

AG WEEKLY

More Policy Support Is Needed to Feed the World's Hungry

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Washington, D.C.-Policymakers around the world need to step up their critical efforts to combat hunger, malnutrition, and poverty by providing greater support for agriculture, according to researchers with Worldwatch Institute's Nourishing the Planet project. As the awarding of the annual World Food Prize approaches, the project acknowledges the important contribution that the Prize makes in recognizing policymakers and leaders who have invested in their countries' agricultural futures. This year's award is being given to two former heads of state to highlight the importance of transformational leadership in effecting positive change and improving people's lives.

The World Food Prize, awarded each year since 1994 and sponsored by businessman and philanthropist John Ruan, recognizes the achievements of individuals who have advanced human development by improving the quality, quantity, or availability of food in the world, thereby helping to boost global food security. This year, the prize will be awarded to John Agyekum Kufuor, the former president of Ghana, and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the former president of Brazil, for their outstanding achievements in reducing hunger in their countries. The ceremony will take place during the Borlaug International Symposium in Des Moines, Iowa, from October 12 to 14.

"As the global population is expected to hit 7 billion by the end of this month, it is increasingly important that food security become a higher priority on country agendas," said Robert Engelman, Worldwatch's President. "Leaders like Kufuor and da Silva show us that political will and government action can reduce hunger. The opportunities to do so around the world are immense."

"It is important to acknowledge such high-level leadership in agriculture at a time when there are still more than 1 billion hungry people in the world, and when food prices are high and increasingly volatile," said Danielle Nierenberg, director of Worldwatch's Nourishing the Planet project (www.NourishingthePlanet.org). "Agriculture is not often a top priority for policymakers----in Africa, only seven nations invest 10 percent or more of their national budgets in the sector. Now, more than ever, it is essential for policymakers to support sustainable agricultural innovations in order to improve food security." Nierenberg notes that continued neglect from governments is putting greater strain on farmers, especially as they confront the risks of climate change and increasing water scarcity.

Both of this year's World Food Prize recipients have made considerable contributions to their countries' agricultural sectors. Under former Ghanaian President Kufuor's tenure, both the share of people suffering from hunger and the share of people living on less than \$1 dollar a day were halved. Economic reforms strengthened public investment in food and agriculture, which was a major factor behind the quadrupling of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) between 2003 and 2008. Because 60 percent of Ghana's population depends directly on agriculture, the sector is critical for the country's economic development.

In addition to the economic reforms, Ghana's Agricultural Extension Service helped alleviate hunger and poverty by educating farmers and ultimately doubling cocoa production between 2002 and 2005. And the country's School Feeding Program, which began in 2005, ensures that school children receive one nutritiously and locally produced meal every day. The program has transformed domestic agriculture by supporting irrigation, improving seeds and crop diversification, making tractors more affordable for farmers, and building feed roads, silos, and cold stores for horticultural crops.

In Brazil, among the major goals of former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's presidency were alleviating poverty, improving educational opportunities for children, providing greater inclusion of the poor in society, and ensuring that "every Brazilian has food to eat three times a day." The

government implemented policies and actions known as the "Zero Hunger Programs" to provide cash aid to poor families (guaranteeing a minimum income and enabling access to basic goods and services); to distribute food to poor families through community restaurants, assisted-living facilities, day-care centers, and related organizations; and to provide nutritious meals to children in public schools. As a result, the number of hungry people in Brazil was halved, and the share of Brazilians living in extreme poverty decreased from 12 percent in 2003 to 4.8 percent in 2009.

Not just in Ghana and Brazil, but around the world, policymakers, farmers, activists, and other leaders are investing in agricultural innovations to reduce hunger and alleviate poverty----although many of these efforts need to be scaled up. During 2010-11, researchers from Worldwatch's Nourishing the Planet project traveled to 25 countries in sub-Saharan Africa and uncovered a rich and diverse treasure trove of innovations from farmers' groups, private voluntary organizations, universities, and even agribusiness companies. Their findings were published in the Institute's flagship report, State of the World 2011: Innovations that Nourish the Planet.

In Uganda, for example, Project DISC (Developing Innovations in School Cultivation) is teaching students how to grow, cook, and eat native vegetables, including spiderwike and amaranth. Not only are the students learning how to cook and provide for themselves, but the classes are giving them a reason to stay in rural areas and become farmers, instead of migrating to the cities. In other countries, including Niger, Kenya, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, farmers are learning how to increase their harvests and get more "crop per drop." In Benin, the Solar Electric Light Fund (SELF) has introduced solar-powered drip irrigation that is improving nutrition and raising incomes for farmers. After one year of implementing the innovation, villagers were eating three to five servings of vegetables a day, and children were going to school instead of spending time carrying water to the fields.

Nourishing the Planet praises the leaders and policymakers—including former presidents Kufuor and da Silva—who have invested in agriculture and helped to reduce hunger and poverty in their countries. But with some 1 billion hungry people remaining in the world, much greater investment and policy support is needed to boost agriculture and improve global food security.