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Exclusive interview with Ibrahim Assane Mayaki, CEO of NEPAD: “Rural development can only be achieved with support from African governments”

“It is essential to create conditions providing a satisfactory standard of living in African rural areas. To attain this goal there is an obvious need for revenue-generating activities, which means a variety of jobs and activities, although they must be agriculture-based. This can only be achieved with support from the government”. Ibrahim Assane Mayaki has clear ideas on the conditions for rural development in Africa. In this exclusive interview with *Afronline.org* (Italy), *Addis Fortune* (Ethiopia), *Sud Quotidien* (Senegal), *Les Echos du Mali* (Mali) and *Le Républicain* (Niger), the Chief executive of NEPAD explains in details his vision on agriculture and food security in the African continent.

Over 70 per cent of the population of Africa is involved in agriculture, but this agriculture is subsistence in nature and in recent decades has been failing to meet the people's food needs in a number of countries, due to regular droughts and the inadequacy of the resources allocated to the sector by the state governments. Because of this, rather than generating jobs, the sector is losing manpower because workers prefer to flee to the ballooning cities to try their luck. Would it be true to say that this phenomenon, aggravated by the land sequestration policies in operation in Arabic and emerging countries today is effectively threatening the future of agriculture in the continent?

Before it is possible to answer this question, some form of diagnosis must be attempted. It is a fact that at the moment the majority of the African population lives in rural areas and their main activity is agriculture. Fact number two is the rapid growth of the cities, now growing to such a size and rapidly that some commentators speak of the ruralisation of the cities. In the third place is the basic reason why people are leaving the land: its inability to hold onto the young, the majority of the rural population. Faced with these three phenomena it is essential to create conditions providing a satisfactory standard of living for country people. To attain this goal there is an obvious need for revenue-generating activities, which means a variety of jobs and activities, although they must be agriculture-based. This can only be achieved with support from the government. This is why, in the framework of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP), targeting support for producers is absolutely crucial. We may dream about building country roads so that smallholders can reach markets or creating systems to store harvests, but the first step is to upgrade the role of the producers. This means easier access to fertiliser and seed, plus better training so that the farmers can consolidate their holdings. In other words, peasants must be transformed into entrepreneurs. And if you will excuse me repeating myself, this calls for help from the government.

African smallholders have never been so hard pressed by poverty, unable as they are to enjoy the benefits of agricultural research, to comfortably feed themselves and sell the

produce of their backbreaking work. What is NEPAD doing to "help African farmers to take their place in history"?

This statement by Sarkozy may be very well known, but it is mistaken in the context of African agriculture for one simple reason: with all their limited means, limited technology, and limited access to newcomers, the farmers you're talking about here are still the farmers who have fed Africa for the past fifty or sixty years! The plain fact is that they have already taken their place in history, because it is their efforts which have made it possible for African cities to keep eating. In the framework of the CAADP, we have been working in a range of ways which we hope will strengthen the farmer's productive capacity. The link between agricultural research and the use of the products of this research remains a crucial challenge for the farmer. At CAADP, we have a section dealing with research which focuses on developing policies supporting national agricultural plans, the aim being to ensure that the smallholder's access to the products of research is as simple as possible. A second dimension also exists dealing with supervisory services in rural zones. As the structural adjustment process has developed, these services have been dismantled, so the job today is to rebuild them in a suitable fashion so that they support the link between research and the smallholders' needs. Finally, the CAADP expects to be able to support training schemes for small African farmers, an aspect which has been completely neglected in recent decades. They must be trained in management systems, the use of technologies, and they must be shown how to become real entrepreneurs.

There seems to be a shift, leading to a possible increase in financing, in international financial institutions such as IMF and World Bank for supporting agricultural and rural development projects since the rise in food prices of 2008. What do you think would be the impact of such a shift on the policy priorities of regional organizations such as NEPAD?

For a long time such international institutions as the IMF and the World Bank failed to see agriculture as a priority and since the public policy systems in our nations depended on the directions dictated by these funding bodies, our governments also failed to see agriculture as a political priority. A number of specific events were necessary, including hunger riots, to place this subject at the political forefront, to make it clear that the best way to reduce poverty and to create wealth was to develop the agricultural sector. As I mentioned before, the majority of the population lives in the rural zones and agriculture is the major source of income. Leaving aside countries such as Niger or Mali, every year sees 250,000 young people joining the labour market, youngsters who are obliged to find an economic sector capable of making use of them. In most of our countries a cap has been set on civil service recruitment, so they are taking on no fresh staff; and the level of industrialisation in our countries is not high enough to cope with the employment demand from the young. This means that the sector with the potential to absorb them would be an agricultural sector with prospects of diversification. Add the destabilising effects of hunger riots to those of youth unemployment, and it becomes immediately clear why all the candidates in presidential elections in recent years have declared agriculture to be a political priority and why the international institutions have taken up a position which NEPAD, excuse my repeating it, had held since 2003! The part played by NEPAD in boosting the value of this sector has been vital. It was NEPAD which defined the CAADP, and it was NEPAD which applied pressure to have the CAADP accepted as the strategic continent-wide framework for agricultural development and which has become an instrument of the African Union. Our current role is to work to ensure that its implementation is as efficient and effective as possible. We have a multi-donor trust fund available to us,

supplied by the World Bank, and other instruments also exist for the purpose of mobilising resources and involving the private sector.

What is the solution to the problem of making the economy and employment in Africa take off on the basis of agriculture?

As I emphasised before, developing agriculture will lead to job creation, and it will do this in three ways. The first focuses on upgrading the skills of the producers; the second is concerned with local produce, and it demands improvement in harvest storage mechanisms to cut losses; and we believe that the third is for the development of this sector to be seen from a regional point of view. ECOWAS is a good example of regional agricultural strategy based on various national plans which work together and are coordinated with each other. Changing the image of the producer, all too often seen as poor, to that of an entrepreneur will help combat the rural exodus. Naturally, an improvement in the farmer's standard of living will also have this effect.

In 2009, an emergency NEPAD reassessment meeting was called in Dakar by President Wade with the aim of re-aligning the broad directions to be adopted in the huge challenge raised by agriculture for Africa. What has happened since then?

President Wade is a passionate supporter of NEPAD and is one of the basic partners who were involved in defining the New Partnership for development in Africa. In 2009, he was disappointed about what had been achieved in the area of infrastructure, and this was why he called the meeting in Senegal to re-energise this sector and to attract potential investors as well as development partners. The outcome of this meeting was the creation of a platform whereby we have been able to define and support the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA), which is the equivalent of the CAADP in agriculture.

What results have been achieved by the PIDA?

At the present moment the programme has only just been defined, and it has yet to be implemented. The body responsible for implementing the PIDA is NEPAD which, as I have mentioned before, became the African Union development agency in 2010.

Discussion about this challenge includes still more talk about infrastructure between the countries to streamline rail, road and air communications, with very little to show for it so far. What position will agriculture take in the future of the new partnership for development in Africa?

Two priorities exist, which are also the priorities defined by the African Union. On the one hand is agriculture, on the other infrastructure. A large proportion of our staff are concerned with these two basic sectors, which are obviously linked. We have been working in close cooperation with the regional economic commissions to achieve a regional format of the CAADP, which reached a conclusion at the level of the 15 ECOWAS states in two stages: the first is to work with ECOWAS to adopt a regional agricultural strategy, and it was in this context that we subsequently met in each of the countries to define national agricultural investment plans. The aim of these national plans is to achieve agricultural productivity growth rates which the CAADP has set at a minimum of 6% per year. Support at country level takes two forms: skill upgrades, including know-how, tools and methodologies, and

secondly coordinating the development partners interested in supporting these national plans. We have recently launched a third approach designed to attract the private sector to fund agricultural development projects. In the ECOWAS case, the whole supporting procedure has lasted three years, and has now concluded. This organisation has even signed what is known as a regional compact, the first in Africa. We would like to repeat this operation with the other regional organisations.

Low yields are not the only problem afflicting agriculture in Africa, as it also suffers from a glaring shortage of food crop infrastructure and reliable agricultural produce marketing channels. Does NEPAD have any policy which when implemented will help Africa to overcome these handicaps?

The fact that no suitable public policy has been outlined is one of the basic reasons for the inadequacy of agricultural development. For a long time the measures which focused on yields, marketing and fertiliser were spread too thinly. Thanks to the CAADP, that is now past. This programme is an overall plan, detailed and consistent at continent level, which means we no longer make fragmentary decisions which should be coordinated. We now have a continent-wide strategy which tackles the basic challenges of research, trade and land productivity.

Mechanisation would seem to be an essential step if agricultural yields are to be increased in Africa. In real terms, what is NEPAD doing to ensure that this mechanisation becomes a reality in the continent, and who are the partners involved?

This is another area where the discussion must be redirected. If mechanisation is taken to mean tractors, it is valid to wonder how many smallholders are likely to be able to acquire a tractor by buying one, and if not, whether one will be supplied by the government. If the problem is posed in this way, the solution emerges before the problem is analysed. The basic question relates to the way in which suitable and accessible technologies can be used to boost productivity.

Mali operates a cotton monoculture. What kind of rural economy can be developed on the basis of produce with fluctuating prices?

Seeing Mali as a cotton-producing monoculture is not quite accurate now, as the country has made considerable progress towards diversifying its agricultural economy. It's true that cotton is still very important and that Mali, along with other African nations, is a prey to the commercial environment as far as cotton is concerned, and the hazards of depending on a single export crop. In addition to diversification, it is important to prioritise food security. Experience has shown us that it is quite possible to set up a multi-crop system such that income is generated from commercial crops while food security is assured by the production of cereals for domestic consumption which can be exported to neighbouring countries if surpluses are produced.

But don't you feel that fluctuations in the prices of agricultural raw materials, particularly when driven by the kind of financial speculation which has recently affected the markets, are liable to compromise this African agricultural economy diversification strategy and food security in the continent?

Increasing price volatility for agricultural produce is an enormous cause for concern. This price volatility is connected with financial market speculation which has absolutely nothing to do with the real economy, but which has disastrous consequences on the living standards of the producers. This concern was addressed by the French presidency of the G20, and NEPAD also attended the meeting of the G20 ministers of agriculture in Paris last June to outline methods of combating price volatility and to establish systems whereby risk could be managed more intelligently so that financial speculation could be effectively tackled.

What expectations do you have of the G20 Heads of State Summit to be held in Cannes in November?

It is my opinion that Africa is no longer in the position of having expectations of summits. The continent of Africa is increasingly dependent on its own means and resources. In addition to this, carefully monitoring the way promises are kept shows that the gap between what is promised and what is delivered is considerable. However, if you look at the way in which the mobilisation of internal resources has improved, you realise that significant progress has been made. It is being realised nowadays that fewer and fewer African countries are dependent on aid. I believe that we should place greater emphasis on mobilising domestic resources via more effective governance and anti-corruption mechanisms, and less on the outcomes of G8 and G20 summits.

Governments such as that of Ethiopia often proclaim that economic transformation in Africa could only materialize if agriculture provided the priority in policy making. Yet, the experiences of emerging South East Asian countries show that industrialization was the basis for their miraculous economic growth. Where do you think the balance lies and what is NEPAD's view on that?

The economic history of the world, and the case of the Northern countries is exemplary, shows us that the development of agriculture is the *sine qua non* for launching industrialisation. The countries of Asia did not neglect agriculture, but they had strategies for developing exports, particularly in the wake of the Korean War, when there was very strong demand for semi-industrial or industrial products in America. This boosted their industrialisation process, but that did not mean that Asian countries neglected the agricultural sector. India, for example, which experienced terrible famines in the nineteen-sixties, was able, thanks to the green revolution, to eliminate the famine problem almost completely and to adopt actions which led to the development of significant industrialisation in the rural zones. So agriculture is an essential priority for us, and it will be on the basis of the income generated by the agricultural sector that we will found a strong industrialisation process in the majority of our countries. And having said this, we see cases such as South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria which are already involved in this kind of process.

Interview coordinated by Joshua Massarenti (Afronline.org), in collaboration with Addis Fortune (Ethiopia), Sud Quotidien (Senegal), Les Echos du Mali (Mali) and Le Républicain (Niger).

