
Carl Lewis
Goodwill Ambassador
of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization

The 2011 Future Policy Award Ceremony
New York, 21 September 2011

Thank you, for that wonderful introduction.
Thank you everyone.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very proud to be with you today on the occasion of this important gathering to mark the world's most innovative and inspiring forest policies.

Most of you probably remember me as a record-breaking athlete. Many of you will also know me as a Goodwill Ambassador for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. And some of you may know about my involvement in the campaign for the UN Millennium Development Goals, and in particular MDG No. 1, reduction of hunger and extreme poverty. Innovative forestry policies are critical for the achievement of MDG 7: environmental sustainability.

Turning the rising tide of hunger – FAO's support to the national forest dialogue

2011 has been designated by the United Nations General Assembly as the International Year of Forests. The theme of the year "Forests for People" conveys the key message that forests are essential to over 1.6 billion people who depend on them for their livelihoods.

Deforestation, caused by flooding, soil erosion, biodiversity loss, aridity, human activity like converting forests to other land-uses is directly affecting the livelihoods of millions of people worldwide. Deforestation and land degradation are reversible; it is a very difficult task but can be achieved. It requires political will and adequate law enforcement.

Forest conservation and the sustainable management of forests is a long natural process. Nurturing this process is the key objective of FAO's support to the forestry dialogue, with the aim to develop policies and regulations to protect and to manage forests effectively.

Every single person can contribute to improve the world's forest resources. Countries, organizations, and the general public are encouraged to take action.

In 2008, the threshold of one billion people hungry was reached. What a sad record for mankind! Even if the 2010 FAO report has shown some improvements, the number of hungry today still amounts to 925 million. That is 925 million TOO MANY, and this is shameful.

The Olympic movement and the United Nations share the same basic goal: the promotion of world peace, development, better environment, and understanding – one through sport, the other through diplomacy. In fact, the Olympic Movement, the United Nations, and the FAO are equally committed to the cause of the underprivileged and actively involved in global efforts to bring hope for a decent life to those who are disadvantaged, hungry and suffering.

By its very nature, sport is about participation, it is about inclusion and citizenship. Sport brings individuals and communities together, highlighting commonalities and bridging cultural or technical divides.

I've broken a lot of records in my career – at the Olympic Games and athletic championships around the world. But the record we want to break now will mean so much more.

We want to break the world's record of empty promises and just ignoring the poor. We want food for all people when they need it to survive and live full and healthy lives. Is that asking too much?

Forests also contribute to improving food security and increasing nutritional standards. Fruit trees and other edible forest products (mushrooms, wild berries, game, etc) represent extremely important nutritional complements for vulnerable communities and sometimes constitute their only livelihoods. Forests also offer opportunities for employment creation, eco-tourism and play an increasingly important role in poverty alleviation and food security.

One of the lessons learnt during my Ambassadorship and my collaboration with the United Nations and FAO, is that the welfare and well being of every one of us is linked to that of everyone else. We are all responsible, in some measure, for each other's welfare, and that global solidarity is both necessary and possible. I have learnt that development ultimately depends on respect for basic human rights.

The dream of every athlete, women and men training hard in every discipline, is of course participating in the Olympic Games. You represent your country, you compete with the very best from all around the world and when you see your flag hoisted at the highest level, when you hear your national anthem being played, you know that all the sacrifices were not in vain.

Allow me to ask a question: Should a similar competition not exist between the governments of our world as between our Olympic athletes? A competition in which governments are celebrated and honoured that provide the best policies on the fight against hunger, on sustainable protection of our environment and on solutions to all the pressing global challenges that threaten humankind today and jeopardise the lives of future generations? To overcome these challenges is so much more important than being able to run the fastest or jump the furthest, and an achievement that should be honoured and incentivised with just as many medals!

This competition should exist every year in the international arena. It should be carried out conscientiously and judiciously. This may seem like utopian musings but the fundamentals for this kind of utopia are already in place: The Future Policy Award, the first prize for sustainable and responsible policies that have a proven effect on contributing to a

better world. I am delighted to be here to help make this prize more well-known and to carry some of the spirit and energy of the Olympic Games into the political sphere.

Thank you.

RP 31.8.11
