



FAO/OECD Expert Meeting on Greening the Economy with Agriculture (GEA)
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Comments (Panel) by Tewolde Berhan Gebre Egziabher, on GEA and Food Availability

A statement prepared for the Panel on Access, 6 September 2011.

1. Introduction

My first visit to Paris was in 1966. I remember being dazzled by the city, but also being conscious of its fast shrinking global colonial shadow. I was on my way to North Wales, in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, just across the Channel, which was also being trimmed down to size after a colonial grandeur that encircled the globe. I was going for my postgraduate studies.

I am here addressing you today in the pos-colonial club of mostly ex-colonial rich countries, the OECD Headquarters. I thank both the FAO and the OECD for this treat given to me, a citizen of a Least Developed country.

More importantly in the context of our meeting, I thank both the FAO and the OECD for the four Working Documents that have set the stage for our discussions during this meeting. I love their content. My feeling when I read them was one of a “déjà vue”. Why?

I grew up in a Northern Ethiopian village in a smallholder farming family. My first memory is that of the post-Second World War chaos that prevailed. Fascist Italy had just been thrown out of my country following a brief colonial attempt. Colonialism was globally ending. But peace had not fully returned to my country. There were vagabonds everywhere in our area. In the evening, all of us went to the biggest house in the village. Women and children huddled together inside the house. Men and boys stayed out, looking after the domestic animals and being on the lookout for the raiding vagabonds. It was in this extended family made up of the whole local community that

my education on agriculture, on crops, on domestic animals, on manure, on soil fertility, on wild animals, on forests and woodlands, on the earth, on the sky, and on the essential linkages among them started. What I learnt then and what is in the 4 Working Documents of our present meeting agree.

My huge extended family of villagers survived that time of instability and educated me. A united local community always teaches its children and always survives all upheavals. The human species, which far too often inflicts itself with upheavals, would have otherwise already gone extinct. Instead we are sending countless other species into extinction, especially by polluting the atmosphere and thus changing the biosphere-sustaining climate.

My Ph.D dissertation in North Wales was on quantitative plant ecology. It gave a name to the knowledge that I grew up with. The name is acceptable even at the OECD. In reality, I started counting the threads of the interlinked components of the ecosystem, the net of life that, as a child, I had merely felt and imbibed.

In other words, what is in a new term? I felt much at home with plant ecology as I had done with my village lore. But not for long.

Agricultural scientists pulled the net of life out of both my youthful heart and out of my renamed ecology and threw it away. Management to sustain the ecosystem nutrient cycle became unfashionable. Dumping on the farm massive amounts of nutrients supplied by the petrochemical industry became the norm. The careful maximizing management of the farm ecosystem nutrient cycle was turned archaic. Therefore, water and land pollution and consequent eutrophication emerged as the new monsters that gobbled up life. Worse still, air pollution and consequent climate change started overwhelming all species. Even we, humans, are now worried.

Now, here we are, discussing greening the economy with agriculture. Now, we are going back to discussing how we can manage the whole ecosystem's, and beyond that the whole biosphere's, nutrient cycling to maximize nutrient availability to our crops and to reduce atmospheric emission so as to help green our whole economy and thus renew the now coal black biosphere. Now, I am experiencing a "déjà vue". This means that I feel at my childhood's home setting again, albeit that I am at the OECD Headquarters in Paris.

Therefore, to save time, I will refrain from repeating all the issues on access to food that I knew from my childhood and find now already covered in the four Working Documents of this meeting, especially in Working Document No. 2. I will raise only some issues that I feel need additional emphasis or I think have not been covered by any of the four Working Documents.

2. Issues not Given due Emphasis in the 4 Working Documents

The penultimate determinant of access is the ability of the biosphere to produce the needed food and feed. The biosphere's ability is continually being dented by us. Working Document No. 1. Points out these dents and shows how we can repair them. I want to add two aspects to this excellent coverage of the issues.

Firstly, I want to point out that I agree with the need for promoting mixed crop-livestock systems, as described in Paragraph 187. However, I must point out that free range grazing by livestock destroys vegetation cover and thus exacerbates land degradation and reduces the land's ability to sequester carbon. This is especially true in arid and semi-arid areas. Therefore, the livestock must be prevented from free range grazing, with feed being cut and carried to them.

Secondly, I want to remind us that already about half of humanity lives in urban areas. This means that much organic waste ends up in landfills. Instead of emitting methane in landfills and exacerbating climate change, this waste has to be protected from industrial pollutants, be cleansed from disease causing agents, be aerobically broken down into its component plant nutrients and into humus, and be taken back to the farm of a clean organic fertilizer. Otherwise the farm ecosystem's humus content will steadily reduce and its nutrient cycle will steadily degrade. This will mean that the biosphere's ability to give us food and give our animals feed will steadily decline. This problem has been touched upon in Paragraph 62-65 of Working Document 3. It needs to be emphasized and expanded into a separate heading under Section 1.C., Paragraphs 63-88 of Working Document 1.

3. Issues not Covered by the 4 Working Documents

As we all know, the Earth's climate is changing, mostly for the worse. Droughts and floods are set to increase in frequency and in severity. Therefore, the world, each country, each part of each country, each local community and each rural household must keep strategic food and feed stocks in good years for use in bad years. The World Bank and other mighty organizations and nations must stop discouraging the poor from keeping food and feed stocks. Their usual reason that it is cheaper to import food when needed than to keep stocks is at last now unconvincing. With the rising food prices and with the increasing use of food grains to produce biofuels, as clearly shown in Paragraphs 57-61 and 71-85 of Working Document 3., those who have been opposing the keeping of food stocks have now to shut up.

In addition to food stocks, each settlement should have a water supply system for both humans and domestic animals, and even for wild animals. The water supply should be dependable even in the driest of years.

Access to stored food stocks, especially in times of disasters, whether the disasters are caused by extreme weather events or otherwise, needs the development of transportation infrastructure to interconnect not only the various parts of each country, but also each neighboring country and thus the whole world. This will transform the now only virtually globalized world into one that is also physically globalized. It is then that access to food will be as global as access to messages via the telephone and the internet is now. The need for transportation infrastructure to access markets is shown in Paragraph 58 of Working Document 4.

It must be noted, however, that proximity to food does not necessarily lead to access to that food. There must be economic justice in each of our countries to provide each person, male or female, child or adult, blind or with sight, deaf or with hearing, bed-ridden for life or mobile, with sufficient and nutritious food all the time. I do not mind seeing billionaires so long as nobody around goes hungry. They can then stuff their

billions anywhere they want. But, if billionaires think that they can protect their wealth with firearms and enjoy gloating over it when others go hungry, they are being foolish. You remember what followed a hungry man putting himself alight in Tunisia? Firearms failed to fire and the Arab Spring started.

Internal injustice in a country can always force change. It would be less painful to all, especially to the rich, if access to all that is essential for life and local community equity through participatory local governance for justice for all became the norm in all countries. Even external intrusion, as happened in my childhood, would then cause no insurmountable social disruption.

The externally induced upheavals of my childhood came from those who wanted more than their due and felt that they could snatch whatever they wanted away from others however little those others may have. Rightly, my parents fought the greedy invaders off and I managed to grow up to be with you now.

With climate change intensifying, deserts are going to expand. The number of failed states may increase. Some of the failed states may even have nuclear arms. Impoverished environmental refugees will then be set to increase. It would be unacceptable to fight them off. We must accept all environmental refugees. We must help them and include them in our respective resilient local community resources and organization.

I will again take you back to my childhood to show you how this was then done. One-third of the arable land was set aside for the landless. The landless could, in theory, be local. But the local people usually had their traditionally accessed parcels of land. Many landless people came from nearby villages. Fewer came from distant areas in Ethiopia. There were even a few who came from as far away as Nigeria. They usually left home on pilgrimage to Mecca. They decided to settle down in Ethiopia. They were given land. They became local community members.

4. Concluding remarks

Even in this present age of passports and visas, the miscegenation of those who want to, or those who are environmentally forced to, must continue to be possible however slowly. We brought climate change upon ourselves unintentionally. Catalysed by our innate mutual support that became so obvious to me during my childhood, we can unite to beat it. We brought about globalization deliberately. We cannot avoid its consequences. We may then no longer be white, or yellow, or red, or black. We would then beat climate change and become green in the sense of the theme of our meeting here this week. Being more precise about the English word, however, we would then tend towards being very light brown. Why should we quibble about a word being green or brown so long as we are on a green development path? Do any of you object to a grass green path going forward? If so, you can leave us and take off to the moon. To those of you who will stay with me in green Paris, I say, “Thank you very much for today”.