

IFAD Cape Town conference highlights challenges and opportunities for boosting economic growth and food security in region

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With the right policies and investment approaches, the agricultural sector can help invigorate economic growth across Africa, government and private-sector leaders said at an event organized here earlier this week by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum on Africa 2011.

The conference, [New challenges, new opportunities: African agriculture in the 21st century](#), was held in collaboration with the South African Institute for International Affairs (SAIIA) and featured the presentation of IFAD's [Rural Poverty Report 2011](#). Speakers included the agriculture ministers from South Africa, Rwanda and the United Republic of Tanzania, other high-ranking government officials, as well as agricultural experts from the private sector and civil society organizations.

A keynote speaker at the event, [Tina Joemat-Pettersson](#), Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of the Republic of South Africa, noted that well functioning agricultural markets are essential for rural growth and poverty reduction, and that modern markets and value chains are bringing forth new opportunities for smallholder farmers on the continent.

“Most rural households are connected with markets, as sellers of produce, buyers of food, or both. However, the extent to which they are involved varies considerably,” she said. “The rapid emergence of supermarkets, for example, is spurring the establishment of modern value chains, particularly for high-value foodstuffs. This is not only a source of opportunities for smallholder farmers, but also a means of creating demand for labor and services from other rural people.”



IFAD President, [Kanayo F. Nwanze](#) told the conference that, while donor support will continue to be important, the continent itself will have to generate the changes that will lead to transformation. Citing the [Rural Poverty Report 2011](#), he called for national policies and investment approaches to support rural infrastructure development and greater private-sector involvement in agriculture. “The report shows that many poor people have the capacity and the desire to build better lives for themselves. What they lack is access, opportunity and infrastructure,” he said. “It is time to stop treating them as charity cases and instead focus on helping them to grow their businesses – first to achieve food security and then to produce a surplus. By doing this we will allow them to break definitively out of poverty.”



Another keynote speaker, Jumanne Abdallah Maghembe, Minister for Agriculture, Food Security and Co-operatives of the United Republic of Tanzania, emphasized the importance of creating a better environment for small farmers to develop their businesses. “There is a dire need to invest in smallholders, particularly in creating rural infrastructure to support them as they develop their production capacity. By looking at the realities of regions and villages, and tailoring solutions for them, we can transform lives,” he said.

At a spirited panel discussion moderated by BBC presenter Komla Dumor, panelists offered a range of views and ideas on how to improve the economic climate for agriculture and rural businesses. They also discussed how to help smallholder farmers to reduce the risks they face so that they can improve their operations and expand rural education for a more knowledge-intensive agriculture.



“Agricultural production in Africa can be increased by a factor of 10 to 20,” said

Agnes Matilda Kalibata Minister of Agriculture and Animal Resources of the Republic of Rwanda. “But to do that we have to educate our banks about supporting smallholders, as well as equipping our rural youth with a better educational system and vocational training.”

Akin Adesina, Vice President of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), emphasized that making smallholder agriculture more profitable is the best way to lift rural people out of poverty and to ensure food security. “We need to focus on value chains with the goal of getting our young people to see agriculture as a good business for them to be in,” he said. “Africa must start using its own resources to make this happen, by connecting banks and microfinance institutions with farmers themselves.”



Other participants on the panel included Pascal-Firmin Ndimira, Professor and Special Advisor to the President of the Republic of Togo; Ibrahim Mayaki, Chief Executive Officer of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD); Kavita Prakash-Mani, Head of Food Security Agenda at the global agribusiness company Syngenta, and Mohamed Béavogui, Director for West and Central Africa at IFAD.

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