

Positive news for world's poor

As president of the International Fund for Agricultural Development, Dr Kanayo Nwanze oversees the UN agency working to alleviate poverty and food insecurity among poor rural people. He met up with ACIAR while in Canberra to discuss a new IFAD report on progress to eliminate extreme rural poverty.

BY KANAYO F. NWANZE

What would your life be like if you were one of the 1.4 billion women, men and children who live in extreme poverty? Chances are you would live in a rural area, as do 70% of the world's extremely poor people.

Like Li Guimin from China, you would worry about the exodus of young people from your community as they seek opportunities but likely face worse poverty in distant cities.

Like Shazia Bibi from Pakistan, you might wonder if your garlic can compete at the market with lower-priced imports and whether you will earn enough to pay your children's school fees and buy your heart medicine.

And like Ribita lobete, a farmer in Kiribati, you would be concerned about the shrinking size of your coconuts due to intrusions of sea water—an ominous repercussion of climate change in a country where 'high ground' is just 2 metres above sea level.

But there is good news, which was discussed at meetings in Canberra in April 2011. A new report issued by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) reveals that more than 350 million rural people have pulled themselves out of extreme poverty over the past 10 years. The percentage of the world's rural inhabitants living on less than \$1.20 a day has dropped from nearly half to about one-third.

But poverty remains pervasive, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. Although its rate of rural poverty has fallen slightly in the past decade, it is still above 60%. And not far from Australia's own shores, South Asia is home to half of the world's one billion extremely poor rural people.

East Asia has accounted for much of the progress. Standouts are China and other emerging economies such as Vietnam, where the number of extremely poor people in rural areas fell by two-thirds, from 365 million to 117 million. So did the rate of extreme poverty, which declined from 44% to 15%.

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Sub-Saharan Africa. Although its rate of rural poverty has fallen slightly in the past decade, it is still above 60%. And not far from Australia's own shores, South Asia is home to half of the world's one billion extremely poor rural people.

Yet change is underway in rural areas, giving rise to hope while also exposing challenges.

These include increasingly volatile food

Kanayo F. Nwanze meets with Jane Ngaguara, a member of the Busara Dairy Goat Self-Help Group, while visiting some of IFAD's projects in Kenya. Jane inherited her land from her parents and has run her goat business since 2003.



prices, which complicate life for rural people as both producers and buyers of food. Other emerging threats include deterioration of natural resources, growing competition for land and water, and as Australians know only too well, increasingly severe weather events worsened by climate change.

But good things are happening too. As cities expand and the world becomes more urbanised, the demand for high-value food is growing, expanding markets for farmers.

And while agriculture continues to drive rural growth, engaging four-fifths of rural households worldwide at some level, technological advancements and changes in the global economy are also creating jobs off the farm. The accelerating search for renewable energy sources around the world only increases the potential for growth.

All of this creates opportunities for poor

rural women and men to lift themselves out of poverty and create a future for their children. But making the most of it requires policies and investments that are both market-oriented and environmentally sustainable.

For a start, governments and the international community need to reverse the long-standing neglect of rural development. We need to improve governance in rural areas and create an economic environment that will allow smallholder farmers to grow both food and their businesses.

We need to invest in rural infrastructure and in building the skills of rural people, so they can exploit new opportunities in agricultural markets or find jobs in non-farm industries. If we help them strengthen their collective capabilities, they will be able to support each other in managing risks, learning new techniques to improve productivity and marketing their products.

And we need to invest in youth. In developing countries, young people aged 15 to 24 make up 20% of the population. In rural areas, many of them are growing up on smallholder farms. We must invest in those young, creative minds so they can develop the skills to run their farms like small businesses.

Anyone who has spent any time with farmers in developing countries knows that they are dynamic, innovative people whose hard work will ultimately lead the way to development and prosperity.

At stake is the security of the global food supply. Agricultural production must increase 70% by 2050, and output in developing countries will have to double, if we are to keep food on the table for the nine billion people expected on Earth by then.

I have no doubt that Li, Shazia and Ribita are up to the challenge. Are the rest of us? ■

PHOTO: GEORGINA GOODWIN



Dr Kanayo F. Nwanze

As the fifth IFAD president, Dr Kanayo F. Nwanze brought to the role more than 30 years experience in poverty reduction through agriculture, rural development and research.

Under Dr Nwanze's leadership, IFAD stepped up its advocacy efforts to ensure that agriculture is a central part of the international development agenda, and that the concerns and needs of smallholders and other poor rural people are recognised by governments around the world.

He also increased the number of outpost country program managers and expanded the number of country offices. This increased country presence, and the direct supervision by IFAD of its projects, helps make them more effective.

In recognition of Nwanze's intellectual leadership on issues of food security, he was asked to chair the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on Food Security in 2010.

His background is in agricultural science, earning degrees from the University of Ibadan in Nigeria and Kansas State University in the US. As Director-General of the Africa Rice Center, Dr Nwanze was instrumental in introducing and promoting New Rice for Africa (NERICA), a high-yielding, drought and pest-resistant variety developed specifically for the African landscape. He also transformed the Africa Rice Center from a West African to an Africa-wide organisation with an international reputation for excellence.

Dr Nwanze has held senior positions at several research centres affiliated with the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) in Africa and Asia, and he was instrumental in the establishment of the Alliance of CGIAR Centers.

During a visit to Canberra in April, Dr Nwanze visited ACIAR to discuss food security issues, especially in relation to African smallholder farmers. The talks dealt with the need for strategies that better allow smallholder farmers to contribute to the 70% increase in food production required by 2050.

This increase must come from existing agricultural land—largely through environmentally sustainable intensification—creating a need for innovative agricultural R&D and extension services to smallholders within projects that integrate production systems and the value chain, including market access.

This approach squares with ACIAR research programs where productivity, profitability and sustainability are components that are routinely integrated into the design of projects across research programs.

Dr Kanayo Nwanze, president of the International Fund for Agricultural Development.

PHOTO: GUIDO FUK

