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Former Nigerian President Obasanjo named IITA "Goodwill Ambassador"

Former President Olusegun Obasanjo has accepted to be the IITA's 'Goodwill Ambassador,' as part of its effort to fight hunger and poverty in Africa.

Nteranya Sanginga, IITA Director General, announced Obasanjo's acceptance after a closed door meeting with the former president in Abeokuta, Ogun State on Tuesday, 22 November.

As IITA's Goodwill Ambassador, Obasanjo will help in advocating for policies that would advance research and bring to reality the long-awaited African Green Revolution.

He will extend and amplify IITA's work and mission and help focus the world's attention on the work of IITA in sub-Saharan Africa. This work involves helping to raise 20 million Africans out of poverty and to redirect 25 million ha of degraded lands for sustainable use in the next 10 years.

Sanginga says the institute is honored by Obasanjo's acceptance of the offer.

Born in March 1937, Obasanjo became the first Nigerian President to hand over to a democratically elected president; first as a military head of state in 1979, and second in 2007 as a civilian president.

Before Obasanjo's administration in 1999, Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product growth has been painfully slow since 1987, and only managed 3% between 1999/2000.

Under Obasanjo's administration, the country's growth rate doubled to 6% until he left office, helped in part by higher oil prices. Nigeria's foreign reserves also rose from $2 billion in 1999 to $43 billion in 2007. He was able to secure debt pardons from the Paris and London clubs amounting to some $18 billion and paid another $18 billion. This made the country debt-free. Most of these loans were secured and spent by officials preceding Obasanjo.

Former Nigerian President Obasanjo (front left) and IITA DG Sanginga (front right) after their meeting in Abeokuta during which the former president accepted to be the institute's "Goodwill Ambassador". Looking on are Gbassey Tarawali, IITA maize scientist, and Godwin Atser, Corporate Communications Officer.

In 2005, the international community gave Nigeria's government its first pass mark for its anti-corruption efforts.

In the agricultural sector, Obasanjo initiated the Presidential Initiatives on Nigeria's major commodities including cassava, maize, rice, and cocoa. His policy mandating flour millers to include 10% cassava flour with wheat boosted the crop's production by 10 million tons between 2002 and 2008. Maize, rice, and cocoa yields in Nigeria also recorded an increase during that time. As a result, Nigeria became the world's number one producer of cassava, while maize became a major cash and economic crop as well.

As a statesman, Obasanjo has been involved in mediating for peace in conflict-stricken countries including Cote d'Ivoire and DR Congo, among others.

In accepting IITA's offer, Obasanjo says the fight against hunger and poverty is a 'battle' he intends to fight as he retires from public service.

Help conserve electricity!

Before leaving the workplace at the day's end, make sure that you have:

(1) Powered off all unnecessary electrical office/lab equipment;

(2) Turned off air conditioners; and

(3) Switched off all lights.

Youths are critical to efforts to combat deforestation and natural resource degradation, says Sanginga

Getting the youths involved in conservation could help preserve African forests, sustain efforts on reforestation, and slow down the rate of deforestation and natural resource degradation, says Nteranya Sanginga, IITA Director General.

Between 1990 and 2005 alone, the world lost 3.3% of its forests. The Guinean Rainforest (GRF) of West Africa, identified over 20 years ago as a global biodiversity hotspot, has shrunk to 113,000 km2 by 2000, which is only 18% of its original size.

Nigeria loses 3.5% of its forests – or about 350,000 to 400,000 ha of forest land – annually due to economic or social reasons.

"This situation has led to global warming, loss of biodiversity and soil degradation, and contributing to the low yields that farmers are now experiencing," adds Sanginga at the official launch of the Nigerian Field Society Young Explorers (NFSYE) in Ibadan on Saturday, 19 November.

David Okali, Nigeria's first professor of forestry and the immediate past president of the Nigerian Field Society (NFS), notes that the impact of deforestation and degradation on the environment and livelihoods is enormous. Meanwhile, Funso Adeniyi, current NFS president, emphasized the importance of forming the youth wing of the NFS, the oldest NGO in Nigeria at 81 years.

"The time for action is now and the youths, who will soon be the custodian of these resources, must be involved," they said.

John Peacock, coordinator of the IITA-Leventis Foundation project, notes that agricultural intensification could help reduce the rate of deforestation in the region.

"If farmers get improved seeds and inputs such as fertilizers, and are trained, they would not need to slash and burn or embark on practices that will harm the forests," he says.

"This makes IITA's work on improving the productivity of crops a cornerstone in curbing deforestation and soil degradation."

Dipo Ajiroba, Chairman of the newly launched NFSYE, commended the Nigerian Field Society and the IITA-Leventis project for making the youths the vanguard of forest protection and natural resource management.

Work by the IITA-Leventis Project, which started in early 2010, include restoration of the existing IITA forest, control of invasive species, multiplication and preservation of indigenous species, and replanting of the forest to control erosion, protect watersheds, and increase biodiversity.

During the launch, the new members of the NFSYE were exposed to the different aspects of the project's conservation work in the IITA-Ibadan campus, particularly on birds, pollinators, and native plants, trees, and seeds.

(Top) DG Sanginga speaking before members of the newly-launched NFSYE at the IITA International School; (bottom) some of the NFSYE members listening to a talk and taking notes on native tree seeds in the IITA Forest.

Aflatoxin-control project in Zambia maps out action plan

A four-year project to control the contamination of maize and peanut by deadly aflatoxin in Zambia kicked off with a planning meeting in Lusaka on 7-10 November.

The event brought together representatives of IITA, ICRISAT, the Zambia Agriculture Research Institute (ZARI), USAID/Zambia Feed the Future (FTF), and partners to develop the implementation plan for the first year of the project.

The project, funded under FTF Multi-Year Food Security Strategy Program and launched last June in Lusaka, is geared towards developing and registering a biocontrol product to address aflatoxin in crops. The project runs in tandem with a similar one recently launched in Mozambique. The United States Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Research Service (USDA-ARS) is an important partner in both initiatives.

Aflatoxin can contaminate both food and feed crops and can cause serious illnesses and even death in humans and livestock. Prolonged exposure also stunts child growth and development.

The project builds on IITA's successes in Nigeria using an aflatoxin biocontrol product named 'aflasafe' in collaboration with USDA-ARS, African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF) and other partners. The technology was initially developed and commercialized by USDA-ARS and is widely used in the southern United States.

A Nigerian maize farmer about to apply aflasafe in his field.

Ranajit Bandyopadhay, plant pathologist with IITA, says that aflasafe has consistently reduced aflatoxin contamination by 80-90% on maize and groundnut during field testing in Nigeria and Senegal in the past four years. Currently, commercial and sustainable ways to mass produce it are being developed.

"This breakthrough technology works by releasing naturally occurring fungus strains that are non-toxic to out-compete their aflatoxin-producing cousins, thereby reducing aflatoxins during crop development, post-harvest storage, and throughout the value chain," he says.

"In addition to identifying effective strains of the non-toxic fungi in Zambia, the project will also emphasize on developing a viable business plan for the production and distribution of aflasafe to stimulate and meet farmers' demands. This will include manufacturing, marketing, and packaging, and creating incentives for farmers to use it," he adds.

Thomas Dubois, IITA biocontrol specialist, explains the project will also focus on quantifying the incidence of aflatoxin in maize and groundnut in Zambia as there is limited data about its prevalence in these crops. Such data are vital to the public.

"We will undertake a phased and focused public information campaign targeting consumers, farmers, farming communities, and extension services to educate them on the dangers of aflatoxin and ways to control it. It will also target food safety and regulatory officials so they can create enabling policies supportive of biocontrol,"he adds.

"In Zambia and Mozambique, we will build the capacity of national partners in tackling aflatoxin, as well as conduct collaborative on-farm experiments," Dubois concludes.