



Feeding the world

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Dr Jacques Diouf, Director-General of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, is the first African to hold this post since the FAO was founded in 1945. Sandra Satterlee spoke to him at FAO headquarters in Rome as he prepares to host the World Food Summit, June 10-13

Past jobs include government minister in Senegal, ambassador to the UN and member of the Council of Advisors to the World Bank. How did you become involved with the Food & Agriculture Organization?

I initially trained as an agronomist and I got my doctorate in agricultural economics at the Sorbonne. Work followed at the Senegal marketing board which dealt with farming products. After this I headed the African Groundnut Council in Nigeria and then the West African Rice Development Association. When I became a cabinet minister I had direct responsibility for scientific research, which included agricultural and animal research, fisheries and forestry.

What can the developed countries do to redress the imbalance between rich and poor nations?

Instead of giving fish to the people, they should help people to fish by themselves and become self-reliant. Up to 80 per cent of the population of poor countries work in agriculture. They need help to acquire the necessary technology to control their environment, particularly water, to improve land management, to avoid erosion and to insure the soil has adequate nutrients. This would not require huge investments.

Has coming from a less developed region of the world helped or hindered your career at the FAO?

Yes and no. Several countries have found it makes sense for someone like me, from a country where they have serious problems in agricultural development and food security, to have the job – I have lived through the issues and know how to handle them. Other people have a prejudgment that someone from a developing country will not be able to manage properly.

How does biotechnology, especially GM food policy, fit into FAO global strategy?

We have approached this problem in a balanced way. In a world of around 6bn

people, and rapidly expanding, we are exhausting arable land and deforesting large tracts at unprecedented rates. So the future of increased production rests with increased productivity.

Any advance in science and technology is an opportunity. Molecular biology has helped us isolate and transfer genes, which is a tremendous scientific advance. But I remember the words of Einstein when he said that the best scientific advances are similar to a machete in the hands of a psychopath.

If knowledge is not properly controlled and regulated, it could lead to serious problems. This is why the FAO has said that we must regulate the conditions of this new knowledge. Therefore, with the UN, we have created a sub-committee to examine all products derived from biotechnology as well as an ethics committee to address these issues.

FAO figures say that war in the last three decades has cost \$4.3bn a year – enough to pull 330 million people from the ranks of the undernourished. How has the current fight against terrorism affected the FAO's work?

This has not changed our policy, it has proved us right. We have always said there is no way to have social and economic development – agricultural development and food security – if there is no peace. At the same time, we have always said that unless you have the minimum food security and the minimum level of justice, you will not have peace.

The 1996 World Food Summit set a goal of reducing by half the number of hungry children and adults by 2015. You report this goal is behind schedule. What has gone wrong?

The lack of political will. This was the first time in more than 50 years that we held a meeting of 112 heads of state (with the participation of 186 states) to discuss

world food security. It is amazing that global summits addressed things like finance, economic development, terrorism, money laundering, and drugs, but not global hunger until 1996.

We did accept long-term targets and the first step was to agree about policies and the plan of action. But we did not put into place the means as we were relying on the political will that would normally have resulted from the commitments given by the heads of state and government. After they made their decisions, to our dismay and shock, we did not see any positive evolution in the priority placed on agriculture on the international agenda nor the international mobilisation of resources in favour of the livelihood of 70 per cent of the poor in the world.

We have made some progress: the number of hungry people has fallen by 6m a year but we are far from the 22m a year needed to achieve the goal by the year 2015.

What do you hope to achieve at this year's World Food Summit in June? What's new on the agenda?

New on the agenda is the question of how we mobilise the political will – for example, in the form of an international alliance against hunger. How do we operationalise that concept?

Many leaders are saying that if we are able to mobilise energy, resources and diplomatic power to fight terrorism, we should be able to mobilise the same capacities to feed 800m people, of which 300m are children. So the first objective is political.

I believe the developing countries should show the lead. If they are asking developed countries to give them the resources to help solve a world problem, at national levels they themselves should also better mobilise their scarce resources in favour of the largest part of their population – the poor – and then set the example for the rest of the world to follow.

What is your biggest challenge in the remaining four years of your second term as Director-General of the FAO?

To make sure that all that I have said will become reality and that the goals of mobilising political will and resources in favour of agriculture will become achievable.

How do you relax?

I sleep and I rest. Unfortunately, one of the terrible aspects of this job is no time to read, listen to music or do a little sport anymore. But I'm an optimist: I keep buying books and records for the future.