

Speech by Jean-Christophe Gouache, ISF President, during the opening ceremony of the AFSTA congress on March 1, 2017

Mr. Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Equipment, Dr. Dogo SECK,
Mr. Chairman of UNIS, Modou THIAM,
Mr. Chairman of AFSTA, Denias Zaranyika,
The AFSTA Board of Directors,
Representatives of international organizations,
Delegates,

The President of ISF usually speaks in the official language of ISF, namely English. But today will be an exception. In honor of the host country of your congress, I decided to speak to you today in French, here in Dakar, a major center of Francophone culture.

My dear friends, it is first a great pleasure and a great honor to be able to speak a few words on behalf of ISF, at a time when you are beginning your work. I would like to thank your President for the invitation.

ISF's vision is that of "a world where the best quality seed is accessible to all, supporting sustainable agriculture and food security."

I know you share this vision and that contributing to food security through the use of quality seed is at the heart of AFSTA's vision.

What is the situation today, here in Africa?

The World Bank has just published its 2017 report entitled "Enabling the Business of Agriculture" (EBA). In this report, all the factors are considered, such as fertilizing, equipment, financing, water, etc., but there is, most notably, a chapter on seed. This document will be presented to you this afternoon in a plenary session.

The regulatory framework and its performance are part of the study. 62 countries were studied, including 23 African countries.

The good news is that 5 African countries are included in the top third. This is important to point out because it will encourage all national associations and AFSTA to continue to work on implementing seed regulations which will allow the seed sector in Africa to grow and develop.

But there is still work to be done because 11 countries, or half, are unfortunately ranked in the bottom third.

Indeed, the report underscores that Sub-Saharan African countries received the lowest scores for seed-related indicators.

There is no need for me to tell you what needs to be done. You know the challenges and are working on them, and you also know that you can count on ISF's support for the long pathway ahead.

However, I would like to emphasize here an aspect that is not technical but political. Indeed, we all hear certain voices saying that seed regulations are an "invention by seed companies" who develop regulations that only serve their own interests.

What is the reality?

Do you know what motivated the creation of the first seed legislation, well before seed companies existed?

Almost a century ago, in the 1920s in France, legislators explained that the goal was to make healthy, genuine seeds available to farmers.

Yes, simply that: allowing farmers to have access to healthy, quality seed.

The EBA report by the World Bank gives an example of counterfeit seeds in Uganda in 2015, which caused Uganda to launch a campaign to reduce counterfeit seeds on the market. The circulation of counterfeit seeds is a scourge that harms farmers and their families, and discredits the seed sector.

Yes, we need to work so that all farmers have access to quality seeds, "healthy and genuine seeds", to use the 1920s expression.

This is why the ISF has just launched a working group specific to "fake seed." I encourage you to participate and follow the work done because I am certain that it will also benefit you all.

Seed regulations are instruments that make it possible to guarantee product quality and reliability. They exist first to protect farmer users and provide them with better performance in their fields.

Do not allow certain NGOs to speak for you with your governments; do not allow them to block the implementation of a regulatory framework that will enable you to fulfill your mission.

We should all recall collectively and at all levels, with your national authorities, in AFSTA as well as internationally, that regulations on seeds serve first to protect the users, that is, farmers. Then, they allow the seed activity to develop, bringing with it positive momentum for everyone, from farmers to consumers, thereby benefiting all society.

Allow me to turn now to the subject of innovation. To face the many challenges confronting African farmers, it is clear that plant breeding has a fundamental role to play.

Take for example the challenge of the fight against MLND, Maize Lethal Necrosis Disease. This disease already affects many countries in Eastern Africa, as presented to us yesterday by Dr. Mwantuni from CIMMYT.

A great deal of effort has been exerted to control the disease and find resistances. Among the projects, there is a research program led by CIMMYT using the CRISPR-Cas9 technology, a genome editing technology that enables targeted mutagenesis, for example.

We hope and desire that this program will be successful and provide an additional solution in the fight against this maize disease that threatens the daily food of millions of Africans.

But even if the research is successful, are we sure that African farmers and populations will be able to benefit from it? This is not yet certain.

Indeed, there is a great deal of uncertainty concerning the regulatory status of products obtained through these new technologies. This uncertainty presents a serious risk concerning the potential

for using them in plant breeding: some would in fact prefer that these technologies involving targeted mutagenesis be classified as GMOs.

The ISF initiated an important project called "Plant Breeding Innovation". The goal is to encourage all public authorities throughout the world to use consistent criteria based on science to make decisions and define the suitable regulatory frameworks. Our Secretary General, Michael Keller, will discuss this tomorrow during a plenary session.

But here I would again ask you not to allow certain voices, which are often not African, to speak for you. At this crucial moment, Africa must be heard; African farmers and seed companies must be heard. The rest of the world needs to hear from you that you need all the various technologies to meet the numerous challenges facing us. You need to recall that access to technologies such as targeted mutagenesis, made possible by CRISPR-Cas9, for example, must continue to be possible without them being classified as GMOs.

ISF is here to coordinate actions at the international level. But ISF cannot do anything and is powerless if all of its members from all the regions of the world do not mobilize and push in the same direction.

Faced with the fundamental issue of the regulation of new plant breeding technologies, we all need Africa's voice. We are also counting on you to help us to enlighten public decision-makers on the real stakes.

My dear friends, I have only given two examples, those of seed regulations and regulations concerning technologies. But I also could have spoken to you about intellectual property or the international treaty on plant genetic resources for food and agriculture.

Concerning all of these subjects, at international conferences or other important gatherings, too often many players, NGOs and others, that are very often not African, claim to speak in the name of Africa. But very often, they are not really speaking for African farmers, they are not speaking for African seed companies, but are simply defending their own mindset by rejecting the use of technology or the dissemination of genetic resources.

African farmers and seed companies must be better heard. You are working hard at this at AFSTA and I congratulate you.

Please know that you will always have ISF's support in your actions. But you should also know that ISF needs all of you to weigh in to a greater degree during international discussions, and we greatly seek your involvement alongside us. I thank you in advance.