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Global Leaders Launch Effort to Turn Around Africa's Failing Agriculture

New Study Reports Three-Quarters of African Farmlands Plagued by Severe Degradation

NEW YORK (30 March 2006) About 75 percent of the farmland in sub-Saharan Africa is plagued by severe degradation, losing basic soil nutrients needed to grow the crops that feed Africa, according to a new report released today on the precipitous decline in African soil health from 1980 to 2004. Africa's crisis in food production and battle with hunger are largely rooted in this "soil health crisis."

The new research shows substantial soil decline in every major region of sub-Saharan Africa, with the highest rates of depletion in Guinea, Congo, Angola, Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda, where nutrient losses are more than 60 kilograms per hectare per year.

President Olusegun Obasanjo, Chairman of the Implementing Committee of the African Union's New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), is calling on African heads of state, ministers, donors, industry leaders, farmers' organizations, and others to support the transformation of African agriculture, beginning with a summit to address the soil health crisis and adopt strategies to revitalize African agriculture. The "Africa Fertilizer Summit" will take place 9-13 June, 2006, in Abuja, Nigeria.

The Summit is backed by an advisory panel of world leaders in African development that includes: Lennart Bage, President of the International Fund for Agricultural Development; Norman Borlaug, Nobel Peace Prize winner; Joaquin Chissano, former President of Mozambique; Jacques Diouf, Director General of the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization; Abdoulie Janneh, Executive Secretary of the Economic

Commission for Africa; Donald Kaberuka, President of the African Development Bank; Alpha Oumar Konaré, Chairman of the African Union Commission; Firmino Mucavele, Chief Executive of the NEPAD Secretariat; and Judith Rodin, President of the Rockefeller Foundation; among others. The panel convened on March 30 at the Rockefeller Foundation in New York with President Obasanjo as Chair.

With Africa losing US\$4 billion worth of soil nutrients every year, and farm yield per person declining, NEPAD considers the Summit a key part of its Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme, which aims to raise farm yield by 6 percent annually by 2015 and halve food insecurity.

In addition to fueling hunger, soil depletion and population growth in farming areas also leads to environmental challenges, as African farmers often abandon infertile fields to clear forests for cultivation, thus threatening Africa's endangered wildlife and forests.

According to the report, "the evidence leaves no doubt that the very resources on which African farmers and their families depend for welfare and survival are being undermined by soil degradation caused by nutrient mining and associated factors, such as deforestation, use of marginal lands, and poor agricultural practices."

Major Findings: Soil Depletion Increasing Across Continent

The new research shows substantial soil decline throughout sub-Saharan Africa, according to coauthors Drs. Julio Henao and Carlos Baanante of the IFDC, an International Center for Soil Fertility and Agricultural Development, a public nonprofit international organization.

"Today three-quarters of Africa's farmlands—some 170 million hectares—is degraded. As a result, grain yield in Africa has stagnated at 1 ton per hectare, compared to world average of about 3 tons," said Dr. Amit Roy, director of the IFDC. "These lands lose at least 45 kilograms of nutrients per hectare per year. When farmers plant the same fields season after season and cannot afford to replace the soil nutrients taken up by their crops, the soil is literally mined of life."

During the 2002-2004 cropping season, about 85 percent of African farmland (185 million hectares) had nutrient mining rates of more than 30 kilograms per hectare of nutrients yearly, and 40 percent had rates greater than 60 kilograms per hectare yearly.

Other findings:

- About 50,000 hectares of forest and 60,000 hectares of Africa's grasslands are lost to agriculture yearly, due to low levels of soil fertility and increasing population pressures.
- In addition to removal by crop harvests, other contributing factors to nutrient depletion are loss of nitrogen and phosphorus through soil erosion by wind

and water, and leaching of nitrogen and potassium.

- The highest rates of depletion are in Guinea, Congo, Angola, Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda at more than 60 kilograms per hectare yearly.
- About 33 percent of the sub-Saharan population is undernourished, and most of the undernourished live in East Africa, where nutrient mining rates are high.
- The sub-Saharan African countries (excluding South Africa) imported 19 million tons at a cost of \$3.8 billion in 2003. Assuming that the current situation in agricultural land management will not change dramatically, these countries will import about 34 million metric tons of cereal at a cost of \$8.4 billion by 2020.
- Fertilizer use in Africa is the lowest in the world, at less than 10 percent of the world average.

The report calls for policy and investment strategies to reverse the mining and subsequent decline in soil fertility. These strategies must make the use of mineral and organic fertilizer, and other improved technologies, available to farmers.

Summit Aims for Action

The Summit's ultimate objective is to reverse the hunger and under nutrition that plagues more than one-third of those living in sub-Saharan Africa, by significantly increasing farm production. To do so, it will identify concrete actions to improve markets for the rural poor, including measures to lower fertilizer costs (now two-to-six times the world average); train a rural network of small retailers; expand financing for private sector importers and distributors; and create conditions for investment in fertilizer manufacturing within Africa.

“In Africa, farmers can buy a soda in nearly every village but can't find basic tools to improve productivity,” said Judith Rodin, president of the Rockefeller Foundation. “But the problem is not insurmountable – solutions do exist. The Summit is an opportunity for Africa to change the direction of its agriculture to improve the lives of millions.”

More than 60 percent of Africa's population is directly engaged in agriculture. But crop productivity in Africa has remained stagnant, while cereal yields in Asia have risen three-fold over the past four decades. Increased farm yield in Africa will be even more critical in the future, as the population is expected to reach 1.8 billion people by 2050.

The Summit will also identify and promote the best practices to boost yields while safeguarding the environment.

Today soil depletion combined with population pressures on farmland creates a major environmental problem. African farmers often abandon infertile fields to clear forests or plow the savanna. For example, approximately 70 percent of deforestation in Africa is a result of clearing land for cultivation.

“Techniques that combine the use of manufactured and organic fertilizers, and that focus on precisely applying minimal amounts of fertilizer, can do double duty—raising farm incomes and rebuilding the soil,” Roy said.

Environmental awareness will be integrated into all Summit sessions and initiatives, to address both resolving current problems, as well as avoiding future ones, Roy said.

The Africa Fertilizer Summit will be convened by the African Union and hosted by the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and chaired by His Excellency, Olusegun Obasanjo, President of Nigeria and Chairman of the NEPAD Implementation Committee. Summit sponsors include: The Rockefeller Foundation, the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, The World Bank, the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development, the United States Agency for International Development, the International Fertilizer Association, Agriterra, Sasakawa Global 2000, and the Arab Fertilizer Association, among others. It will be implemented by the IFDC.

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