

**INTERNATIONAL CONSULTATION ON THE ROLE OF
BIODIVERSITY IN ACHIEVING THE UNITED NATIONS
MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOAL OF FREEDOM FROM
HUNGER AND POVERTY, 18-19 APRIL 2005, CHENNAI, INDIA**

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS ON BEHALF OF PARTICIPATING
COUNTRIES DELIVERED BY MR. ERNEST DEBRAH (MP)
HONOURABLE MINISTER OF FOOD AND AGRICULTURE,
GHANA**

Mr. Chairman, Your Excellency, The Prime Minister of India, Honourable Ministers of Agriculture, Eminent Administrators and Scientists, The Media, Civil Society Groups, Farmers and Women Representatives, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I bring to you greetings from the Government and the people of Ghana. It is my pleasure to be here with you today and tomorrow to discuss this all important subject of biodiversity. Even more, I deem it a privilege to be invited as the Guest Speaker to deliver a Keynote Address on behalf of participating countries.

Mr. Chairman, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as we all know, are the international community's time-bound and quantified commitment to cut sharply, by 2015, the extent of extreme poverty around the world. This is a big challenge for those of us from the developing world where poverty and hunger are said to afflict about eight hundred (800) million people or more.

The millennium development goals are therefore very critical to our respective countries agenda for growth and prosperity of our citizenry. It is my understanding that all Countries that signed into the Millennium Declaration (2000), which led to the Millennium Development Goals, have developed strategic policies detailing measures for achieving the set goals. In my country, we have developed the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS), which has put in place the necessary structures for managing the economy and building strong partnerships to put Ghana on the right track.

Undoubtedly, Mr. Chairman, Agriculture plays a lead role in the attainment of the objectives of the GPRS. This is because the poverty profile indicates that poverty is a rural phenomenon in Ghana. That about 95% of people who live in the rural areas (and this constitutes about 65% of the national population) are engaged in Agriculture.

Biodiversity, which embraces the great variety of forms within and between flora and fauna have evolved over thousands of years in a dynamic interaction between nature and careful selection and breeding by farmers. The *selections* or landraces are able to yield inspite of intense environmental pressure.

After surviving for over a thousand years, biodiversity for sustainable rural livelihoods and global food security is however under threat. Our valuable genetic materials are being either neglected or under utilised.

Mr. Chairman, at this point, it is important to remind ourselves of the extreme benefits of biodiversity in areas such as nutrition, medicine, crop improvement and environmental sustainability. In this light, to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, especially on extreme poverty eradication and in the fight against hunger, the management and use of biodiversity become critical.

Scientists, Policy Makers, Ladies and Gentlemen, Agricultural biodiversity has reduced in recent decades as farmers increasingly come to rely on fewer crops. I am informed that we need gene banks to protect and make available crop diversity. This diversity is vital to winning the war on hunger and poverty. It provides the raw material necessary for farmers and breeders to develop reliable high-yielding food crops, which are needed to keep up with the pace of population growth.

I am also informed that Crop diversity is also needed to overcome major farming constraints such as pests, diseases, weeds, drought, and poor soils. Crop gene banks are also necessary to help restore the agriculture of countries coming out of war, drought, civil unrest, and natural disasters where local communities have lost their own planting materials.

It is therefore noteworthy that the diverse traditional cultivars domesticated and conserved in-situ, on-farm, by farmers over the years, have global significance because they constitute the fundamental genetic pool for modern plant breeding to meet the food requirements of a growing global population.

Thus, the diversity of flora and fauna not only provides a basis of rural livelihoods, but also serves as a cornerstone of global food security, quality of life and environmental conservation.

Mr. Chairman, it is against this background that we view with a sense of relief the various concerted attempts by certain institutions such as the International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI) to stem the erosion of crop landraces and the time-tested traditional systems of managing them.

Since there exist the realities of global environmental disasters caused by human kind and nature, there should be a growing commitment to taking urgent steps to address our environmental problems through preservation of biodiversity to create a better life for all and to preserve our national heritage for future generations.

This should be achieved by investing in conservation and developing our biological resources in an effort to develop our tourism industry further and enhance our capacity to tap into many export markets we have not yet exploited.

The Tourism Industry itself has become a very important sector in many developing countries as a poverty reducing mechanism. Therefore, investing in biodiversity has the long term effect of also fighting poverty in our various countries, in line with Millennium Development Goals. (MDGs)

Mr. Chairman, participating countries, and I am sure other countries as well are looking forward to implementing the recommendations from this meeting to strengthen policies on both conservation and utilisation of plant biodiversity, especially the endangered ones, for the betterment of livelihoods.

At this point, Mr. Chairman, I would wish to pose this question how and what do we need to do to ensure that the recommendations of this Consultation do not end up on paper but that decisions are made which will influence our development and progress in our respective countries?

I would also wish to draw your attention to another challenge with regard to biodiversity. Biodiversity is to a higher extent a concept of Scientists. A significant number of ordinary people including policy makers do not have the full understanding and implications of biodiversity. A second question for this conference is how do we propagate the idea of biodiversity to the understanding of not only ordinary people but also policy makers in order to get their commitment on issues related to biodiversity.

Mr. Chairman, biodiversity is a global phenomenon. The benefit of it cuts across borders; whether you are a poor country or a rich country. It is significant to note that areas of rich biodiversity are areas that high levels of poverty exist. It is therefore important for us to find ways of not only sharing the global benefits of biodiversity but the cost of maintaining global diversity. How do we achieve that?

By the time the conference ends, I wish that there would be a clear-cut direction with regards to these three challenges among others in relation to the attainment of Millennium Development Goals of Freedom from Hunger and Poverty.

Mr. Chairman, on behalf of participating countries, I would like to congratulate the organisers and donors for bringing us together at this forum and hope that the multi-stakeholder team would make valuable inputs to make the conference a success.

I sincerely hope that the final report that will come out of this consultation will provide additional momentum to the efforts of the various governments at achieving the UN Millennium Development Goal of Freedom from Hunger and Poverty.

On this note, and on behalf of my colleague Ministers and policy makers from other countries, it is my pleasure to wish you all fruitful discussions today and tomorrow. May the Almighty God grant you the wisdom you may require to achieve that.

Thank you.