



The Centrality of Africa

Ibrahim Ouédraogo

I wish, first of all, to convey my joy and that of the many communities which my organization (INADES-Formation) supports on the African continent, at being able to take part in this important event and for the honor you do me in asking me to speak at this meeting. Our joy is almost as all-encompassing as the central theme which unites us together today, one that has always been at the center of the concerns of the people of Africa and which defines our organization. You now offer me the opportunity to share our views on the subject, in the hope that one day such a meeting will take place in Africa, allowing you to appreciate all the more our rich cultural, biological and culinary heritage.

The African Institute for Economic and Social Development (L'institut africain pour le développement économique et social-centre africain de formation) known as Inades-Formation, has, since its creation in 1962, focused on how to support communities of Africa, especially rural communities, in order to sustainably produce food of quality in sufficient quantity, whilst respecting both the environment and varying cultures. To this aim, we have sought to strengthen the capacity of these rural communities and their organizations so that they become agents of progress within their geographical, economical and political environments.

But the establishing of indigenous development programs is based on a basic principle: that partnerships and strategic alliances with other development agencies must be created, for the exchange of knowledge and project collaboration. It is to support a food community in the village of Tanlili, in Burkina Faso, West Africa, that we have created a tripartite partnership between the community, Milan University and our organization. It is the result of this partnership of sharing and mutual learning between a research body, a group of farmers and a supporting organization which won the Slow Food Award in 2004.

This award has taught us that even in situations of seeming hopelessness and economic fragility (degradation of the land, poor rainfall) the improvement of indigenous knowledge and its enrichment by modern knowledge can lead to a solution to famine. This is why this meeting of giving and receiving constitutes for Africa an opportunity to learn from the experiences of others and enrich others with ours. Clearly, Africa's position in global commercial exchanges remains weak (less than 2%) and due to this, when economic deals are discussed and finalized, Africa is only marginally represented, judging by its weight at the OMC and within multinational institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. This Slow Food meeting, however, breaks with the trend: Africa is represented here both by the significant number of delegates and by the wealth of experiences exchanged. Slow Food is clearly conscious of the riches of Africa.

Usually, when we speak about the subject of food in Africa, the images of wars and natural catastrophes and famine presented by the western media come to mind. Certainly, these things are not imagined; to a certain extent they reflect reality. But the causes of these famines are related to factors both internal and external. Internal causes are generally the following: natural factors (such as drought and desertification) agricultural policy, the poor incomes of farmers,




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the inability to invest in new technologies (reliance on animal-driven machinery), isolation, which prevents the delivery of products from zones with a surplus towards those with a deficit, the absence of small processing plants, low profits that do not encourage farmers to increase yields, and the lack of market opportunities.

Alongside these factors indigenous to Africa are major external factors, such as unfair competition from European products such as milk, meat, wheat, sugar and cotton. Today, for example, the importation of poultry from Europe is an acute problem. Despite high production costs, the practice of subsidies results in an invasion of foreign products on African markets which are consistently able to beat the prices of local products.

Another factor is the increasing rarity of public funding for development, to fight against poverty. Despite the official discourse of many investors, the amount of public money going towards development in African countries, from South Africa to the Sahara, has fallen from 8% of gross national product in 1990 to 5.8% in 2000. At the same time, international financial investment in rural and agricultural development has fallen by 40% and only 12% of public aid goes towards agriculture.

To add insult to injury, whilst we are searching hard for ways to deal with these numerous problems instead of supporting Africa and solving the real causes of lack of food security, we are being pressured into accepting GMO foods as an alternative, after they have been rejected by European consumers.

Instead of involving ourselves in the debate over this issue, we feel other viable solutions exist to resolve the problem of famine in Africa. These include improved water management and the development of water-bearing stratum, which will respond not only to the needs of the human and animal populations, but also ensure crop irrigation.

The example of the countries of the Sahara is there to encourage all: after sufficient rainfall, good quantities of food are produced and any surplus is distributed. Unfortunately, surplus food is not always distributed.

The resolution of the problem of famine in Africa also includes the financial support of rural areas, to permit them to acquire methods of production and strengthen the integration of agriculture and livestock raising.

Further to this, we must also fight both for an opening for African products on European markets on one hand and for a drastic reduction in agricultural subsidies on the other. A reduction, not their elimination, for we do not want the European farming communities to disappear.

In every case, the measures taken to resolve the food problems of Africa must always be based on agricultural development which is both safe and respectful of the environment.

This is the ethos of Slow Food, which seeks to ally economic and cultural interests with ecological imperatives in food issues: it is an initiative which should be promoted and valued throughout Europe and Africa. We would like to thank the organizers of this meeting once again for giving us this immense opportunity to enrich ourselves with the experiences of the other people of our earth, and to work towards an Africa with a more prosperous tomorrow, ever rich in cultural and biological diversity.

I thank you.

Ibrahim Ouédraogo, (Burkina Faso), is the president of Inades-Formation, a Pan-African confederation of farmers' associations (this speech was read at Terra Madre by Francis Fru N'Gang, assistant director of the same organization, since Mr. Ouédraogo couldn't attend the opening plenary session of the event).



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