

Speech by Angela Cropper, Deputy Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), at the High Level Conference on Food Security, the Challenges of Climate Change and Bioenergy

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Mr. Chairmen, distinguished delegates, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

We are living in a time of multiple crises.

These are grabbing the headlines and requiring the international community to find solutions on so many fronts.

What will it be next – a new wave of natural disasters in another vulnerable area of the globe: or will it be a global water crisis?

Ladies and gentlemen,

It may seem right to seek solutions in the tried and tested systems of the past.

But perhaps we need to find a new set of answers for a new century?

- Ones that balance the realities with new approaches.
- Ones that echo to a diversity of responses that recognize the differing circumstances of countries and communities.
- And ones that do not simply attempt to solve one crisis independently of the links with others.

What are the choices?

One choice is to simply ratchet up the agricultural production systems of the 20th century – a model one might call reductionist.

Reductionist in the sense that we are coming to depend on an ever smaller suite of crops.

Reductionist too if we ignore the wealth of agricultural biodiversity that has nourished humanity for millennia.

Reductionist also because farming is being reduced to a simple process of intensification – centering on the notion that ever more chemical inputs from pesticides to artificial fertilizers, will solve our difficulties.

If the goal is to simply maximize yields at the cost of all else then perhaps we are on the right course.

But UNEP, among others, is convinced that this is not a model that will ultimately serve the interests of either the developed or developing world.

And what about the wider price we pay? For which the bill arrives at a later date.

The price of:

- An increasing number of 'dead' or de-oxygenated zones in the seas and oceans which challenge fish stocks.
- Reductions in biodiversity, including the simple life forms that underpin the fertility of the soils.
- A continued spread of land degradation and its consequences including those for farming.
- Clear felling of forests for animal feed and food with impacts on soil stability, water resources and climate change.
- The whole-sale clearance of mangroves for shrimp farms and aquaculture that can increase the vulnerability of communities to extreme weather events.

If we leave these 'prices' out of the equation, we will have ignored all that another set of delegates, representing the very same governments, have talked about in Bonn last week at the 9th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Definitely, we must assist the millions currently priced out of the food markets. But we might also seize the opportunity to plan a new Green Revolution: one with a capital G.

Take water.

It is about using more or damming more or is it about using less but using it more intelligently?

One thinks of drip versus spray irrigation, of water recycling.

And what about small scale solutions? What about rainwater harvesting on truly transformational scales – Africa has enough rain falling on it to supply the needs of 13 billion people if only it were collected.

Take soil fertility.

Yes, in some areas such as Sub-Saharan Africa we may need more fertilizer use.

Take biodiversity.

There are investment and management options that work with nature-based services rather than against them – services that make agriculture possible in the first place, and which will be required to make agriculture possible in the long run!

I am talking about the health and diversity of the microbes, beetles, worms and other humble life-forms whose presence is at the very root of productive agricultural systems.

Why not invest in these rather than in ever larger amounts of artificial inputs that often kill the very life forms upon which soil productivity is founded.

And what about bees, bats and other pollinators whose services are worth tens of billions of dollars if only their services were properly captured in national and global measures of value?

Agriculture in the 21st century and the need to feed nine billion people will not be possible in a world without them.

And we do not have the machines or devices that can replace what the billions of bees currently do for free.

What about the forests? Stabilizers of soils and securers of water supplies.

Investment in forest conservation is not only good for agriculture but also important for carbon sequestration, as well as a source of genetic diversity.

And the challenges but also the opportunities get wider if we look beyond the latest 'crisis'.

Sure, we need investment:

- In seeds and in tools and in farm equipment
- In creative market mechanisms, such as insurance policies able to support the poor and the poor farmers in times of scarcity.
- In the political processes and approaches to more fairly manage global commodity markets, trade and subsidies.

But, we would say, we also need investment in the conservation and restoration of ecosystems and biodiversity that are the real and fundamental inputs for truly sustainable agriculture:

- Investment in sustainable farming techniques and in the genetically rich crops of the past.
- And Investment in the centuries-old experience of farmers, often in developing countries and often among the female members of communities.

In our view, the current food situation is a symptom of a wider set of interacting forces relating to sustainability, from the degradation of our ecosystems to the climate change that is underway, from fairer trade to gender equity, from ignoring the concept of One World and the reality of One Earth.

Perhaps, here in Rome, we can not only recognize these interacting forces and the interdependence between nations and natural systems, but act on that understanding by reflecting them in our responses.

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