

Editorial



**Dr. Sanjaya Rajaram, 2014 World Food prize Winner
Born in India, a Citizen of Mexico after decades of work at CIMMYT**

Shall we be able to feed more than 9 billion people in 2050? Are we on course? We first heard Ambassador Kenneth Quinn, President of the World Food Prize Foundation, ask these questions during his visit to Jinja, Uganda to attend the Centennial celebrations of Dr. Norman Borlaug's birth at the invitation of Sasakawa Africa Association (SAA). This was the same theme that resonated this October at the Borlaug Dialogue in Des Moines Iowa, the home of the World Food Prize, founded by Dr. Borlaug in 1986.

I have just come from Des Moines and this year's Dialogue marked the epic centennial celebrations of Dr. Norman Borlaug's birth. He was born on March 25, in 1914. The Dialogue gets better each year and this one was no exception. The focus now is clearly sub-Saharan Africa; as far as agricultural development in all its forms is concerned, the light is finally shining on the African continent and this Ebola "plague" is doing us no good.

There were many speeches and many participants (1400) of varied backgrounds and from more than 60 countries across the globe. Private sector discussions were particularly interesting as we address an increasing urbanized population, and thus more reliance on processed foods.

Jeannie Borlaug, Dr. Borlaug's daughter talked of the many birthdays she has had to attend during the year, commemorating the father's centennial milestone. Ambassador Quinn every so often would share with the audience words said to him by Dr. Borlaug, who hired him in the year 2000, after he had retired from the US Foreign service, to manage the World Food Prize Foundation. To state what an excellent pick by the Nobel scientist is an understatement. Ambassador Quinn has brought the World Food Prize Norman Borlaug Dialogue to a whole new level. Clearly he remembers all those words that used to be said to him by Dr. Borlaug, whether privately or formally. Ambassador Quinn, a career diplomat did not study agricultural sciences;

yet, he continues to translate the vision of the luminary so articulately that one would think they spent time together on the CIMMYT agricultural research fields or in Asia as Dr. Borlaug worked to convince the Indian and Pakistan governments to adopt the new technology that was set to quadruple wheat and rice yields, and thus eliminated starvation completely from those two countries. This year of the centennial celebrations marks the first time a wheat scientist like Dr. Borlaug and a protégé of Dr. Borlaug is winning the prize that was founded by Dr. Borlaug himself. Dr. Sanjaya Rajaram said in his acceptance speech: "I believe that the challenges of the 21st-century agriculture and food production are surmountable compared to the past and can be overcome provided we can bring together new knowledge and delivery systems to farmers in a very sustainable manner... It will require all the resources from international research centers, national governments, foundations, NGOs and farmer groups together to synergize future agricultural technologies and food production." "Shall we be able to feed more than 9 billion people in 2050? That is the single greatest challenge facing mankind today" said Ambassador Quinn. The World Food Prize was established in 1986, the same year the Sasakawa Africa Association (SAA) was established following the bitter famine in Ethiopia that claimed the lives of more than one million people. This year it is Ebola, which already threatens to starve many in the affected countries. Each year volunteers in Iowa, and mostly high school students pack meals to go and feed the hungry. This year, 24,000 meals were packed for Liberia. We were addressed, through video link, by the President of Sierra Leone, who described a very chilling, sad and challenging situation in his country, and who appealed for international support. He described a dire situation where his people have had to abandon the farms, hurling together as the only way of fighting the scourge and in the process, not being able to work or to farm.

For Dr. Borlaug, a human face needed to be put to hunger, malnutrition and poverty, and should be devoid of any form of divides, and should be able to foster world peace; it is no surprise then that he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970, for being able to feed one billion people with his science. The man used his passion, his refusal to accept that people should go hungry for lack of food and pledged to work on these issues for as long as he was still alive, and he did.

"Dr. Rajaram worked closely with Dr. Borlaug, succeeding him as head of the wheat breeding program at CIMMYT in Mexico, and then carried forward and expanded upon his work, breaking new ground with his own invaluable achievements. "His breakthrough breeding technologies have had a far-reaching and significant impact in providing more food around the globe and alleviating world hunger," Quinn said. "Dr. Borlaug himself called Dr. Rajaram "the greatest present-day wheat scientist in the world" and "a scientist of great vision". The creation of Sasakawa Africa Association in 1986 helped to bring Dr. Borlaug's technologies to Africa, as the Green Revolution wave in Asia and Latin America had bypassed Africa. At the time though, work was going on in Mexico, and the Mexican government and some Latin American nations were able to embrace the technology; also at the time, scientists from Asia were working closely with Dr. Borlaug and included Dr. Sanjaram, this year's winner of the World Food Prize. Other Indian scientists have won this prize, M.S. Swaminathan being the first, and using part of the prize money to establish the well-known MS Swaminathan Foundation in Chennai, India, which I have had the honor to visit twice, at the invitation of MS (as we popularly refer to him).

Africa too has had World Food Prize winners: Dr. Monty Jones of Liberia for NERICA rice, which is now a popular variety in many African ecologies and Dr. Gebisa Ejeta of Ethiopia, who developed sorghum varieties suitable for Africa, and former President of Ghana, His Excellency John Kufuor for his support of agriculture and food security during his tenure (2001-2005). I should also add that Ghana was one of the countries in the early years of Sasakawa Africa

Association that embraced improved varieties of rice and maize. Ambassador Quinn makes sure there is increasing presence of Africa in the work of the Foundation. He invites African Heads of State to speak, and Ministers of Agriculture and accords them all the special diplomatic privileges, he provides opportunities for African students to apply for the various Borlaug Awards, the high school students of the Borlaug Youth Institute get a chance to study African countries and report on them, and a good number of the interns are placed in CGIAR centers in Africa.

We at the Sasakawa Africa Association value the association we have with the World Food Prize Foundation in Des Moines. Since 1986 when Dr. Borlaug started his work in Africa, the organization has worked in 14 countries, promoting the same technologies that had seen Asia put massive hunger behind them. But then, Africa is 54 countries, and what worked for India and Pakistan is that their governments wholly embraced these technologies. The food security situation was dire then in Asia. It is extremely dire now in sub-Saharan Africa. For the first time in 2014, African Heads of State have collectively embraced the need to prioritize Agriculture and food security, designating 2014 as Africa's Year of Agriculture and Food Security. But then, it is not just a question of improving productivity, but nutrition and overall quality of life.

The late Chris Dowswell, who served as Dr Borlaug's technical and communications assistant for more than 40 years and as SAA's Executive Director (Programs) for a number of years until his death, was a yearly participant at the World Food Prize Forum and a great support; he is dearly missed.

The Ebola epidemic has exposed the terrible healthcare situation in Africa. If people are still dying from treatable conditions such as malaria, tuberculosis, diarrhea and others, how are they going to survive from a killer non treatable disease? Even as African governments finally pledge to do something about hunger, malnutrition and agriculture, there is need to put in place measures to uplift the overall standard of living of the citizens. Availing potable water, decent housing and clothing, addressing sanitation and creating jobs especially for young people, developing infrastructure in rural areas and getting rid of slums are just some of the aspects that need to be addressed, not just for a few individuals, but to get rid of divisive inequities altogether. For now, there is need to be innovative in the way we contemplate to reduce hunger and malnutrition in regions still affected, but to be able to do the same for fast growing populations, African governments know what needs to be done and should go ahead and do so. Supporting their women to be able to deliver safely, and with agricultural information and inputs, and promoting gender and social equity will be good actions to start with.

For now, Ambassador Kenneth Quinn's question remains one to consider seriously. Hopefully we shall find answers and act soon and fast.