

**A FOOD SECURITY POLICY FIRESIDE CHAT**

*Ismail Serageldin and Sir Gordon Conway*

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**Ismail Serageldin**

Founding Director Emeritus & Member of the Board of Trustees, Library of Alexandria

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You know, I could speak for a very long time about Gordon Conway, but I won't, partly because some of the highlights of his career have been touched on by Ambassador Ken Quinn. But the most important thing I can say about him – his humanity, his commitment to share the humanity, especially for the poor, compassion, his notion of dignity for the farmers, came through in that speech. I mean, Gordon is a guy who spends a lot of time with ministers, heads of states, President of the Ford Foundation, Vice Chancellor of Sussex, advisor to DFID, head of the Montpellier Panel, and so on – but all his discussion, all his examples or how to interact with the poorest farmers. And I think in that comes a lesson and a summation about a man of passion and compassion, a man of caring, and that certainly, I believe that all of us can continue to learn lessons from you, Gordon.

I will ask you about a number of things, because I think if there's one thing missing from this excellent presentation, it is the sense of urgency – it could be you, who have spent much time thinking about these issues, will know that, especially if you have been reading the reports on climate change and if you have reading the reports about demography in Africa.

So I will give you four important points at a starting point of this discussion. The first of these is that it's going to be very, very hard, to deliver the negative impacts of climate change, even if we were able to keep their eyes in average global temperature to below 2° Celsius, which doesn't look likely under current trends. We have seen some of the enormous variability that will occur in that sense.

Secondly, a terrible statistic. (I was telling my friend [inaudible] about that.) In May of this year for the first time the country with the largest number of very poor people, where hunger is concentrated, is no longer India. It is now Nigeria. And that in itself is a momentous marker, despite the fact that Nigeria has oil and so on.

Thirdly, population projections for Sub-Saharan Africa are enormously frightening. The U.N. consensus position is that the population will quadruple from 1.1 billion in 2015 to 4.4 at the end of the century, while Asia will go up to 5.2 and then come down to 4.8. And the IIASA, which disagrees with the U.N. consensus forecast, forecasts a tripling from 1.1 to 3.3. And I have said to my friends there, I said, "Look, yes, it's less than the U.N. figure, but it's devastating. To go from 1.1 to 3.3 billion human beings in Africa is going to be devastating." Gordon mentioned the Ford statistic, which was fiscal year powerful, which is the fact that Africa imports 40 billion dollars' worth of food today with the current population of Lebanon with the current income levels.

Now, to that we must add that climate change is going to increase variability of rainfall, sequences of draught and flood, and (here it comes, the difficult part) a very large proportion, over 90+% of African agriculture is not irrigated. So as a result, these are small-scale rainfed farming, which are going to be subjected to an enormous fluctuation in rainfall and will have cycles of rain and flood.

So what does that tell us? I think it tells us something that a fellow Brit said extremely well, that *There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune. Omitted, all the voyage of their lives is bound in shadows and in miseries, and on such a full sea are we now afloat, and we must take the current when it serves or lose our ventures.* I think that applies to the threat and the challenge that is before these billions of small farmers and that we all collectively here who want to be loyal to the tradition of our friend and mentor Norman Borlaug, have to figure ways in which science and outreach can be combined to reach out and empower the farmers in Africa to take charge of their destiny. And, Gordon, since you have committed almost all of your life, many of your books, not all (I have some more to talk about), what would you have to tell us about how to make science most effectively the servant of these small farmers in Africa?

### **Sir Gordon Conway**

Member of the World Food Prize Council of Advisors  
& Professor of International Development, Imperial College of London

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My problem is that I'm an optimist, naturally, of course—it's probably genetic. That's why I go on working, because I believe we can have an effect. I think there are out there lots of really good stories of change. There are really big efforts to make a difference. I mean, one, for example, in China is that they now have got a major campaign to reduce the amount of fertilizers used in China and also to get on top of the pig waste. And if they do that effectively, they bring down the amount of greenhouse gas emission in the world as a whole enormously, and that's a real plus.

I think the constraint of land in Africa is serious, but we are seeing now growth of middle-sized farms. We're getting quite a considerable number of farms of 5 to 10, 20 hectares in size in Africa. And for example in Ghana those middle-sized farms are producing as much food as all the small, one-hectare farms.

I think what's important when it comes to population; again we know very well that the desire of Africans to have smaller families is there. The unmet demand is enormous for contraceptives, and it's not been helped by donor governments who shall be nameless who will not provide those contraceptive devices. So there are a number of things that you can do and are being done, and there are good stories. And I think the really... We were talking about this before I came up here with Roger, who's a great storyteller. I can't see him now; he must be still there in the audience. Roger is a great storyteller. We need more of these stories, and they need to be told simply, and we need to persuade people that that's what's going to happen.

Ismail      Amen, so if we can...

Gordon     So it's a fireside chat. I should be serious...

Ismail     No, no, no, that's all right. The main thing is the ideas that you bring forth, and it compelling that we have responsibility to engage the leaders as well as the

entrepreneurs and the farmers, everybody in the value chain that you showed us. And this regretfully is not going to be very easy, because some of the leader spay only lip service. Some currently reject everything about climate change. But we can, I think, go a bit further.

You have in your career done a lot in supporting directly the development of new varieties. If I remember correctly, America, the rice, African rice you were at the back of funding it when you headed the Rockefeller Foundation. And you also, when you were there, in fact, launched two other major programs, one with Secretary General Kofi Annan on post-Rwanda reconstruction, and that is important. We have the Congo. We have Southern Sudan. We have many other places in Africa where conflict is causing the family problems, and we heard the panel on this yesterday.

You also dealt with issues of health, including how to reach pregnant mothers to have HIV-free babies. So in being able to do all that, do you have any particular reference as to where the entry point might be for a new program to support the situation?

Gordon I think this is in Rwanda really every year for, I don't know, soon after the genocide, and the progress in Rwanda is enormous. There's no doubt about that. You can see it all around, and you can see in particular the young entrepreneurs, even if they're only driving little motorcycle taxis. There are still human rights abuses, of course, in Rwanda, but the change there is one that we could all learn from.

The story about HIV is an interesting one. Kofi Annan asked me as the Rockefeller Foundation would I give some money to his big fund to combat HIV. And I said, "No, no. We're a foundation. We don't just do that kind of thing. We like to be a pioneer in some way." And so we came up with the notion of trying out giving antiretrovirals to pregnant women before they gave birth. And we raised a hundred million dollars from different foundations in a group, and lo and behold when you do that, none of the babies have HIV. And of course that was a time when people were saying, "Oh, HIV is a lifestyle disease." I used to get so mad at that notion that these little babies had gotten the wrong lifestyle and that's why they got aids. It's just dreadful. But we were able to demonstrate that, and that's something I think I'm always very proud of that we did that work.

Ismail Well, actually you should be also very proud of the post-Rwanda work that you did. In fact, many people here should be very proud. And I'll remind you with a small story, and Gordon was involved with me at the time in the CGIAR. In the genocide in Rwanda, practically everybody who had been involved in agricultural research was killed. The stores were looted, the labs were destroyed, etc. And it was the scientists of the CGIAR who, through a program called Seeds of Hope, were able to get from the seed collections the right seeds for each region of Rwanda and multiple those seeds and sent to work with the farmers of each of those areas to get agricultural production restarted after that. And to me that was always one of the great examples of how scientists, many of whom are here from the CGIAR, were devoted in their common humanity as people and brought science to bear on the basic ability to have food grow again after a genocide.

Gordon I think that's good. It's interesting. Rajiv Shah has become the new president of the Rockefeller Foundation, and I saw him last week, and he's absolutely adamant that the Rockefeller Foundation is now going to be a science and technology-based organization dealing with the big issues around health and around agriculture and so on. And I think that's fantastic to have that happen again.

Ismail Good, a question. Because one of the things that comes out from your presentation is in fact that you need many disciplines to deal with an issue, and multidisciplinary, as you have said yourself, is not something that administrations normally like, whether at universities or elsewhere. And you have yourself, when you were in charge of the University of Sussex, pushed multidisciplinary, and in Imperial College you have a Center for Environmental Technology and Policy, which brings together many disciplines.

Question: Is it better to have a group of people who are not all specialists but working together and thereby bring all the disciplines together, or to have someone trained to a lesser degree in all the disciplines?

Gordon No. I think you've got to have the structures laid out, people to work together. And the problem is that multidisciplinary is what governments like to mouth about, but they don't support it. Sussex was a good example of the multidisciplinary that we've built into the system. Unfortunately, after I left, the bureaucrats said it's too complicated to manage, and so it's gone away. But I think we need to continue to fight for multidisciplinary.

Ismail Indeed. Well, that's very important, because I think there is now an increasing possibility of having specialists unified at the particular platforms, one of which you've given an example of in the conceptual model in which each person may be a specialist in one part of it, another being of course increasingly the mathematical models that are being dealt with in very large scale, computing facilities.

But the third and most important is really on the ground where, I mean, to use another expression, it's where the rubber hits the road, as they say. This is where whatever you've been doing in the lab and with the computers has to be translated into reality. And that requires actually another skill, which is seldom mentioned and that which you showed so gracefully in your presentation that perhaps didn't come across enough, which is to have the quality of diplomacy that enables you to deal with the heads of state all the way down to the local farmer. And the gentleman caring that is there, now, that is, I would believe, best developed by on-the-field training – wouldn't you say?

Gordon Yes.

Ismail You've had your own career was...

Gordon I think all scientists, even if they become lab scientists, need to spend part of their time learning how to live and work in villages with poor farmers. It's the same with doctors. People who eventually do become specialists and heart surgeons and all the rest... And I love heart surgeons, because I've got a nice one here working away at the moment. They all need to have that time on the ground talking to individual

patients about their ailments. And I don't see any reason why... We did at Sussex create a new medical school where right from day one the trainee doctors were out in doctor surgeries, in clinics, and learning how to do it. Before then, you'd get a degree in medicine, and then they'd say, "Okay, now you can go and treat patients." And you walk into the room and say, "My God, what can I do. This is awful, having to deal with all these people." And so you need to build that into their training programs.

Ismail I think we are all very proud of the fact that the World Food Prize is engaged with the Borlaug Youth Institutes and that our friend, Ruth Fresco, has started one in Europe as well and that we now have cadres of young people going out for their training and being exposed to some of these issues.

I'm going to be very nasty and ask you a question. How do you ensure that this doesn't, in terms of academic preparation (and you were a vice chancellor), that this doesn't turn into a soft option in terms of the academic career that involves developmental tourism and not enough vigor? So how do you do that? How would you hold up the standard to make sure [inaudible]?

Gordon You've got to make sure that academics are judged on a number of criteria, of course. One of which is they have to be judged on their academic publications. But secondly, they can be judged on their more popular publications. And thirdly, they need to be judged on their impact in terms of individuals having ways of working out there in the community. In fact, under the new British system which is just coming in, all three of those strands are going to be there, and we're going to be judged on all three of those, and I think that's what's important.

Ismail Let me ask a question a something you have not mentioned at all and which probably hardly anybody in the audience knows about Gordon. At one point in his career, he was put in charge of a very important and sensitive panel for the UK and in which he coined the word *Islamophobia*. And the notion was how to get communities of diverse backgrounds in the UK get together. Now, to this day that report stands as a beacon, especially in these days where we see the tensions in Europe and we see the problems of immigration, when we see tensions in the U.S., that Gordon was the leader of an effort—how many years ago?

Gordon 20 years ago.

Ismail 20 years ago, that came up with a report for the UK Government, and he labeled the report, at his own insistence, it should be *Islamophobia*. So tell us a word about that.

Gordon Well, it was an exciting development. To begin with, I said, "No, I can't do this." And it was a very persuasive woman who said, "Yes, you can." I said, "But I'm not an expert in race relations." And she said, "But you've worked in a whole lot of countries. You've worked in, for example, Pakistan, you've worked in Indonesia, worked in Bangladesh, a lot of countries that have large Muslim populations. And you know what it's like to work side by side with people of that faith." I said, "Yes, that's true." And so that was the basis for what we did. I think we did make a difference at that time about British attitudes towards Muslims in Britain. A lot of it has been transformed by more recent events. But even now there is still pushbacks in

saying – when we talk about what’s going on here, then we talk about people who are for example terrorists, let’s be quite careful how we label those, that terrorism. Is that terrorism a result of Islam? Is terrorism a result of Muslims? Is it a terrorism of extremists who are exploiting that kind of activity? I remember going back to one of your books you produced was about the origins of Sharia law. And we all think that Sharia law is not a very good thing, but in fact the way it was written originally, one of the things that Sharia law did was to say that people were innocent until proven guilty, and that was a very important statement. And we have to keep remembering that actually if you go back in history in all our communities, there are really strong undercurrents of more liberal, democratic lifestyles, which have been undermined in more recent years. And we need to get back those liberal, democratic lifestyles for ourselves.

Ismail     Indeed, and this shows that Gordon Conway, the scientist, Gordon Conway, the development specialist, Gordon Conway, the educator, and Gordon Conway, the head of foundations, advisor to governments, and the man who reaches to the smallest farmers and ensures their dignity and empowerment, is also a citizen who adopts a philosophy and acts on it.

And that, incidentally, to come back to the Africa challenge, is going to be very serious. Because, as you know, we have tribal and ethnic and religious warfare throughout Africa, and some of the panels have discussed the problem of conflicts and hunger are important together.

Now, I could, as I said, we could continue to speak forever, but we won’t. I will be wrapping this up now. And before I wrap up, I would like to ask you if there is one more thing that you would like to add to this session before I say my closing valedictory for you.

Gordon     I think if I was to decide, I'd say one more thing. Let’s say in some ways the obvious thing. I've greatly enjoyed being a member of the Council of Advisors of the World Food Prize. I've enjoyed every year coming here to Des Moines and interacting. I see lots of faces in the audience of people I've known and I've done business with. There’s lots of business gets done at this place, lots of funds being raised – and I'm about to do that with some of you in the next couple of years, days. I won’t name who it is. But that has been rewarding. I'd like to thank you all so much for all that you’ve done for me. I have so much pleasure from coming here to Des Moines and to this wonderful account. And in particular from all the inspiration over there from Ken, from Ken Quinn who has just been a fantastic leader of all of this. Thank you, Ken.

Ismail     Yes, thank you, Ken, thank you. Now this is the applause to Ken. And then after, Gordon, wait. I want to say something about Gordon myself and others who are growing older. We are all very inspired by the young people who are here and the built-in mechanism which Ken has so artfully worked whereby there is this intergenerational link.

So I say on behalf of the old – don’t look very old – but... Years may wrinkle the skin, but to give up our ideals would wrinkle our soul. And the years may mark our face, diminish our physical vigor, whiten our hair or lose our hair completely, limit

our eyesight, but we can remain young at heart—and you are. You are as young as your face and as old as your doubt, as young as your dreams and as old as your cynicism, as young as your self-confidence and as old as your fear, as young as your hope and as old as your despair. And you will remain young as long as you believe in the beauty of your dreams and you believe in hope, cheer and courage. Only if you give in to pessimism and lose your heart to cynicism, then and then only are you grown old. And then indeed, as Douglas McArthur said, you just fade away. But we are, all the not-so-young in this audience, I believe, are young at heart, and we can take pride in the example of the one and only Gordon Conway.

Gordon Thank you.

Quinn Great, that was wonderful.

Ismail Thank you.

Quinn That was wonderful. So I want to be sure the official record reflects that Gordon Conway got two standing ovations. That was just incredible. Gordon, we wish you Godspeed on your journey. Tell Susan how much we love her and miss her. And you always, you both always have warmest welcome back at the Food Prize. I have been the one who has benefited from your wise counsel. And Ismail, thank you so much for your eloquence and this dialog. Let's have another round of applause.