



[HOME](#)



[America.gov](#) (Washington, DC)

Africa: Farming is Continent's Lifeline, Clinton Says

Charles W. Corey

5 August 2009

Nairobi — For millions of Africans, farming is a lifeline, the only source of income and food. For the continent, agriculture is the primary economic sector and the engine of future growth, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said August 5.

In remarks following a tour of the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI) outside Nairobi, Clinton said, "For the global community, agricultural development could help address some of the most urgent challenges we face -- chronic hunger, which afflicts nearly 1 billion people worldwide, including one in three Africans, many of whom are children."

Clinton was in Nairobi to attend the Eighth AGOA Forum (named after the U.S. African Growth and Opportunity Act) on the first stop of a seven-nation Africa trip that will also take her to South Africa, Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Liberia and Cape Verde.

At KARI, Clinton said, scientists are developing tools to boost the productivity of Africa's farms, which is "part of a broad strategy to strengthen the entire agricultural sector -- to increase incomes, to support rural communities and to drive economic growth."

"The benefits of a strong system of agriculture are great. The benefits to the world are equally so," she said, adding that most of the arable land left in the world is in Africa.

"More and more, the world will look to Africa to be its breadbasket, and I hope that when the world looks ... it is Africans and African farmers who will profit from becoming the world's breadbasket."

Clinton lamented that African agriculture "has been held back for decades by wars that have forced farmers to clear their fields, by diseases that too often strike the young and the strong, by climate change. ... Farmers in Africa have also faced the lack of investment from the private sector, governments and [the] global community."

Together, these and other factors, she said, have "eroded the foundation of African agriculture," but she noted that "that foundation is being rebuilt," with scientists at KARI taking the lead in cultivating heartier crops that will feed more people and thrive in harsher conditions: "disease-resistant cassava plants, sweet potatoes that are enriched with vitamin A to prevent blindness, maize that can flourish in times of drought."

What is being achieved in the labs at KARI and in other African labs can go a long way toward making sure that farmers are paid well enough to support their families so people are not forced to pull their children from school or sell their livestock to survive a food shortage, she said.

"This is also time to innovate," she said, in the areas of telecommunications, microfinance and even microinsurance,

in ways that help farmers flourish. In Uganda, she said, farmers are receiving text messages on their cell phones about how to diagnose and treat local crop diseases.

Another initiative, she said, will provide farmers with local weather information and farming tips, along with other information such as health advice.

"Innovations like these are what must be a comprehensive approach to agriculture -- one that connects the tools developed in labs like this to the fields where farmers are every day."

Clinton pledged the Obama administration's full support for the effort to "strengthen the entire agricultural chain here in Africa and around the world," which is critical to generating economic growth and linking Africa to the rest of the world.

"We are convinced that investing in agriculture is one of the most high-impact, cost-effective strategies available for reducing poverty and saving and improving lives," and that is why it is a "signature element" of the Obama administration's foreign policy, she said.

People often mistakenly think that modern countries do not "do agriculture," she said, but "nothing could be further from the truth. If you don't do agriculture, you don't eat."

In July in Rome, Clinton said, the members of the G8 and others committed \$20 billion to end global hunger -- not for short-term food aid, but for longer-term investments. The United States, she added, has pledged \$3.5 billion as part of this effort to help customize programs to stop hunger.

Praising KARI, she said the United States has been a strong partner with the institution for 40 years.

Since 2003 alone, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has provided more than \$4 million to KARI for agricultural technology development and transfer.

Clinton was joined at KARI by U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, who was also in Nairobi to attend the Eighth AGOA Forum. Both officials appeared with Kenyan Minister of Agriculture William Samoei Ruto.

Ruto praised the United States, saying almost 50 percent of KARI's staff has been educated in the United States, in close concert with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

The actions at KARI, he said, underscore the important role research is playing in making agriculture commercially viable.

He said KARI is a "clear symbol of the partnership that exists between the United States and Kenya," and that the research institute is looking at ways Kenyan farmers can benefit from more trade in their key crops of tea, coffee and cashews.

Agriculture Secretary Vilsack -- whose department has worked closely with KARI for a long time -- reminded the audience that it was just in 2008 that there was a world food crisis that affected a billion people, of whom 265 million lived in Africa.

He said USDA forecasters are warning that the number of hungry people will increase by 11 percent in 2010. For that reason, he said, "transformational change" must occur, with country-led food security plans, transparency and good governance.

Agriculture is important, he said, because farming in sub-Saharan Africa makes up almost 30 percent of GDP and employs 60 percent of the African work force.

Vilsack said he had visited an African school the day before that had many orphans. "While I have never truly been hungry like so many in Africa," he said, "I can relate to the students I met because I too started out life an orphan.

"As a child, I thought about books and baseball. The children I met yesterday just wanted one thing: to be fed and educated. If that is not reason for us to do all we can together to make sure kids don't go hungry, I am not sure what would move us."

Copyright © 2009 America.gov. All rights reserved. Distributed by AllAfrica Global Media (allAfrica.com).

AllAfrica - All the Time

Carsfortheworld.com