, his country had earned one of the highest growth rates in the world. And that was the reason we extended an invitation to him to deliver the keynote address at the 2014 Borlaug Dialogue. But since then, of course, his country now confronts a terrible crisis; and so he has had to remain at home in Freetown to manage this, instead of being here with us.

We are so grateful for his willingness to do this live address through a video link, and so it is my privilege and honor to introduce His Excellency Dr. Ernest Bai Koroma.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

H. E. Ernest Bai Koroma

President - Republic of Sierra Leone

Thank you. Your Excellencies, distinguished ladies and gentlemen. I would have been here with you today in person, but I have to stay put in my country to lead our fight against the deadly Ebola virus that is threatening the very survival of my nation.

Since the first cases of the disease in Sierra Leone in May, over 2,900 of our people have been infected, of which there are over 570 survivors. Our people are dying. Farmers have felled by the disease in the food production and commercial crop centers of the land. The majority of the victims of the disease are persons between the ages of 15 and 20, the most active age category comprising of our youths. A disease that strikes youths and farmers is a disease that destroys food production. It is a disease that weakens the present and starves the future. The Ebola disease is a disease against agricultural productivity. It is a disease against youth. It is a disease that compromises the role of youths in agriculture.

The founder of the World Food Prize, Dr. Norman Borlaug, would definitely have supported the fight against Ebola. He was a man who loved food production. He was a man who loved youth. I distinctly remember looking through your website and coming across the simple

question on how people have been inspired by Dr. Norman Borlaug. I immediately came to the concentration that in the 1940s, while other scientists were attempting to split the atom bomb to cause destruction, Dr. Norman Borlaug was attempting to split wheat to feed millions. That, to me, is as inspiring as I can confess; because, on balance, Dr. Borlaug's work and the legacy still stand the test of time. It has raised millions out of poverty and food insecurity and in the process done more for humankind than those who split the atom.

But more inspiring was his belief in youths, a belief that enabled the creation of a worthy institution like the Global Youth Institute, where each year hundreds of students participate in research, peer group learning and exchanging ideas with global leaders in fields of science, industry and policy. In its attack on youths, agriculture and food security, Ebola is a great threat to Dr. Borlaug's vision in our part of the world and a threat to that vision anywhere is a threat to each everywhere.

I thank you very much for inviting me to give this keynote address on Enterprising Youths in the Development of Agriculture. I believe in the youths of my country, and I believe in the youths of the world. When youths are on to great endeavors, not only the present but also the future is secured. The fate of humankind is as good as the fate as its youth. The fate of agriculture is as good as the fate of youths in agriculture.

My country is a nation of young people. Over three-fourths of the population is below 14. Youths, defined in my country as those between the ages of 15 and 35, comprise a third of the country's population. Without their participation, their help and their positive role, our nation is doomed – there will be no present and no future.

Agriculture is the occupation of the majority of our people. This is why this topic that speaks to the relationship between the majority of our people and our country's major occupation is so very important to us. Youths can do it themselves, but their efforts at constructing lives will be better served by the scaffolds and safety nets of national development, vision, program of action, and the relevant institutions. In Sierra Leone, this national program of action has been our Agenda of Change, which has now been transformed into our Agenda for Prosperity.

Before I took over office as president in 2007, there was hardly any government institution specifically dedicated to serving youth interests – but this has changed. We have created a separate ministry of youths, a National Youth Commission and Youth Councils at Chiefdom district, regional and national levels to ensure youth participation in development programs.

I have also appointed a presidential youth aide in my office to integrate youth work into my daily activities at the statehouse. We are presently concluding the framework for the creation of a National Youth Service that will help to nurture positive habits, patriotism and facilitate career development that will help our youths to achieve their professional goals. With the dedication and support of young people during our implementation of the Agenda for Change, we are transforming our country's infrastructure and energy, enhanced agricultural productivity, and improved our health and other human development indicators.

Agriculture was preeminent of the five sectors we emphasized during our implementation of the Agenda for Change. Our vision was to make agriculture the engine for socioeconomic growth and development through commercial agriculture and the promotion of private sector

and farmer-based organizations. We were able to establish over 200 agricultural business centers, about 500 farmer-based organizations, nearly 40 financial services organizations, and a number of community banks. Our policies also have brought in hundreds of millions of private sector investors in the sector, employing thousands of youths.

Our actions have ensured that the primary production of our major crops and other agricultural products have more than doubled the 2007 figures. The country now exports high-grade quality cocoa and coffee, fetching high prices from the world market, more than at any time in the nation's history. From 2007 to 2012, food production generally increased between 34 and 40% compared to the previous years, and this trend has continued.

Private sector participation in agriculture continues to expand. Alongside the support of smallholder commodity commercialization, support is being provided for medium- and large-scale farmers through hire purchase schemes, which have made it possible for them to own tractors and medium-size rice mills.

Earlier this year, we launched a blueprint for youth development in the country as a guide for deepening youth integration in our Agenda of Prosperity. With our youths would develop the document, because we collectively want to face up our challenges through youth private sector development and youth-friendly agencies and services. We want to ensure both skills training for the youth, more education, more employment, and more participation.

But there are still challenges. Many youths are too unskilled to seize the growing job opportunities. A number of cultural and other practices are too restrictive for youths, and many people are refusing to acknowledge that the day of the youth has come upon us, that the youths can no longer wait in the sidelines, that the youths of today want to be in the primary league of national development.

But let the youths also know that a good development player must train hard. A talented development player must be disciplined and must obey the rules of development. Development is teamwork. Without the energy and skills of the youth, the team will be very weak. The team will not be able to score goals. And all those involved with youths in agriculture, it is merely about providing support to the youths to score goals of development. It is about the role of the youth serving agencies and other stakeholders in providing technical advice to the youths. It is about how to motivate youths who feel let down. It is about how to organize youths into a formidable team. It is about how to inspire these most energetic players in our team to bring more development trophies.

Let me at this moment emphasize a very important section of the youth population often neglected in youth agricultural programs, that is, the female youth. Without the participation of female youths in our agricultural programs, we cannot truly talk of a national youth program. Female youths are very active wherever you go in the value chain. And in most of these subsectors, they show great commitment and dedication. I salute the female youths in agriculture.

But there is no better way to appreciating the value of contributions of female youths than working to address the great challenges they face. That is why I believe that development

should also have a human face. That is why we must all ensure that our actions in agriculture are informed by the specific challenges faced by female youths.

Our current national development program, the Agenda for Prosperity, represents a vision for Sierra Leone to become an inclusive green middle-income country status by 2035. In this national vision, we mainstreamed youth affairs and agenda concerns as cross-cutting things on government's development agenda.

We are also embedding our young people in strategic positions, from the chairman of the National Revenue Authority to the Minister of Water Resources, Youth Minister and Presidential Advisor on Youth Affairs, exuberant young people are in authoritative positions to determine and implement government policies. Making young people responsible for their own destinies in a country's major occupation integrates their energies into the better aspirations of their nations.

Youths are the best adapters and innovators, and our nations need innovations in agricultural practices to push ahead. Youths are the greater masters of the new ICTs, and Africa needs ICTs in transforming its agricultural extension, marketing and other agricultural extension, marketing and other value-adding activities. Youths must be allowed to play these roles. The youths must take up this challenge of transforming agriculture on the continent through their better skills and the greater knack for innovations.

Of course, this is not about writing off the tried and tested. In my country, we are grateful to Professor Monty Jones, our own indigenous World Food Prize Laureate, for spearheading a project on agricultural fisheries and agri-based industries. His office has managed to sequester involvement from across six ministries who are now ceding oversight and coordination to a central coordinated unit at Statehouse for direct executive sanctions and greater priority on improving and lifting millions out of food and nutrition poverty in Sierra Leone.

In Africa and other parts of the world, we will continue to tap on the knowledge and expertise and the genius of World Food Prize laureates, implementing their successful agricultural land mass, and enabling the research experience of agricultural expertise to walk within our scope for enhanced development.

I have made for myself a commitment for this legacy of Dr. Norman Borlaug. We must utilize the wisdom of the tried and tested, but only the youths, our most energetic age, can carry us through. Youths are the sinews of our efforts, the sustainers of our better aspirations.

But today, as I speak, these champions of our endeavors and everybody in our country face a great threat from a virus of death and destruction. The deadly Ebola virus is infecting more youths than any other age category in our region. Our gains have been reversed. The economy is slowing down. And nurses, the overwhelming majority of whom are youths, are dying. Food production is going down. Widespread starvation may result. And should our Dr. Borlaug's vision for the youths and the people of Sierra Leone and the general Mano River Basin, which I believe would support of devotees to the ideals of the World Food Prize.

We shall overcome. We will defeat Ebola and its deadly ramifications. I strongly hold the belief, because the energy for life is stronger in a young country than the hold of Ebola. With your support, the strength of our youths will defeat the virulence of the virus.

I thank you for your attention.

Ambassador Quinn

Mr. President, Your Excellency, thank you for this incredibly powerful address that brought both the tragic crisis that you are facing, that you are leading your country through, as well as the measure of hope that you have expressed, and particularly your faith in the youth of your country.

One of your people under the age of 40, Emiliano Mroue, of the West African Rice Company, will in one hour receive a 40 Chances Grant for an innovative program there. And he is asking, and asked me to ask you that, given the massive food security risks to the three or four million smallholders, what can the international community do to help Sierra Leone avoid a major food crisis next year?

H. E. Ernest Bai Koroma

Well, let me start off by putting in the forefront according to crisis. The international community can start by providing us the support that is required in our fight against Ebola. I must admit that a lot of work has been put into it. A lot of commitment has been demonstrated. The U.N. has made a huge pronouncement, and they have established a mission. The Americans within the South Region, the bridges are here, the Chinese. But in spite of the pronouncements and commitments made, the virus is still ahead of us. We must continue in our efforts to ensure that we sprint very fast to get ahead of the virus and stop it. I am sure with all of these concerted efforts, with effective and efficient collaboration, we will be able to address the issue of the virus.

Now, moving beyond that, we now have our programs that we have rolled out. As I have indicated, we have our Agenda for Prosperity, and in it we have positioned agriculture to play a very significant role in transforming the socioeconomic activities of this country. And we also believe that we have mainstream in that sector, a critical role for the youths to play. And I'm sure with all of us providing the kind of support that is required, especially from the international community, and more so as we are now going to address issues that are post-Ebola – post-Ebola because Ebola has ravaged our economy, and it will require us to resource it to get it to where we have been before the outbreak in May. There will be required international concerted efforts to get us to be positioned to where we were, and I'm sure with that, with the active implementation of the programs we have put in place, we will be able to move on with food participation, with agriculture taking its rightful place in the socioeconomic development of our nation.

Ambassador Kenneth Quinn

Well, Your Excellency, again you have the heartfelt feelings of empathy to the crisis that you face. And I'm sure I speak on behalf of everyone here and everyone watching today, that you have all of our support, our thoughts, our efforts to be with you and all of the people of your country as you face this agricultural crisis. Again, thank you, Your Excellency, for your powerful and very memorable address to keynote our Borlaug Dialogue. And I know that Dr. Borlaug's spirit is also with you in your endeavors. Please join me in thanking His Excellency.