Horticulture for People

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It is my great honour to convey to you, on behalf of His Excellency, the President of the Portuguese Republic, Mr. Aníbal Cavaco Silva, his warm regards and best wishes for a most fruitful Congress and a pleasant stay among us during these days. I would also like to voice my heartfelt thanks to Dr. Norman E. Looney, President of the International Society for Horticultural Science, for his challenging invitation to open this 28th International Horticultural Congress. Let me confess that initially I was quite puzzled by the demanding task ahead and I seriously considered declining it. But thanks to the persuasiveness of your peer and my old and dear friend, Professor Carlos Portas, I eventually decided to take this opportunity as a kind of “good risk” as people in the world of finance used say.

I would like to share with you some thoughts on the topical issue of “Horticulture for People” that you will address during this Congress and offer you a United Nations perspective on it. Let me divide my thoughts in two parts: The Millennium Development Goals—the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development, and Horticultural Science at a Critical Juncture in Terms of a New Civilizational Paradigm or of a New Humanism

THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS: THE UN AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

As you may remember the Millennium Declaration, adopted by 189 States in 2000, is aimed at shaping the framework for global cooperation in the twenty first century and since then it is driving the United Nations development agenda. This Declaration gave birth to a set of concrete and measurable development objectives to address extreme poverty, hunger, disease; to promote gender equality, education and environmental sustainability; and to build a global partnership for development.

These eight objectives are known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). At the end of the day, the MDGs reflect a rather new approach on human rights focused on achieving basic conditions to realize basic rights for all. As the world’s quantified, time-bound targets, the MDGs gave rise to an action-oriented agenda, engaging national and global society as a whole as well as a wide array of stakeholders such as governments, private companies, organizations and individuals.

Let us focus now on the sub-MDG1 aimed at “halving, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.” Ten years after the commitment made to achieve this target, where are we regarding this very basic right? Despite earlier progress, I am sure no-one doubts that there is a considerable distance yet to go in meeting the target set. Figures are alarming: the number of hungry people worldwide rose from 842 million in 1990–1992 to 873 million in 2004–2006 and to 1.02 billion people during 2009, the highest level ever (Millennium Development Goals 2009). Although in general I am rather a confident and positive person, regarding this topical issue of hunger, we have absolutely no grounds for feeling optimistic about finding a solution to such a huge, complex and global challenge in a near future. It is crystal clear that in the 21st
century food remains a basic human security challenge. A sharp increase in agricultural productivity and output quality is dramatically needed; but food security has also to be addressed in two main ways: in terms of availability of food and in terms of access and equality of access to adequate nutritious food for the poor and vulnerable.

In our globalizing times, our world is one. We are all increasingly dependent on one another for our shared prosperity and security. This is why MDGs are not about charity or about pity. They are all about solidarity and justice. MDGs are no negotiable stepping stones towards equitable and sustainable development for all. This is all about solidarity and justice in one world!

**HORTICULTURAL SCIENCE AT A CRITICAL JUNCTURE IN TERMS OF A NEW CIVILIZATIONAL PARADIGM OR A NEW HUMANISM**

My second point regards the very particular role that horticultural science can play to help build a more just world within a new civilizational paradigm or a new humanism. I told you at the beginning that I was invited to address this distinguished audience in my capacity as the United Nations High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations. It is now time to explain to you how I see a close relationship between the purpose of the Alliance of Civilizations and “horticulture” as the science and industry of plant cultivation at large. In a nutshell, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations represents a kind of fourth pillar of sustainable development and complements the MDG’s agenda.

As you may know, the Alliance of Civilizations was launched in 2005 by the former Secretary-General of the United Nations Kofi Annan, with the co-sponsorship of the Prime Ministers of Spain and Turkey, Mr. José Luis Rodriguez Zapatero and M. Recep Tayyip Erdogan. It seeks to improve understanding and cooperative relations among nations and peoples across cultures and religions and, in the process, to help counter the forces that fuel polarization and extremism. By achieving these goals, the Alliance aims at contributing to develop “good governance of cultural diversity”, an emerging issue on political and policy agendas in our globalising world.

Good governance of cultural diversity is needed both to foster a culture of peace, prevent conflicts and contribute to peace-building in post-conflict situations, and to preserve cultural diversity as the fourth pillar of sustainable development. Now the meeting point between the Alliance and Horticultural Science is precisely here, at the juncture between cultural and biological diversity, nature and culture, the cosmos and mankind.

The combination of both perspectives is part of the civilizational challenge that we face in our globalizing world where global and local dimensions merge into a new “global” reality where anything is everywhere—be it conflicts, problems, opportunities and threats. This means that we need a new humanism but also a new ecological pact as the main components of a new paradigm for sustainable development. But this new paradigm requires a new approach. To figure it out, it is important to keep in mind the example of the “tragedy of the commons” popularized by Garrett Hardin in his classic article of that title in 1968 (Hardin, 1968).

As some of you may recall, the “tragedy of the commons” is a simple story about a village that only has one field where all the shepherds take their flocks to pasture. However, to increase their income the shepherds keep adding new sheep to their flock and in the long run this produces a situation of overpopulation which in turn causes the pasture to dry up. The field here serves as an example of natural resources but it also
represents the vast category of “common resources”, also known as common public goods, such as health, education and food.

As for the tragedy mentioned before, in the end the problem is the inability to safeguard the general interest and preserve the common good—in this case the field—whilst concentrating only on freedom and private interests, that is, the individual decisions of the shepherds. This example draws attention to the need to build a virtuous circle between economic and social growth, on the one hand, and environmental protection, on the other hand, in order to ensure sustainable development; but it also draws our attention to the central concept of “good governance or democratic governance of public goods”!

Indeed the marketplace is the most efficient way of producing private goods. But this very market relies on a set of goods that it cannot provide itself. These are public goods. Examples of public goods are peace, environment, health and knowledge, but also food. To a certain extent, the MDGs materialize the basic set of public common goods.

Indeed on these public common goods, we can have at least two opinions:

- One might side with Adam Smith in focusing the State, as the provider of public goods, on a few areas: maintaining the money supply, enforcing property rights, promoting competitive markets, providing national defence and administering justice.
- Or one might assert that people-centred societies call for a wide range of publicly-supplied goods from social security, health services and student aid to public transportation, national parks and food stamps.

I do not intend to enter into this very complex debate here. But whatever position one can takes, it is widely understood that national public goods and services are fundamental to people’s well-being and that governments and markets must work together to provide them.

It is my belief that democratic governance is the best way to preserve and manage public common goods and to defend general or collective interest. This means that to achieve the MDGs, we need to strengthen a global partnership involving all stakeholders including governments, international community, private sector, scholars, universities, and civil society.

There is urgency to live up to the promises made because after all every person anywhere in the world, irrespective of citizenship, residence, race, class, caste or community, has some basic rights which others should respect (Sen, 2009). Given the terrible deprivations of people’s lives around the world—and this applies first and foremost to hunger—there is an urgent need to recognize rights for everyone and to act accordingly. Action is the key word. Concerted and coordinated action. A global partnership for action.

Now you may ask: but what can we do to contribute to achieve the MDGs? What can we do as experts, scientist and practitioners on horticulture? Dear friends, it is my humble opinion that you can do a lot! You can precisely scale up your efforts to raise agricultural output in order to overcome hunger and ensure food security as individuals but also as a global Association.

You can commit this Congress to support national governments, to help the international community to take the right measures, to implement additional programmes to reduce hunger, to develop prevention-based interventions and targeted support to the most vulnerable groups. You can push for the elimination of trade distorting agricultural subsidies and help open market access to developing countries. You can continue your
stimulating habit of combining science and innovation. You can expand your network of partnerships with all stakeholders in order to fight hunger. You can make history! Take the risk! Move ahead!

**Literature Cited**


Millennium Development Goals. 2010. Report to the Secretary General, 23 June.