

OPENING SPEECH

Hon. Mwai Kibaki, CGH, MP

President and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Kenya

Ladies and gentlemen, it gives me pleasure to join you for this opening ceremony of the Sixth Conference of the Global Consortium of Higher Education and Research for Agriculture.

I note that one of Kenya's most respected institutions of training, research and innovation in agriculture, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, has been granted the opportunity to host this global conference. I express our gratitude for the choice of Kenya as venue for this conference and warmly welcome you all to the country while wishing you fruitful deliberations and enjoyable stay.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Kenya Government appreciates the crucial role that university education, training and research plays in the production of high-level human resource needed for national development. For this reason, we have continued to increase investments in tertiary education.

As a result, in the last six years, the university sub-sector in our country has rapidly expanded. Today, we have 7 public universities, 24 private universities and 13 university colleges and campuses. All the institutions are engaged in dispensing knowledge and skills to the youth, carrying out research and professional training in many areas of strategic significance to the growth of our economy and national development.

It has been observed, however, that despite large investments in university education and research in developing countries, very few research findings reach the end users such as farmers, livestock keepers and small-scale business persons. I challenge universities and other research institutions to find ways of translating research findings into innovations applicable to the end users so that they can make a difference in their day to day economic and social activities. Thus, I urge lecturers and researchers in universities and other institutions to strive to narrow the gap between theory and practice. Society wishes to see more efforts directed at hands-on education in fields such as agriculture, science, engineering and management.

As you may have noticed, despite a lot of research work in Africa, large numbers of people still live in poverty under the perpetual threat of hunger, starvation and malnutrition.

The leading researchers should get more homegrown solutions to our basic problems so that our people are not only free from the threat of hunger, but are also empowered enough to embark on real wealth creation ventures. The answer to food security lies within the realms of the lead researchers and their ability to cascade their findings for implementation by governments, farmers and business persons.

Ladies and gentlemen, this conference is being held against the backdrop of a global economic meltdown, climate change, food insecurity, rising energy costs and many health challenges. I am pleased that the conference will address these and other challenges

and recommend practical steps that need to be taken to tackle them. The global economic instability has particularly affected the developing world, Kenya included. Some of the direct effects include reduced remittances from the Diaspora and a severe drop in earnings from tourism and agricultural exports. As a consequence, there has been marked drop in employment and productivity levels, thus adversely affecting the vulnerable members of society.

Although signs of economic recovery are being recorded, we are still far from coming out of the crisis and more concerted efforts still need to be made. The Government of Kenya is in this regard implementing an economic stimulus package that we hope will generate additional impetus into the economy. Much of this effort is in the area of agriculture with a view to developing mechanisms of responding to climate change.

Ladies and Gentlemen, our response is motivated by the experience of erratic weather patterns in the recent past due to climate change. This has triggered serious challenges to agricultural productivity as a result of a three-year long drought across the country. It has led to massive crop and livestock losses for farmers, leading to severe food shortages and poor performance of agricultural-related industries. There is now a sigh of relief as we are hopeful of receiving adequate rains during the current short-rain season. In the meantime, the Government has put in place appropriate measures to address emerging challenges and mitigate their severity.

Ladies and gentlemen, food insecurity remains a fundamental challenge to developing countries. Among key causes of food insecurity are population increase; adverse impact of climate change and environmental degradation, and changes in consumption patterns. To adequately address these challenges, a variety of interventions including improved governance, technological advancement and cultural adaptations are required. All stakeholders including Governments, private sector, university lecturers, researchers, financiers, farmers and consumers should be involved in the implementation of appropriate interventions. My Government has in this respect made efforts to encourage farmers to adopt modern farming methods, including the use of improved and drought-resistant varieties, high quality planting material and other inputs.

Agricultural biotechnology is a field that should seriously be considered in order to arrest the effects of famine in Kenya and Africa at large. In support of efforts to find even more effective solutions to problems facing Africa, the Kenya Government has enhanced resource allocation for science, technology and innovation. Particular areas of interest here include enhanced funding for universities and other research institutions, and the promotion of Private-Public Partnerships.

It is our hope that with all these measures in place, Kenya and the rest of Africa will achieve a reasonable level of food sustainability.

Ladies and Gentlemen, The global oil crisis has over the years exerted undue financial pressure on developing economies, leaving all other vital sectors, including agriculture inadequately attended to.

This is largely due to the high dependency on fossil fuels and hydro-electric power. Fossil fuels remain costly, while hydro-electric power is dependent on rainfall,

which is now erratic. This has impacted negatively especially on small scale farmers and food processors who are responsible for most of Africa's food production.

Scientists have gone a long way in the development of biofuels from plant products. But production of this form of energy still covers a very small percentage of energy requirement. Climate change also poses a major challenge to significant production of adequate quantity of plant materials to meet the biofuel needs.

I hope this Conference will come up with practical proposals on how to make bio-energy widely available to humankind.

Meanwhile, various Governments continue the search for alternative sources of energy. In Kenya, the Government is exploring alternative energy sources such as geothermal, solar, and wind.

Among other goals pertaining to energy, the Government intends to increase electricity supply in rural areas from 4 to 12 percent by the year 2012, a move expected to boost agricultural productivity and related activities.

In conclusion, I wish to commend the organisers of this conference at a time when everyone is looking for answers to the challenge of climate change on agriculture, health, energy and general survival of the human race. I wish you fruitful deliberations on these and other related issues.

Meanwhile, you are all invited to visit some of our renowned tourist attractions and enjoy the hospitality of our people. Do also interact with our farmers in the countryside.

With these few remarks, it is now my pleasure to declare the Sixth Conference of the Global Consortium of Higher Education for Research and Agriculture officially open.

Thank you and God bless you all.