

WELCOME ADDRESS BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL

“Bioenergy, Agriculture and Rural Development”

**Side event organized by the Global Bioenergy Partnership (GBEP) in cooperation with
UN Foundation and the Italian Ministry for the Environment Land and Sea**

FAO, Rome, 16 October 2008

Austria Room - 16.15

Distinguished Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I warmly welcome you all to FAO and to this event on “Bioenergy, Agriculture and Rural Development”. Let me thank UN Foundation, the Italian Ministry for the Environment as well as the Global Bioenergy Partnership, which is based here in FAO, for organizing this important event as an opportunity to release a valuable report on bioenergy potential in the eight countries of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA).

Bioenergy development has been an issue of importance on FAO's agenda for decades. The topic is drawing world attention again because of global concerns following high energy prices, environmental degradation, sustainability of current energy systems, the competition of food crops versus energy crops and sharp rises in food prices. A careful consideration of these and other factors and their linkages to bioenergy development must be carried out at local, national and international levels, based on proper information and understanding.

The FAO High-Level Conference on World Food Security held in Rome in June this year as well as this year's report on the State of Food and Agriculture (SOFA), released few

days ago, are contributions in this direction. Equally important are the bioenergy projects and initiatives in numerous countries where food security and environmental considerations are paramount.

The access to adequate and affordable energy is one of the basic requirements for guaranteeing the wellbeing and development of rural populations on a sustainable basis. Nearly two billion people, mostly in rural areas of developing countries, are without electricity and rely on burning fuelwood for their household activities. Bioenergy is the dominant sources of energy for about half of the world's population.

Undoubtedly, bioenergy present both opportunities and risks, and the outcome depends on the specific context of the country and the policies adopted. Therefore, the challenge is to reduce or manage the risks while sharing the opportunities more widely and ensuring that benefits reach the poor.

Among the risks, food security concerns loom large. Expanding production of bioenergy from food crops is one factor among others that have contributed to the recent sharp increases in food prices. Nevertheless, while it involves risks, higher food prices also represent an opportunity for agricultural and rural development. Higher prices can indeed constitute an important element in the effort to re-launch agriculture as they provide incentives to invest and produce. However, higher prices alone will not suffice without elasticity of supply. Investment needs are estimated at 30 billion US dollars per year for the next years to free the world from hunger. In parallel to this, the lowering of trade barriers in developed country markets is crucial to allow developing countries to take advantage of the opportunities that agriculture exports, including bioenergy, may offer.

The challenges for the future development of sustainable bioenergy are clear: preserve the goal of world food security; promote opportunities for agricultural and rural development; ensure benefits reach the poor; manage land, water and biodiversity in a sustainable manner; ensure a positive contribution to reduction of greenhouse gas emissions; and accelerate the transition toward second generation technologies. Policies, strategies and programmes must be based on a better understanding of the socio-economic and environmental implications of bioenergy production but also governed by international strategy and agreements to ensure that bioenergy production result in positive and equitable outcomes.

This report is an excellent example of concrete willingness to work together in partnership to further the global goal of sustainable energy development in Africa and should represent the beginning of a broad based process to meet Africa's energy needs.

Africa faces many challenges when it comes to ensuring access to sustainable and affordable energy services for all, but the continent also offers great opportunities. With its vast land and biomass resources, Africa has the opportunity to develop sustainable and competitive bioenergy for domestic use and export. Africa still depends predominantly on traditional bioenergy for basic energy services, however the challenge is to move away from traditional bioenergy with its limitations and negative impacts on the environment and human health towards modern bioenergy, which provides significant opportunities for sustainable development in Africa.

The eight countries of the UEMOA (Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo) have a rich resource base and unrealized development potential, but lack of modern energy sources which impedes their growth. It is with particular interest that this report emphasises modern biomass as an option for the UEMOA to seek new

solutions to conventional fossil fuels, turning an energy shortfall into a surplus and boosting rural economies.

Recognising the opportunities and also the potential risks of bioenergy development, FAO has embarked upon various initiatives in order to facilitate a global approach to sustainable bioenergy development.

With its interdisciplinary capacity, FAO can provide substantial support to its Member Nations, especially through partnership. FAO is therefore pleased to be a founding Partner of the Global Bioenergy Partnership and also to host its Secretariat thanks to a fruitful cooperation and support by the Italian Ministry for the Environment Land and Sea.

This is a good example of concrete willingness to work together in partnership - across sectors and interest groups - to further the global goal of sustainable energy development.

I congratulate UN Foundation, the Italian Ministry for the Environment, the UEMOA Commission and the Hub for Rural Development in Dakar in undertaking this initiative with the UEMOA countries, and wish you a successful workshop.