

Bringing Agriculture to the Negotiating Table at the World Economic Forum in Davos

By Janeen Madan

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At the recent 2011 World Economic Forum (WEF) meeting held in Davos, Switzerland (January 26-30), business leaders, politicians, economists, and scientists gathered to discuss the world's most urgent economic challenges. This year, agriculture was on the agenda as a key tool to address the interconnected issues of food security, environmental sustainability, and economic growth.

The New Vision for Agriculture initiative, led by the Consumer Industries Community of the WEF, launched a roadmap to increase food production, cut greenhouse gas emissions, and reduce poverty by 20 percent over the next decade.

The strategy highlights the role businesses can play in promoting collaboration between private, public, and civil society actors. This "new vision" aims at providing a platform to address the urgent need to develop sustainable agricultural systems. They warn that "by 2050, the global population will surpass 9 billion people, and demand for agricultural products is expected to double. At the same time, the world's agricultural systems will be increasingly challenged by water scarcity, climate change and volatility, raising the risk of production shortfalls."



The New Vision for Agriculture launched by top global businesses says farmers play a central role in building key partnerships between the private and public sector.
Photo credit - Bernard Pollack

The initiative is led by 17 global companies spanning the agriculture value chain from seed companies to fertilizer manufacturers to food processors, and grain traders, including Archer Daniels Midland, Cargill, The Coca-Cola Company,

Kraft Foods, Monsanto Company, Nestlé, PepsiCo, Syngenta, Unilever, and Yara International.

Speaking at the WEF meeting, CEOs and top executives outlined the framework, goals and principles for this new strategy.

"We are sending out a strong message that the private sector is ready to work with public sector leaders to realize agriculture's potential as a positive driver of food security, environmental sustainability, and worldwide economic growth," said Frits van Dijk, Nestlé's Executive Vice President and Zone Director for Asia, Oceania, Africa and Middle East (AOA).

Among the roadmap's top priorities is the central role farmers will play in establishing new partnerships. "Business can help transform agriculture, but we can't do it alone," said Paul Polman, CEO of Unilever. "By working collaboratively with farmers, governments and others, we can achieve our common goals of increasing health and prosperity while protecting the planet."

It is indeed exciting to see agriculture and food security being discussed at the negotiating table. This "new vision," however, focuses on agricultural innovations as creations developed by corporate businesses and research institutes.

As Olivier De Schutter, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, writes in the Forward to State of the World 2011: Innovations that Nourish the Planet, we must embrace practices that seek to "reward the inventiveness of farmers, who move from being passive recipients of knowledge developed in laboratories to being inventors of the knowledge they need."

And while the New Vision for Agriculture emphasizes increased agricultural production, (especially of staple crops), we also need to focus on some of the often-ignored issues, including promoting food biodiversity and reducing post-harvest losses.

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