

Draft Keynote Speech by Mrs Betty Mould-Iddrisu, Minister of Education at the UNU-INRA 25th Anniversary and International Conference on Sustainable Development of Natural Resources in Africa.

Your Excellency, Professor Dr. Konrad Osterwalder, Under Secretary-General of the United Nations and Rector of the United Nations University, Professor Ernest Aryeetey, Honourable Vice Chancellor of the University of Ghana, Honourable Ministers, Excellences, Distinguished Scientists, Ladies and Gentlemen.

On behalf of Professor John Evans Atta-Mills, the President of the Republic of Ghana, the government and the people of the Republic of Ghana, let me welcome you all to Ghana. Let me also congratulate UNU-INRA for its accomplishments during the 25 years of its existence.

In the early part of the 1980s, in response to the Organization of African Union (OAU) Lagos Plan of Action for Economic Development of Africa, and particularly the worsening environmental impacts of exploiting Africa's rich natural resources, the United Nations and African Governments realized the critical role that the application of science and technology could play in improving the use and management of Africa's natural resources. The pursuit of this idea led to the establishment of the United Nations University – Institute for Natural Resources in Africa (UNU-INRA).

The Assembly of Heads of State and Governments of the OAU adopted a draft resolution at its Twenty-First Ordinary Session in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, from 18 to 20 July, 1985 in support of collaboration with UNU-INRA and a strong appeal to all governments to contribute to UNU-INRA's endowment fund.

Excellences, Distinguished Scientists, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am very happy and proud to inform you that Ghana demonstrated his commitment to this resolution and to the support of UNU-INRA by being the first African nation to contribute to the UNU-INRA endowment fund and to serve as the host country for the Institute. I understand that the Republic of Zambia and the Republic of Cote d'Ivoire have also made commitments.

I am also happy to inform you that the current government of the Republic of Ghana is committed to this idea as the nation demonstrated about 25 years ago. This question may be lingering in your mind – why should Ghana remain committed to this idea? The simple answer is this – the issues that gave relevance to the establishment of UNU-INRA are still applicable today.

Africa today remains the developing region with the highest level of poverty and other socio-economic and environmental challenges despite the high economic growth in recent years. The average growth rate of 5.2% of Africa's gross domestic product during the past decade surpasses the global average growth rate.

Despite this encouraging economic performance, the number of people living on less than a dollar a day in Africa has actually increased. More than 90% of the world's least developed countries are in Africa.

Africa today remains the only part of the world where the absolute number of people and the percentage of the population that is chronically malnourished have continued to increase.

According to estimates by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Africa had the highest net annual loss of forest between the years 2000 to 2010. Over-exploitation and lack of sustainable management of Africa's rich natural resources are worsening the depletion, degradation and loss of genetic resources and natural ecosystems.

Natural resources related conflicts and civil wars in many parts of Africa are not only diverting human and material resources needed for development of the continent but are also exacerbating the depletion of Africa's natural resource base.

Today, there is broad consensus that the continent is lagging behind in achieving many of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), particularly the goals of environmental sustainability, poverty reduction and social development.

The world population reached 7 billion in October this year and currently the population of Africa is estimated to be over 1 billion. We all know what this means. More food, clothing, shelter, schools and so on may be required. There are also new and emerging threats like climate change, dumping of hazardous and electronic waste that the continent will have to grapple with.

Excellences, Distinguished Scientists, Ladies and Gentlemen, permit me to reiterate the unfortunate paradox characterizing our continent.

Africa today is confronted with all these development and environmental challenges, yet it is a continent endowed with rich natural resources. The continent is one of the world's major sources of gold, diamond, copper, uranium and crude oil. It is estimated that, Africa has 97 per cent of world reserves of chrome, 85 per cent of world reserves of platinum, and 64 per cent of world reserves of manganese.

To help us appreciate the abundant and long periods of sunny and breezy days in Africa, we may have to recognize the continent's potential for renewable energy like solar, and wind power that may be unparalleled in the world.

However, according to a World Bank's report, while natural capital accounts for only 2% of wealth creation in most developed countries, it constitutes about 25% in Africa. What are the major reasons for this great disparity?

Distinguished scientists, it may be obvious to you that Africa lacks advanced and cutting-edge technology capable of improving efficiency of utilization and value addition of its natural resources. This will help the continent to export greater percentage of its natural resources not in the form of primary products that transfer employment and wealth to importing countries but highly processed products that will help Africans to enjoy the wealth from their endowed natural resources. Science, technology and innovation have critical roles to play in helping to diversify economies in Africa, improve employment opportunities and general human development.

Excellences, Distinguished Scientists, Ladies and Gentlemen, these reasons underpin the continued commitment of the government of the Republic of Ghana to promoting science, technology and innovation through research and development to support policy- and decision-making for sustainable development and equitable distribution of natural resources-related wealth in the continent.

Distinguished scientist, UNU-INRA will need to reposition itself to pursue the critical mandate of strengthening the capacities of universities and research institutions in Africa for science, technology and innovation to address the existing and emerging challenges associated with using the continent's natural resources. I am told information gathered from the discussions during these three days conference will help the institute to strategize for this critical repositioning.

This is the reason why I will encourage and urge you to be bold, candid and objective in your assessments and discussions in a way that will help the institute to learn from its successes and failures over the past 25 years. This will be critical as it charts a new course for the next 25 years to help contribute to the delivery of science-based knowledge so as to help the continent manage its richly endowed natural resources for the present and future generation.

Again on behalf of the President and people of the Republic of Ghana, I want to welcome you to Ghana and wish you successful deliberations.