

International Conference on the Sustainable Development of Natural Resources in Africa – Creating a nexus between research and policy for sustainable management of Africa’s natural resources, marking the 25th anniversary of UNU-INRA, 5-7 December 2011

6 December 2011: Remarks to open Session 4: Mr. Max Bond, Executive Officer, Office of the Rector, UNU Headquarters, Tokyo, Japan

Introduction

This session was intended to provide some background on: (1) the process leading to the establishment of UNU-INRA in 1986; and (2) the early efforts to begin the work of the Institute.

Unfortunately, two of our speakers - Professor Alexander Kwapong and Professor Bede Okigbo cannot be with us today.

Professor Kwapong, a classics scholar and a former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana, and subsequently one of the first Vice-Rectors of UNU: for institutional planning and resource development, cannot be with us today as he is in hospital in London. We wish him a full and speedy recovery. I know that Dr. Kwapong wanted very much to be here. I also know that as Chair of this session, I would have had a difficult task of trying to keep him within his time limit. He has much to tell about the setting up of UNU-INRA and he is a born raconteur.

A second disappointment is that the founding director of UNU-INRA, Dr. Bede Okigbo, will not be present for this session, as he has had some difficulty in getting from his home in Nigeria to Accra. He will hopefully join us tonight.

So, it is left to me to provide you with a “brief” overview of the start-up of UNU-INRA and the early days as I saw them. I am sorry that two of my mentors – two African scientists, from whom I learned a great deal, cannot be present to give you their personal accounts.

Towards the establishment of UNU-INRA

I hope that I can convey to you a flavour of the extraordinary efforts that were made by many to bring UNU-INRA into concrete reality. I want to stress three main points in this regard.

First, UNU-INRA was an African concept, developed by some of the top African scientists.

Second, UNU-INRA was established on the basis of strong political and moral support from African governments. Despite the lack of funding, it was a good decision to proceed with INRA’s establishment.

Third, the landscape of Africa (to misappropriate one of Paul Vlek’s favourite terms) has changed radically since the time when the concept of UNU-INRA was developed. Africa is not in the same situation as it was 25 years ago – although much remains to be done by institutions like UNU-INRA.

My intent also is to pay tribute to those people who played a crucial role in UNU-INRA’s early history some of whom are no longer with us.

So let me start quickly to give you some background, as I recall it, on how UNU-INRA came about.

How UNU-INRA came to be

When I joined UNU in Tokyo in 1982, one of the first projects that I learned about was an initiative to establish a UNU institute to be focused on Africa's natural resource endowment. There was a small group in Tokyo who felt very strongly about UNU reaching out to Africa – my colleagues were African scientists or scholars or people who had spent several years in Africa and knew the continent – or parts of it – well.

By 1983-84, quite a bit of work had been done to come up with a framework for UNU-INRA.

Dr. Kwapong and his colleagues had undertaken a series of consultations with African scientists and universities and with African governments. A small team was put together headed by Professor Thomas Odiambo who was well known in Africa for starting the International Centre of Insect Physiology and Ecology (ICIPE) in Nairobi. Professor Odiambo, together with Dr. Eddie Ayensu, then the head scientist at the Smithsonian in Washington, DC, and Dr. Richard Odingo, a Kenyan geographer, were tasked to come up with a proposal for a UNU research and training centre to focus on the management of Africa's natural resources endowment. Some of you may even have seen the famous "blue book" which became the proposal for UNU-INRA.

A Danish colleague, Mr. Vagn Kjellberg, who had spent several years in northern Nigeria, worked with the African team to come up with a convincing case. You must remember that at that time, there were no personal computers. We used something called a Vydec machine, and as Vagn was not the best of typists, his secretary, Ms. Maya Kukde and I were enlisted to go through hundreds and hundreds of edits by Vagn and the team. I have fond memories of the long argumentative sessions between Dr. Odiambo, Eddie Ayensu, Richard, Vagn and Dr. Kwapong. The corner where our offices were located was usually shunned by the rest of the UNU Headquarters staff because it appeared to everyone that all we did was argue. We did, but it was about things that mattered. And at the end of the day, we came up with what I still think is a pretty sound proposal.

The ongoing consultations in Africa, in New York with UNDP and in Washington with the World Bank and which were led by Professor Kwapong, eventually resulted in the resolution passed by the Organization of African Unity in 1985 in support of the establishment of UNU-INRA that was mentioned in the message read out yesterday by the representative of the President of the Republic of Ghana.

While Dr. Kwapong and his colleagues were putting together support for the Institute in Africa, there was a need to convince the UNU, and specifically the UNU Council, of the need to create a new institute in Africa. The Council deliberated at several sessions about establishing the Institute. The creation of UNU-WIDER in Helsinki, Finland, in 1984 caused a major upheaval in UNU in Tokyo.

There were many who were concerned about the centrifugal forces that would be created by the establishment of UNU institutes in different parts of the world. A vice-rector at the time, Professor Kinhide Mushakoji, wrote an interesting paper arguing that the establishment of UNU institutes would cause innumerable problems for the UNU campus in Tokyo which up to that point had been the hub of three major networks on world hunger, natural resources management and human and social development. In some respects, Professor Mushakoji was correct, but the effect of establishing the first institute of UNU in one of the most northern locations (Finland) caused another reaction among many in Tokyo and the Council – it put force behind the initiative to establish an institute in the developing world and, in particular, in Africa.

The difficulty of mobilizing resources for UNU-INRA was present from the very beginning. It was difficult to convince African governments to make funding available for a new pan-African institute which would be located in only one country, but would have possible sub-units in several others. Commitments came with difficulty – Zambia and Côte d’Ivoire and France manifested commitments – but UNU found it difficult to have some of those commitments fulfilled.

At the same time, Dr. Kwapong and his colleagues faced an uphill battle with the UNU Council – to convince them to take the brave step to establish an institute in Africa without having firm and full commitments of the necessary funding for the institute.

Finally, in July 1986, at the 27th session of the UNU Council, a small group, led by Dr. Kwapong, went with the African members of the Council – then Professor Walter Kamba (Zimbabwe), Dr. Marie Thérèse Basse (Senegal), Dr. Martha Mvungi (Tanzania) and Prof. Joseph Ki-Zerbo (Burkina Faso - Upper Volta at the time) to a lunch in a Chinese Restaurant on the 30th floor of the then Toho Seimei Building in Tokyo where the UNU Headquarters was located. The lunch turned into a “frank and open discussion” (as one of my colleagues would say) to ask the African members of the Council to take a strong stand in the plenary to establish UNU-INRA. It took quite a bit of discussion, but by the time of the 28th session in December 1986, the UNU Council did take a formal decision to establish UNU-INRA.

Finding a home for UNU-INRA

The host country of UNU-INRA was at that time was meant to be Côte d’Ivoire - in the hometown of President Félix Houphouët Boigny – Yamassoukro. There was also a pledge of support from the Government of France of US\$5.0 million for UNU-INRA if it would be located within the complex of the Institut national supérieur de l'enseignement technique (INSET) in Yamassoukro. The difficulty was getting the funding from President Houphouët-Boigny. Professor Odiambo, Professor Kwapong, the resident representative of UNDP, among many others went to see the President several times in Abidjan and also in Yamassoukro – all to no avail.

After waiting for probably the better part of three and a half years, the UNU finally decided that it needed to begin searching for another host country. With initial funding from the UNDP Regional Bureau for Africa, the UNU had sufficient funds to begin the search for a director of UNU-INRA. Funding from the OPEC Fund also made it possible to move forward with better equipping the mineral resources unit of UNU-INRA in Lusaka. Things appeared to be coming together.

UNU-INRA’s founding director and the institute’s initial activities

It was at this point in time that Dr. Bede Okigbo, an eminent scientist from Nigeria and the brother of one of Nigeria’s great poets – was appointed as the founding director of UNU-INRA. Dr. Okigbo was then resident in Ithaca, New York and he made his way to the UN in New York at the UNU Office at the United Nations where he started his work. He spent much of his time soon after his appointment going to Africa and looking at the possibilities for starting UNU-INRA’s work. He did launch what became known as the “African institutional capability survey.” As a part of the project funded by UNDP, Professor Okigbo created a long questionnaire that he used to survey the state of research and capacity building on African natural resources in African universities. The questionnaire was sent to every African university that we could identify. Professor Okigbo – a born teacher and a man of ample energy pressed and cajoled many African universities (vice-chancellors included) to complete the survey.

Ultimately, the figure of 73 universities replied which was quite a feat at the time. The results of the survey, followed up by site visits to laboratories and teaching facilities all across Africa – showed the lack of investment and the lack of commitment by African governments to fund research and teaching in general and related in particular to the management of natural resources.

I am sure that Professor Okigbo's presentation today would have focused to a large extent on that institutional capability survey. It was a tremendous amount of work.

Moving to Africa

After a few months in 1990, it was decided to create a temporary UNU-INRA Office in Nairobi and to house it within the UN Offices at Gigiri. Professor Okigbo and I travelled to Nairobi and after a few weeks had established offices within the UNESCO Regional Office for Science and Technology (ROSTA). ROSTA was headed at that time by Professor Pascal Lissouba who later returned to Brazzaville to become the first democratically elected President of the Congo from 1992-1997.

We had an able administrator in Ms. Sammy Vos who took care of Professor Okigbo and helped to move forward with the setting up of UNU-INRA's projects and assisted Professor Okigbo to complete his ongoing scientific work as he was still writing articles for scientific journals.

A home in Ghana

Now, you are, by this point in time asking how the Institute came to be located in Ghana. Dr. Kwapong, who had by this time retired from service with UNU and had taken up positions in Canada with the Commonwealth of Learning and in Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia – continued to help in trying to locate a home for UNU-INRA.

It was through the generosity of the Government of Ghana which had pledged US\$5.0 million for UNU and which had asked that the pledge be used to support the work of UNU-INRA, that agreed to host UNU-INRA. The decision was taken after Dr. Kwapong made repeated calls to officials of the Rawlings Government at Osu Castle.

The Ghana Government has been a steadfast supporter since that time. There are many people in Ghana who made it possible for UNU-INRA to become located in Legon at the Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research (ISSER) including the then Vice-Chancellor Akilagpa Sawyerr. I still believe that Professor Sawyerr was not too happy about having to allocate offices to UNU-INRA, but he did so under pressure from Dr. Kwapong and Dr. Kwesi Botchwey – a former law lecturer and Minister of Finance. Dr. Botchwey was most helpful in getting support for UNU-INRA within the Ghana Government. Subsequently, Professors George Benneh and Ivan Addae-Mensah, both Vice-Chancellors at Legon, were supportive of the efforts to build up UNU-INRA at Legon, as were many scientists from Legon, from Kumasi and many other parts of Africa.

Support from Africa

Support from the Government of Zambia in the form of a contribution to the UNU Endowment Fund made it possible for the Mineral Resources Unit of UNU-INRA at the University of Zambia to be a steady, but often under-recognized, part of UNU-INRA.

This support was made possible by the support of Professor Lameck Goma and Dr. Jacob Mwanza to mention two former Vice-Chancellors, as well as Professor Mutale Chanda – all three predecessors of Professor Stephen Simukanga as Vice Chancellor of the University of Zambia.

Professor Okigbo did his best to fulfill the structures set out for UNU-INRA in the Blue Book, including the College of Research Associates which was meant originally to be the brain trust to support the work of African scientists working within UNU-INRA's work programme. He mobilized financial support from the Government of Nigeria and from several other sources. The sums were not enormous, but they brought support and hope for UNU-INRA.

Setbacks and letdowns

I have not spoken of the many heartbreaking set-backs when donors – such as the World Bank – let us down – or northern governments who expressed interest in establishing soil laboratories for which detailed proposals had been prepared by eminent African scientists like Dr. Henry Obeng.

Unfortunately, from my own perspective, Professor Okigbo's tenure as Director was not renewed – he had toiled so hard in the hope of moving UNU-INRA beyond its first stage of development, but he had spent his time doing science and promoting science and did not gain the support he needed from UNU in Tokyo.

Some positive developments

Other subsequent directors have worked hard to strengthen and promote UNU-INRA's work on the continent including Professors Uzo Mokwunye and Karl Harmsen. The setting up of operating units by Uzo Mokwunye with the assistance of Professor Hans van Ginkel, then UNU rector, was a good step forward and a good indication of the support which can be mobilized when the rector of the UNU spends time in Africa visiting African heads of governments. The five operating units in Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Namibia, Senegal and Zambia need additional support and recognition to flourish.

I would also like to pay tribute to the current and former staff of UNU-INRA: JoJo Baidu Forson, Kunadu Acheampong, Eugina Aggrey, Ernest Owusu-Duodu, William Briandt, Benjamin Turkson, Yasuko Kusakari, Tim Koomson, Kwabena Asubonteng, Harris Andoh, and many others.

That brings us closer today to the current situation of UNU-INRA. I am encouraged by the energy which Dr. Ayuk has brought to UNU-INRA in the short time he has been director and I wish him and his colleagues the very best.

I am sorry to have been long and to have left out many important names and supporters from Keto Mshigeni, Lamine Ndiaye, Osmund Mkandamele to Sam Nujoma himself. I also wish that you could have benefited from the more direct and detailed accounts from Drs. Kwapong and Okigbo.

Lessons learned

There are lessons to be learned from UNU-INRA's past – the main one is that without the perseverance of so many persons – UNU-INRA would never have made it to age 25 and it would not have been able to carry out a number of important projects with substantive outcomes.

UNU-INRA has played an important role in continuing to raise its voice about the important need to continue to strengthen Africa's higher education sector and to focus on strengthening Africa's indigenous capacities.

Let me close this chapter of recollections and turn to a more substantive account of what UNU-INRA is doing today.

I thank you for your attention.