

**OPENING SPEECH BY THE APRNet PRESIDENT, DR. ANTHONY OJONIMI ONOJA
AT THE 7TH AGRICULTURAL POLICY STAKEHOLDERS' FORUM AND 1ST ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE
AGRICULTURAL POLICY RESEARCH NETWORK (APRNet)**

Theme: *Towards a Resilient and Sustainable Agri-Food System by 2025 in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa*

Date: Wednesday, 1st to 3rd June, 2022.

Venue: Hotel Benizia, in Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria.

PROTOCOLS

It is with immense pleasure that I welcome you all to the 7th Agricultural Policy Stakeholders' Forum of APRNet and its 1st Annual International Conference. The African adage which holds that "a toad does not jump in the day time for nothing" explains better why we are here. Some things have terribly gone wrong with our system in the world, in Africa and especially at home here in Nigeria and we must find a way to provide workable solutions to these teething challenges threatening our common existence.

The United Nations forecasts that the world's population will increase from 7.9 billion in 2022 to **8.1 billion** in 2025, with more than **4 billion** in Africa (Worldometer, 2022), while Nigeria's population will reach **233.3** million by 2025 from its present 216.7 million (Statista, 2022). With this growth it is obvious that the Malthusian fear spell is playing out. However, the possible checkmates for the expected crisis envisaged in Malthusian theory are evident. The agri-food systems and economic landscape in Africa and the world increasingly faces a very worrisome turmoil and shocks. In 2019 and 2020 alone, sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) was ravaged by *desert locust* upsurge and *COVID-19 pandemic*. The negative impact of *climate change*, *rising conflicts*, global food and other commodities' price volatilities exacerbating *food insecurity* (especially hidden hunger) and rising poverty. These remind us of the need to wake up and act fast. Conflicts are in Ukraine, Ethiopia, Congo, Chad and in Nigeria, especially in the three North East states of Yobe, Adamawa and Borno where more than 2.1 million people are internally displaced and in North Central Nigeria especially, Niger, Kaduna, Plateau and Benue State where millions have been displaced and billions of properties lost especially among farm households.

Over 193 million people in 53 countries or territories experienced acute food insecurity at crisis or worse levels in 2021 representing an increase of nearly 40 million people compared with the already record numbers of 2020. The issue is more severe for the SSAs, because over half a million people (570 000) in Ethiopia, southern Madagascar, South Sudan and Yemen were classified in the most severe phase of acute food insecurity Catastrophe and require urgent action to avert widespread collapse of livelihoods, starvation and death (GNAFC, 2022).

IFPRI Global Food Policy Report 2022, Swinen, Arndt and Vos (2022) and the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2022) also raised alarm on a looming food crisis globally that will be exacerbated by Climate change threatening agri-food systems, with heavy toll in many regions, especially in SSA, where reduction in agricultural productivity and disruption of supply/value chains are pressurizing livelihoods and inflating hunger and malnutrition. In SSA and Nigeria in particular, many people—including the poor, rural populations, women, youths and minority groups—remain underserved and limited in their ability to access the benefits of transformative reforms and innovations.

Even though The UN Food Systems Summit and UNFCCC COP26 meetings of 2021 emphasized the relevance of food systems for global *climate* discussions and solutions, it is feared that agriculture and food systems still receive insufficient attention and funding to address the crisis as indicated by the fact that only 4% of *climate finance* is currently directed to Agriculture, Forestry and Other Land Use (AFOLU).

The above situation makes adaptation efforts relying on innovative products and strategies crucially vital, hence there is a dire need for evidence to support policies in address this issue. *Poverty increase and dwindling decent jobs* (concerns of SDGs 1 and 18) in SSA are also issues that African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) can be deployed to address if agri-food systems are to be strengthened, especially the agricultural value chains. The World Bank (2022) rightly notes that AfCFTA presents a very huge opportunity for African countries to bring over *30 million people out of extreme poverty* and to *raise the incomes of 68 million* others who live on less than \$5.50 per day.

However there are no much information to optimize the role of farmers and the agri-food value chains especially on how to eradicate hunger, poverty and contribute to the attainment of AfCTA goals in a continent where over 80 percent depend on agriculture and agribusiness value chains as source of food, incomes and livelihood. Similarly, Covid-19 pandemic and climate change provides huge opportunities and learning points that can enable us to better enhance the resilience, sustainability, and productivity of the agriculture and food sector using innovative research. This underscores the need for a gathering as this today. APRNet believes that efforts to *Eliminate Poverty (SDG 1)*, attain *Zero Hunger (SDG 2)*, and *create safe and decent jobs (SDG 8)* in consonance with climate action (SDG 13) by 2030, transform agrifood system to more efficient, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable systems (in Nigeria and SSA) will fail unless concerted efforts are made to *build the resilience of farm and agri-food system*.

Knowledge and appropriate policies to address these issues are better harnessed through engagement of Stakeholders from the academia, research institutes, farmers, agribusiness value chain actors, private sector leaders and policy makers (from the government especially). Hence this colloquium brings all stakeholders from Nigeria and diasporas on board in Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria, a state that has demonstrated capacity to transform agri-food system through a purposeful and well focused leadership. This was achieved through the leadership of His Excellency, Governor Godwin Okowa, the Executive Governor of Delta State. We believe there are lessons we can learn from the *Okowanomics* model in agribusiness value chain transformation. Hence we are gathered here to share knowledge, policies and innovations in this colloquium which we believe holds opportunities to generate clear roadmap and policies that will help us in **building a resilient** agri-food systems for our country, Nigeria and SSA generally.

APRNet believes that efforts to attain Zero Hunger by 2030, transform SubSaharan and Nigerian agrifood system to more efficient, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable systems will fail unless concerted efforts are made to boost farm and agri-food system productivity, improve nutrition (reduce hidden hunger especially), ensure a cleaner and safer environment, and an improved livelihood as well as wellbeing in a way that everyone (women, youths and other vulnerable groups) is carried along.

Doing the above tasks will also be in tandem with the rationale of the Nigerian Agricultural Sector Food Security and Nutrition Strategy (AFSNS) which guides the Federal and State Ministries of Agriculture and Rural Development (FMARD and SMARDs), and the wider agricultural sector in Nigeria, in all current and future interventions linking agriculture to nutrition in Nigeria. This conference comes as a timely response to the nutrition situation in the country where only little improvement has been made in the nutrition landscape over several decades. The recommendations from this conference and stakeholder meeting will hopefully support effective advocacy to mobilize and guide the allocation of the human, material and financial resources required for the realization of FMARD and SMARDs nutrition interventions. The outcome of this conference too are expected to help us build the National Agriculture Policy of our country and implement it effectively. The proper implementation of these strategies will also support the objectives of several other national policies, including the National Policy on Infant and Young Child Feeding, and the National Social Protection Policy. On regional, continental and global levels, the outcome of this conference will help build better strategies that will contribute to the achievement of regional and international frameworks that Nigeria and other SSA countries have committed to, such as the CAADP Framework, ECOWAS Zero Hunger Initiative, Malabo Declaration, International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2) Commitments, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Outcomes of our deliberations and recommendations will be in form of a Communiqué for the policy makers and a special issue of our journal, Nigerian Agricultural Policy Research Journal (NAPReJ), indexed in *Econ Papers*, *AgEcon*, IDEAS and Google Scholar. Only papers that pass our peer reviewed and editorial scrutiny will be published.

APRNet and score cards

APRNet was established in 2009 at a meeting of Nigeria's agricultural research policy stakeholders and facilitated by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) under the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)-funded Agricultural Policy Support Facility. It was incorporated on 14th June 2011 as Corporation Limited by Guarantee and had Professor Eric C. Eboh, as the pioneer President (2011-2015) followed by Dr. Anthony Ojonimi Onoja who served from 2016 till date. The organization is being governed by a 9-member Executive Council one of which (2nd Vice President) is nominated by the Federal Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development (FMARD). Membership includes researchers, policy experts and representatives from the private sector and civil society working in agricultural, food and nutrition related policy sectors.

The Mission of APRNet is pragmatically couched to *facilitate the conduct of research as well as the communication and utilization of research results in the agriculture and rural development policy process in Nigeria.*

The network facilitates the following tasks:

- (i) Research and information sharing;
- (ii) Training/ capacity building,
- (iii) Policy linkages and feedback; and
- (iv) Dissemination and public enlightenment.

APRNet obtain its main funding from USAID through IFPRI under the Nigerian Strategy Support Program (NSSP) and the Nigerian Agricultural Policy Project (NAPP) under the aegis of the *Feed the Future programme*, a joint effort between Michigan State University, IFPRI and USAID. Voluntary donations are welcome but has been very insignificant or almost non-existent.

APRNet is a stakeholder-based not-for-profit organization devoted to *bridging the gap between research, policy and enterprise* in agricultural and rural development. APRNet's strategy is to foster knowledge-sharing and evidence-based communication, dialogue and networking between producers and users of agricultural research. The ultimate goal is to improve the livelihoods of agricultural and rural people, increase food security, reduce poverty and contribute to sustainable agricultural growth and economic prosperity in Nigeria.

APRNet membership cuts across agricultural policy researchers, academics, technocrats, policy officials, development practitioners, farmers' and agribusiness organizations, professional societies, private sector organizations and the media. Members are youths, seniors, males and females. We currently have over 130 members both locally and internationally. Using its critical mass of agricultural experts from various fields, APRNet has been involved in policy dialogues as well as reviews of new and existing agricultural, food and agribusiness policies in Nigeria since its inception. In most occasions these are done through National Multi-stakeholders forums annually organized by the organization with the support of our donors.

Since 2016 APRNet had achieved the following feats with limited resources:

- ✦ Engaged over 7 States in agricultural and food policy dialogues and advocated for positive policy changes in these states regarding food and agriculture and providing platforms for the states to showcase their achievements in agriculture and food sector.
- ✦ Over 1500 farmers, scientists, policy makers, agribusiness leaders and scholars have benefitted from our capacity building programmes nationwide within 2 years.
- ✦ Brought the media to sit and strengthen their integration into the agricultural development process by stimulating their consciousness in reporting food and agricultural issues in Abuja
- ✦ Produced the first journal devoted to Nigerian agricultural policy (Nigerian Agricultural Policy Research Journal which is now at volume 8).
- ✦ Conducted a funded a collaborative research to assess the effectiveness of aid to agriculture sector in Nigeria and Ghana which was won in the very competitive Global Research Competition under the auspices of World Bank/USAID funded Global Development Network (GDN)
- ✦ Reviewed and made critical inputs to policies of the Federal Government in Agriculture using its stakeholders forums with 4 communiqués from these and 7 communiqués from 7 seminars.
- ✦ Provided avenues for over 200 researchers to disseminate their research findings and deepen networking for useful collaborative research in food and agricultural policies in Nigeria while building their research analytical skills.
- ✦ Provided enlightenments and funding opportunities, scholarship opportunities and opportunitie in agribusiness at both physical and online platforms. Our website hits (<http://aprnetworkng.org>) records, on the average, 8,000 hits per month, validating the global visibility of our programmes and activities. The total hits rose to 99,743 by 2020 before decreasing to 33,263 by 2021 when our activities were almost paralyzed due to Covid-19 pandemic, almost zero funding but thank God we have bounced back in 2022 again and the sky is our limit this time around.

APRNet's mandate during this event is to harness the knowledge of experts and receive constructive inputs from agricultural policy stakeholders in Nigerian and Sub-Saharan African agricultural and food systems to showcase best

practices for improving its the agrifood systems resilience as well as advance the contributions of agriculture and agribusiness to national and regional development.

We cannot achieve all that we have planned to do today without God's grace and the efforts of our presenters, donors and collaborators. We are especially grateful to the Delta State Government, its Bureau for Job and Wealth Creation office headed by Prof. Eric C. Eboh for their strong support in hosting this event. In the same vein, our unwavering gratitude remains with USAID and IFPRI, APRNet major and most consistent collaborator without whom there would have been no APRNet. We are equally indebted to The Innovation Lab Centre for Policy Leadership in Agriculture and Food Security (CePiLAF) for their support towards this event. We equally thank the FMARD, the State Ministries of Agriculture senior staff (especially those from Delta State and others), Commissioners of Agriculture present, our special guests from Ondo, Umudike, Abuja, Zaria, Ibadan and other parts of Nigeria; APRNet Executive Council and Members of the Congress, the Media, distinguished lawmakers, agribusiness and farm associations representatives, colleagues from academia/scientific communities/research institutes and other stakeholders from different related fields of the agrifood system. We wish you all a very fruitful deliberations and safe trip back home after the event.

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