

Welcome address by Nnimmo Bassey Executive Director, Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria at ERA/FoEN's 3rd Annual Environmental Consultation held at Abuja, 17-18 November 2010

The language of hunger is universal. What is less universal is the questioning of why people are hungry. Indeed, a mere examination of why people are hungry can be considered a subversive activity.

The urgency of asking this question has never been as urgent as it is today with the world producing more food than it has ever done while at the same time having a growing army of hungry as well as malnourished and obese persons. We are confronted by a situation that I captured in a 2004 poem as mountains of food, oceans of hunger.

Hunger has become a political tool for manipulation of peoples and nations, with specially devastating impacts on the poor. Africa has been particularly hit by this game that manipulates the way to peoples heads through the stomach to the heart and the heads. Perhaps the most atrocious of the system of manipulation through food aid was the case of Zambia in 2002 when that country experience food shortages in parts of the country. Zambia rejected whole grain genetically modified maize and was called names in the process.

In fact, a few days ago, a British television channel ran a programme seeking to show Where the Greens Got it Wrong with regard to GMOs and nuclear power. The programme sought to blame Friends of the Earth International and other NGOs such as Greenpeace for misleading Zambia to reject GMO maize food aid. The producers assume that African countries cannot make up their minds about what is best for them. They forgot to mention that Zambia overcame that food shortage, went ahead to have a bumper harvest in the next season and set up a strict system of monitoring and blocking the entry of GMOs into the country through commercial imports or food aid channels.

We note that African countries have really been open to manipulation by international financial institutions as well as aid and development agencies. Such bodies draft policy directions and foist them on African countries including Nigeria. We are forever domesticating policies that are of dubious benefit to our agriculture or poverty combating needs.

The major problem here has been that the targets of manipulation appear to have lost their heads in this game either by refusing to interrogate proposals or by taking the ostrich posture and burying their heads in the sand.

The idea of fighting hunger has become big business as well. Food aid, with the connotation of philanthropy, has become nothing short of big business and a tool for crass manipulation and intimidation of those who are adjudged to be hungry.

The current food crisis is one out of a number of crises thrown up the dominant system of production and consumption in the world today. It runs alongside other crises such as those of

finance, economics and climate. As we interrogate these systemic crises we will likely come through to a conclusion that the current market creed may have a lot to answer for them. We hope to examine how it happened that Africa has become the poster continent for hunger and poverty whereas she was a net food exporter in the 1960s. It will also be seen that the deepening food crisis has moved in tandem with externally driven policies such as the infamous SAPs and the current scramble for African land that has thrown up scandalous land grabs such as the leasing of 4000 square kilometres of fertile land along the River Nile in Southern Sudan by an American business man.

This consultation is the third in our series of looking at topical issues with regard to our environment. In the first edition held in 2008 we focused on the theme, The Nigerian Environment and The Rule of Law. The verdict was that there was a huge gap between the law and its rule as far as the Nigerian environment was concerned. In 2009 we zeroed in on Envisioning a Post Petroleum Nigeria. That second endeavour aimed to urge the nation to move beyond petroleum as the major revenue earner for the nation. Our clarion call was and still is Leave the Oil in the Soil. We showed how this could be done without hampering revenue expectations. Our proposal was submitted to the president through NEITI. Since we have not received any response after the submission we are resubmitting that proposal today.

As we take on the topics before us, we look forward to very exhaustive debates on the issues of hunger, food aid, agricultural modern biotechnology, moves towards a new green revolution for Africa. The mix of resource persons we have with us should also throw up options for Nigeria, indeed for Africa, pointing at the proven paths to food sufficiency through sovereign food systems powered by small holder farmers utilizing agro-ecological means that do not depend on alien seeds and chemical inputs. We also expect that serious issues will be raised about the manner the proposed Nigerian Biosafety bill has been handled and why our lawmakers are bent on opening the Nigerian environment to genetically engineered crops despite the many reasons why caution should be exercised.

We hope to examine what has made Africa to become a continent at risk. As has been the case with our other consultations, we look forward to not just talking about the issues, but getting on to make concrete suggestions for actions that will lead to positive transformation.

We are grateful to our resource persons, participants and all who have supported us financially and otherwise to make this consultation a reality.

Thank you.