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Synthesis of the Q&A panel discussion

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Synthesis of the Q&A panel discussion

Dr Denis Blight AO FRSA
Chief Executive, the Crawford Fund



The Crawford Fund's Conference on Agriculture and Mining, which was held in Perth in the context of 'Africa Down Under', concluded with a panel discussion moderated by Max Bankole Jarrett. The panel comprised: Florence Chenoweth, Minister for Agriculture of Liberia; Festus Mogae, former President of Botswana, Chairman of the Coalition for Dialogue on Africa; John Kerin, Chairman of the Crawford Fund and for many years a minister in the Government of Australia in portfolios in agriculture, mining, development assistance and trade; and Ann Harrap, an independent consultant and formerly an

Australian diplomat with a most recent posting as High Commissioner to South Africa, accredited to six other countries in Southern Africa.

The discussion embraced several key topics.

- The best policy and practice mix or recipe which might be deduced from the discussions, on how we can make 'bread from stones'.
- The roles of government, governance and enabling policy, especially in terms of coordination, issue of mining licences, taxation and community consultation.
- The roles of mining companies, recognising their responsibilities to their shareholders but also to the countries and communities in which they mine.
- The shared and opposing interests of miners and agriculturalists, especially where mines are dug on ground that has been traditionally farmed or grazed, and in terms of shared benefits of infrastructure investments.
- The priority of research.

The imperative for action was set by the example of Liberia seeking to recover from the awful consequences of 24 years of conflict as described by Chenoweth during the discussion: to rebuild 'our broken country' which at the end of the conflict had no seeds to plant (zero germplasm), and no animal life because during the years of conflict 'anything that moved became dinner'; electricity and road networks had been destroyed; trained professionals had been brutally killed. It is a country where 40% of children are stunted and 40% of people are malnourished.

A recipe for government policy and practice

No single recipe for government policy or practice is possible but some ingredients emerged from the discussion, which need to be mixed in the right

proportions though those might vary from country to country.

- An enabling policy environment through a whole of government approach, recognising that this is neither straightforward nor easy given the competing needs of political constituencies, communities and economic sectors.
- Consultation, which in Liberia and Botswana, we heard, is inherent at inter-ministerial level in forms of Cabinet processes through draft Cabinet memoranda, and in traditional community decision-making approaches. Mogae and Chenoweth pointed out that ministers in their countries are compelled to consult, and that even hostile discussions eventually resolve into 'some kind of consensus'. The earlier and the better informed those discussions the more likely a sensible outcome. Ministers try 'to help each other', rather than treating defined activities in agriculture and mining in isolation: activities in both sectors may be 'good' but may conflict with the interests of the other sector (for example, where miners 'dig for whatever is below the ground and leave').
- An understanding of the importance of engaging the community, especially where questions of traditional land use arise: the minister for agriculture, the minister for lands and the minister for mineral resources may have to go to the community together. Otherwise, people can 'feel that a lot of the decisions that affect real lives, their land, everything about them, are made in the capital'. The land tenure issue for Africa is 'a can of worms' that most people do not want to touch but a land tenure reform program is essential.
- Recognition that ministers need to be well advised, in legal, financial and technical terms, in negotiations with mining investors who are usually well resourced and backed up in discussions across the table. Experience from past mistakes can teach valuable lessons for governments that wish to sustain and encourage long-term foreign investment.
- Clear legislative prescriptions that define criteria the prospective investor has to meet and how the consent of relevant community has to be obtained.
- Harrap added that 'economic, social and environmental impact assessments right at the very beginning' were important.
- A balance between the demands of governments, communities and mining investors; gentle persuasion and insinuation might be better than unreasonable demands 'especially as we still really need more and more investment'. Certain things however may be 'firm obligations by law ... including making provision for mine closure'.

Governments are transient. Politicians in Botswana may have a five-year term, at least at the level of President; individual members of Parliament can be elected 'as many times as they are lucky'. A mine might last for 60 years; a mining licence 25 years. A mining concession once it is approved and becomes law is renegotiable after the 25 years. No one can guarantee that a country will think the same way 25 or 30 years hence, but in Botswana 'generally there is consensus ... between all parties'. Developing 'the institutions and the practice and the culture of evaluating a situation and building consensus' is therefore paramount.

The private sector

As Kerin pointed out, both agriculture and mining are populated by private sector enterprises that deal with world markets. To the Crawford Fund, a greater involvement of the private sector in its programs and in Australia's official development assistance program makes sense, and this conference has illustrated how the mining sector 'can show the way' in many areas. Mining companies are 'on the ground for much longer than many ... groups delivering aid', giving them time to understand communities, and to devise new ways of assisting in a real-world 'market-commodity environment'. Harrap added that 'often the need is not about money but about sharing stories, sharing ideas' about best practice and experience.

In this regard, Mogae was not 'aware previously of mining companies directly supporting agricultural activity' in the way he had seen here. He knew, however, that 'in some African countries the company itself makes promises to the community [but] in Botswana that is not the case'. There, 'it is the government that makes the promises to the community' and 'the people hold the government accountable'. Chenoweth said that in Liberia they would like to see 'mining companies taking some responsibility for making sure that they do not just leave a hole in the ground; that some activities are carried on to benefit the people rather than displace them completely'. Liberia does 'not have on the ground an agriculture program for any of the mines', but she recognised that to do so is a good thing and her agency 'is pushing it', including for people who are not directly involved in mining activities and who want to continue that way of life.

Best practice examples of strengthening the partnership between mining companies and the rural community were addressed at the conference (and in the field trip that preceded the conference), and further examples of best practice were sought during this panel discussion. Kerin cited an example from India where 'they have been farming for 3000 years'. ICRISAT* had 'sat down with the local people, learnt the processes of their farming systems, how the villages worked together ... how the whole community functioned'. Giving as another example the situation at the Porgera gold mine in Papua New Guinea, he added that a mining company being on the ground had time 'to understand and develop what the communities really wanted that was feasible and sensible'. He added that not all mining companies do that but there are other examples where it has occurred, and that it needs to occur more often.

The priority of research

In response to a question from the floor, both Mogae and Chenoweth stressed the importance of agricultural research. The priority of research and knowledge has followed 'a shift in thinking' and they are now recognised as important by the African Union, across the whole continent including the countries of southern Africa. In Liberia agricultural research is back on the agenda after the devastation of the past. This is about rebuilding human capital, rather than just making a physical place for the research. Research is needed to put food on the table;

* International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics

and to enable agriculture and mining to co-exist productively so families that are involved in mining and also engaged in agriculture can keep together.

Concluding thoughts: bread from stones

Asked for thoughts on the next steps, panel members highlighted the following points:

- a big role for government in ensuring integrated planning at the start of major investments;
- government taking the lead to ensure outcomes are in the interest of people of the region;
- the vital role of international agricultural research: 870 million people will go to bed tonight hungry;
- knowledge-based planning.

In thanking participants, Denis Blight, citing the Gospel according to Saint Matthew and confident that there are equivalent quotations in other good books, asked: ‘Who amongst you, if your children ask for bread, would give them stones?’. He added another quotation, from the Egyptian Ambassador to Australia, who had told him: ‘During the Arab Spring what the people were chanting was “bread, freedom and justice”’. Blight interpreted that, in the context of the discussion just completed, as agriculture and mining in cooperation with the community and with clear, transparent and good governance.

Dr Denis Blight AO FRSA, the Chief Executive of the Crawford Fund, has had a career including positions as an Australian diplomat, public servant and chief executive. His association with international agricultural research began in earnest some 25 years ago. Prior to working for the Crawford Fund, he was Director-General of CAB International, an intergovernmental body in research, training and publishing in the life sciences, and had 15 years with IDP Education Australia, the international development program of Australian universities and colleges, including the position as Chief Executive.
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