ESCAP, Myanmar development partnership seeks to boost agricultural sector and enhance rural livelihoods

Nobel laureate Stiglitz leads expert discussions on restoring country as 'rice bowl of Asia'

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The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the Government of the Union of Myanmar today held a wide-ranging dialogue aimed at boosting the country's agricultural sector and to help it reclaim its status as the rice bowl of Asia. At the invitation of ESCAP, Nobel Prize-winning economist Prof. Joseph Stiglitz and other eminent experts discussed strategies for Myanmar to cut poverty in light of Asia's regional and subregional experiences.

"It is my hope these ideas and analysis will open a new space for policy discussion and a further deepening of our development partnership," UN Under-Secretary-General and ESCAP Executive Secretary Noeleen Heyzer said at the event held in Myanmar's capital, Naypyitaw. "These development objectives can only be achieved through the successful engagement of local experts and people who know what is happening on the ground. This development partnership, requested by the Government of Myanmar, provides a unique platform for eminent international scholars and local researchers to exchange experiences and ideas with government agencies and civil society," Dr. Heyzer added.

This is the second in a series of events launched by Dr. Heyzer during her visit in July to Myanmar, and was organized by ESCAP with the country's Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation and Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development.

In his presentation, "Towards a more productive agrarian economy for Myanmar," Professor Stiglitz noted that Myanmar was well-positioned to learn from other countries in the region that have developed on the back of gains in agriculture. "There are large opportunities for improvement. Myanmar should take a comprehensive approach," he said. He urged the Government of Myanmar to: 1) promote access to appropriate agricultural financing; 2) take measures to boost access to seeds and fertilizers; 3) dramatically boost spending on health and education; and 4) create well-paid jobs in construction of rural infrastructure in order to stimulate development and raise incomes and spending.

Professor Stiglitz also noted that well-functioning institutions were critical to success, and that Myanmar could learn from the mistakes made by other resource-rich countries. "Revenues from oil and gas can open up a new era, if used well. If not, then valuable opportunities will be squandered," he said. "Economics and politics can not be separated," Professor Stiglitz added. "For Myanmar to take a role on the world stage — and to achieve true stability and security — there must be widespread participation and inclusive processes. This is the only way forward for Myanmar."

Maj. Gen. U Htay Oo, Minister of Agriculture and Irrigation of Myanmar, noted that climate change has had significant effects on the country's agriculture and livelihood, particularly in the dry zone. "To mitigate such pressure we are implementing short-term and longer term measures, such as promoting access to irrigation water to increase productivity, and developing resource-based as well as knowledge-based sustainable agriculture and livelihoods built on existing infrastructures," he said. "We are adopting a holistic approach informed by the human development perspective to address the needs of the most vulnerable," he added. "We cannot afford to be complacent — thus the tasks for agriculture and rural development must be implemented through mass movement."

The Minister also welcomed and supported the continued close cooperation and collaboration of ESCAP in the development partnership series. “I look forward to the joint activities to come in 2010, in particular the regional development programme for sustainable agriculture towards inclusive rural economy development,” he said.

Col. Thurin Zaw, Deputy Minister of National Planning and Economic Development, delivered a presentation on Myanmar’s “National development plans and the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).”

The meeting was organized into two segments: The morning roundtable was devoted to expert discussions and included presentations on “Recent socio-economic development,” by Daw Khin Ma Ma Swe of the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, and on “Approaches for agriculture and rural development,” by Daw Dolly Kyaw of the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation.

There were also presentations on “Establishing the virtuous cycle of food security, sustainable agriculture and rural economy development,” by U Tin Htut Oo and U Tin Maung Shwe of the Academy of Agriculture, Forestry, Livestock and Fisheries Sciences, and on “Enhancing Myanmar’s rural economy,” by Ikuko Okamoto of the Institute of Developing Economies-JETRO.

The afternoon high-level development forum covered, “Economic policies for growth and poverty reduction: lessons from the region and beyond.”