Farming in the 21st Century: A Woman’s Perspective from South Africa

Brylyne Chitsunge, Farmer, Entrepreneur, and Facilitator of the Nigeria-South Africa Group on Agriculture

Good evening, Chancellor Katehi. Good evening, UC Davis. Perhaps I should say good evening, California. Thank you, Chancellor Katehi for your warm welcome. I'm absolutely thrilled to be here today and to see so many faces here today. It's such a great honor and privilege from one continent to the other, having traveled 35 hours to get here. Thank you.

As I stand here before you, it brings me great pleasure to be able to say that we are no longer talking the talk. We are now truly walking the walk. I say this because for so long I've
advocated for a network of knowledge exchange between large organizations and educational institutions.

Now I have, over the years, spoken on various noble platforms about climate change, supporting women and families, food security and community farming. Some of these platforms I’ve even shared with various world leaders, icons and decision makers, all with the common goal of feeding our one world; however, none of these give me as much pleasure as being able to share my message with you here at UC Davis, an institution where education is the priority. Without the ability to educate our generation and educate our youth, we as advocates would have no message to deliver.

My journey into the world of agriculture began several years ago when I moved back to my native country of Africa. After having spent 16 years in the United Kingdom where I had set up and run a successful recruitment company, upon returning to Africa after so long, I was surprised at how often food security and agriculture come up in conversations. Whether this took place with a local shopkeeper or a prominent business person in the area, they all seemed to be talking about the same thing: food.

Not long after I arrived, I was driven into the playing field by anger at the failure of contemporaries to see agriculture as a business and to recognize and understand the importance of agriculture and the need for food security.

“As a business woman, I saw this as an opportunity to start a business within a sector filled with so many opportunities and with a lot of potential. I can tell you now that I have not once looked back since I started this journey.

We are living in an agricultural industry era and the youth of today are our 21st-century farmers. Farming in the 21st century is more exciting and enthusiastic as it not only incorporates up-to-date knowledge of farming techniques, but also keeps up with the latest technology and methods of managing a successful and effective restructured business. We should prosper for the benefit of all, feeding the one world that we have.

Educating the youth of today on the impact that even an emerging farmer can have on a global scale is key to delivering the message that the world needs to be fed. The younger generation needs to be enlightened to the fact that farming is fun and is a profitable business. I’m speaking from experience.

We live in a world where technology is no longer a luxury, but a necessity. For many young people, the word farming conjures up images of severe manual labor in the middle of nowhere with a little straw hat, with a spade and possibly a donkey for transport.

My own daughter who is here today with me, was once guilty of this misconception but has since come to understand that methods of practice in farming have not remained static while the rest of the world continues to evolve.

In sub-Saharan African countries, more than 60% of the population is under 25 years old.
Although young people offer a vast potential resource to the agriculture sector, many of them are migrating to cities in search of opportunities, leaving behind an increasingly aging rural population. It is vital and ultimately beneficial for everyone to reverse this trend. More new-age farmers are needed to explore and produce newer farming methods and exciting kinds of food in a very smart way. Where better to get innovative technology and practices than the generation that understands it to be a necessity?

Farmers have a huge challenge. We have to feed billions of people, and to achieve this goal, we must encourage the youth by educating them, networking, influencing and allowing them to access, build, and add to their strengths.

Growth in the agriculture sector remains fundamental for poverty alleviation, economic growth, and environmental sustainability. The growth includes the ability to grow food and consume it locally.

“I’m a child of Africa, a continent which I believe will prove to be of great importance and significance in feeding the world in our tomorrow.”

The continent has, however, faced the triple challenges of poverty, unemployment, inequality, and that’s making its journey towards a better tomorrow a very difficult one. There are however opportunities in existence for Africa to loose itself out of this triple dilemma, and one of these is through effective management of these abandoned natural resources that are still very much untapped.

This is a defining time in Africa’s development trajectory when all the economic indicators are showing signs of the rising continent. Rural poverty in sub-Saharan Africa calls for innovative solutions that will enable poor rural people to harness new opportunities to regenerate economic growth. It is necessary to create policies that develop disadvantaged rural areas as well as focus on the gender and youth dimensions of small holder agriculture enterprises.

There is a compelling need to explore the ways in which investment in Africa’s agricultural sector could spark wide economic development across the whole continent. It is believed that the potential cannot be understated, that by bringing state and non-state actors as well as other stakeholders, it is possible to leverage the recognized resource endowment that Africa possesses.

I am keen to see greater movement towards community-managed farms. Particularly in the rural areas, focusing on community funding would directly strengthen community-level action. Communities play a large role in agriculture by supporting each other. Via this channel, they produce high-quality, locally grown organic products.

Committing to agriculture provides a comprehensive approach to the following: reducing the carbon footprint; cutting costs of buying highly prized imported foods; enabling locals to buy fresh, organic produce directly from the farmers; cutting out that man that I described as needing his legs chopped off – the middleman. It stimulates local economic activities through social enterprises. It protects local environmental resources and the land, the priceless, honorable land that we have. Committing to farming can have a positive impact on a country’s economy which can include pulling its citizen out of poverty.
With pressure on agricultural production set to rise by 70% by 2050 to feed the world’s growing population, community farmers and emerging farmers in particular would need to start farming now if we have any hope of meeting the substantial demand for food production that we’ll be facing over the next 40 years.

According to a report, profound changes in agriculture markets are giving rise to new and promising opportunities for smallholder farmers in developing countries. As a result, farmers will have more incentives to boost their productivity. Helping them to get access to these markets and increasing their negotiating power are key to achieving this goal.

We also need to work towards providing farmers with support to make their farming systems more productive, more sustainable, and more resilient. Using resources efficiently and adapting to the effects of climatic and other unpredictable variables will be hallmarks of smart farming in the coming decades.

Substantial and sustained investments focused on young farmers are essential to motivate them to remain on the farm and to nurture their energies and ambitions in their endeavors.

It is time to look at poor smallholder farmers in a completely new way, not as charity cases, but as people whose innovation, dynamism and hard work will bring prosperity to their communities and greater food security to the world in the decades to come.

We are all aware that climate change will have a massive impact on food availability, accessibility and food system stability across the whole world. We are talking about an increased risk of crop failure, loss of livestock, and impact on food markets and food security on a local and household level.

With Africa relying on rain-fed agriculture, farmers are highly vulnerable to changes in climate variability, seasonal shifts, precipitation patterns, hereby affecting the agriculture process. Small-scale and homestead farmers in dry lands are most vulnerable to climate change. The interesting thing is they are the ones who are not actually creating the damage to the climate, but they are the ones who are the most vulnerable.

So not only do we need to educate people on the benefits of farming, we also need to educate them on any available alternatives for them to be able to handle the unexpected that they must weather in agriculture.

Although farming is historically and presently at the moment a male dominated industry, it is known that women everywhere play a key role in producing food and ensuring food security for their families. This is especially true within the developing world where women are literally the backbone of the rural economy; however, they only receive a small fraction of land, created inputs, for example your fertilizers and seeds. They get the very minimum of that agriculture training in comparison to their male counterparts, giving the impression that a woman’s productivity in farming is not as great as a man’s. According to reports, women
comprise of approximately 43% of the agricultural labor force in developing countries and account for about two-thirds of the world’s 600 million poor livestock keepers.

Of those women in the least developed countries who report being economically active, 79% report agriculture is their primary source of livelihood. These women would typically work longer hours than men, taking into consideration paid productive and unpaid domestic responsibilities. Women tend to be employed for labor-intensive tasks and generally earn lower wages than men. For example, in the casual agriculture labor market in Africa, women’s scheduled wages whether in cash or in kind are usually half of men’s wages.

To all the women here today, I say to you; just imagine being paid $50.00 for doing a job and producing results which are mostly if not identical to or higher than the man sitting next to you who then gets $100.00 for the same job that you get $50.00 for.

This all stems back to a generation when a woman’s place was to maintain the household whilst the man had the duty to feed the household. Although these views have somehow, somewhat changed over the years, in Africa it has been considerably slower to bring those changes.

I must admit that even my own parents still follow this way of living. My father’s role is, and has always been, to provide for the family. In his eyes, my mother has no business making a living. He considers any money that my mom makes for herself in her own right to be pocket money from a hobby that she does.

Likewise, my mother is perfectly happy to embrace this role as the mother who looks after the household while my father is incapable of this. A recent conversation with my mother enlightened me to the fact that he has serious doubts about his ability to find the necessary ingredients to make a cup of tea, including the milk that’s sitting in the fridge.

As a result, you can imagine the particular challenges that rural African women face in their fight against poverty. They have all the necessary tools, the ability, the endurance, the intelligence, yet their progress is hindered by outdated cultural beliefs and obstacles to having equal access to productive resources and services or employment opportunities as men.

Empowering and investing in rural women has been shown to significantly increase productivity, reduce hunger and malnutrition, and improve rural livelihoods. A child lacking the necessary nutrients to grow—as you all know and research has shown, an empty stomach produces nothing in the classroom and for the students that are here, I’m sure you feel it; that if you don’t have a meal before you go to the classroom, your sugar levels are very low, you’ve not been well fed and the professors can vouch you produce zero in class. So a child needs to be fed. That’s the brain fuel and the task of the food, but not just food, it’s got to be a well-balanced died with all the nutritional values added to it.

Today in cultures where women are seen as the inferior sex, there are barriers to stop women from owning and inheriting land. Because of cultural attitudes, discrimination and lack of recognition for their role in food production, women enjoy limited to no benefits from extension and training in new crop varieties and technologies.

Using myself as an example, I own just over 1,000 acres worth of land where I breed and produce, as the chancellor already said, Kalahari Red goats, which is a special breed of goats which is disease resistant and also kid twice a year. It is very well known for its attributes as
being very maternal as well, and I’m actually a registered breeder with the Breeding Association in South Africa.

I also own Nguni cattle, which is a local cow that is also a hardy type, also again known for its attributes that you don’t have to be vaccinating it and dipping it and doing all sorts of things that do with your Brahmins and all these other type of cattle, and it’s also known for its skin which is also of value, which has more value than the meat itself. Again, also a registered animal which has got repeated patents on it.

I also have indigenous pigs which are beautiful, and they all roam. They all walk. I have developed a farm to say I don’t institutionalize any animal on the farm. Everything is free-range. You are free to do what you want, so your pigs, your goats, your chickens—under just one condition: I do not carry passengers on my farm. If you’re a goat, you need to produce. If you’re a pig, you’ve got to produce. I cannot afford to give rent-free accommodation. Give you my water? No, to the market, that’s where you go.

I’m very proud of my achievements to date, but it has been an uphill struggle in establishing myself as a farmer. I’ve had to break down barriers and fight off stereotypical views to match as a serious contender in the farming business.

The journey hasn’t always been an easy one, but as is typical to a woman, I persevered and prevailed.

My goal now is to see greater female representation within the industry at my level and beyond. I’ve summed it up to say: what is the way forward? How do we ensure that increasing public and private investments in Africa’s agriculture sector provide greater results for smallholder farmers than in the past, engender national policies that would encourage large numbers of small holder farmers to farm and to do so in ways that are more productive, more sustainable, and more resilient to climate and other unpredictable variables?

A commitment to improving the skills of small holder farmers and highlighting the opportunities created as a product of Africa’s young and better educated rural population, examine what is required for this new generation of women and men to lead the future growth of African agriculture.

It is known that women everywhere play key roles in providing and producing food and assuring the food security of their families. As a result, it is important to examine the particular challenges that rural African women face in their fight against poverty. From the perspective of poverty reduction, it is also important to highlight the importance of the non-farm rural economy.

My message to you all today is about education and awareness. We’ve done a lot of research, a lot of work has gone into all this, but now we can only do so much work, so much research. How do we translate all the wonderful work that you’re doing to where it’s most needed? Educating the younger generation to become more active in the world of agriculture, educating the less fortunate in the rural communities to give them the tools necessary to provide for themselves and feed themselves and to be able to sell surplus and to recognize it as a business.
Educating the world about climate change and the effects it will have on our ability to feed ourselves, empowering women in agriculture. I’m sorry to all the men that I’m having to say to the women, but you know that a woman is the driver. If you give more power to the women, everything gets sorted, and I’m only here today because you’ve got a woman who is in the driving seat.

In a nutshell, just to give you a little background about myself, I’m a farmer.

I don’t normally like to do this. That’s not what we do on the farm. On the farm, we farm. We don’t talk. We don’t sit. We get up very early in the morning and we sleep very light. I said earlier that if anyone can convince me or convince my goats that it’s Sunday today, you don’t eat, it’s a day off, then great! We can all have days off on Sundays, but nobody has yet to do that. Perhaps with the research that you are doing, attenuate the gene and try and see if you can manipulate it and get a goat to understand that Sunday is a day off. It would be great to have that information!

It has been a very long, painful journey and lonely. I’ve had interruptions. With some of you I’ve been to dinner, I’ve gone to student farms: very impressive stuff. I’m really, really impressed by all the hard work that you’re doing, but we’ve got this disconnect between the urban, the state actors, the politicians, research institutions and the real place where knowledge is needed.

I had an interesting conversation with a lady when we were talking about cell phones and I said to her, “There are no cells phones in the rural areas.” She said, “There’s no cell phones?” I said, “Yeah, there are no cell phones. That’s a luxury and moreover, there is no network.”
So how, with all the wonderful work you’re doing, do we translate it to my grandmother who is in the village with no TV, no radio, no newspaper, and poor roads?

How do we now communicate all this information to say, “Grandma, the first drop of rain does not mean put your seeds down. Things have changed.” How do we do it?

I’ve been looking for answers and only today when I went to the university food garden, I learned something which really struck my heart and brought tears to my eyes, that here at UC Davis, my dream has finally come true where you are actually bringing kindergarteners, five-year-olds, to teach them and let them experience all this.

I’ve asked the question when I was in Vietnam, and I’ll ask the same question to you also today: how many of us in this room can put their hands up and say 2050, which is 40 years from now, will be then still very active. How many of us are going to be there? How old will you be? Will you still be able to do the things that you’re doing now? Maybe not. We are only in this situation today because the past has not prepared us, so why are we not preparing the five year olds? In 2050, they’ll be our age group. They are the future generation. Let them grow up knowing that they need to grow more food, they need to build more hospitals, they need to improve their road systems and all sorts of things because the population is growing, so why not prepare them? Why do we not advocate for them?

Only to say, here at UC, I would like to just take my hat off to you and say congratulations, keep up the good work, and I think let us spread it. Exchanging knowledge at platforms like this, I think is actually a wonderful thing. Like I said, I traveled 35 hours to get here and discovered that quite a lot of you have not actually been to Africa, including the chancellor herself. She said to me, “I haven’t been to Africa,” and I thought, wow. It’s there. The continent is there. It’s beautiful. It’s untapped, but there is a lot of pain that you’ll experience when you get there.

You’ve got subsidies here. Apparently, I discovered also one thing that there are not that many subsidies in California, but a lot places, there are a lot of subsidies and so forth, but where I’m coming from, there are no subsidies. There are no institutions. Institutions exist on papers, but in reality, you’ve got to look after yourself.

I’m only successful today because I looked up to people who had the knowledge and the skills, the white farmers. They have been farming for millions and millions of years and we
Brylyne Chitsunge

Mary Delany, Interim Dean of the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences:
Thank you so much. That was very inspiring and heartwarming and I think much food for thought.

I have one sort of inconsequential question. I wondering; have you named your farm?

Brylyne Chitsunge: I did not name it. I inherited a name that was there and I fell in love with it. You won’t believe what it’s called. It’s called El Paso, and I fell in love with the name, so it’s truly special and I think it connects me with this continent.

Delany: Very good. I think another question that probably everybody in the audience might want to ask you, males and females both, young people, middle aged, and people who have seen a lot of life: how did you do it? How did you really do it? How did you get from a situation where your family sounds somewhat traditional to a woman of substance from Africa?

Chitsunge: Well, like I said earlier on, I was in England for 16 years and I went to school in England and various universities also in Europe. I ran a very successful business in England, a recruitment company, and I started off running a business. I knew how to make money and I said to myself, “If I can be successful in England, surely I can make a business and I can survive anywhere in the world.” So then I decided to go back to Africa. When I got there,
Africa was very beautiful, but very painful. Then I realized there was an opportunity to actually make money, and the only way to make it was in the food sector.

I don’t know if you know the old saying, “You follow where the cash is,” so I followed it. I saw it and I thought, “Well, there is cash. I’m going to go for it.” So I went for it.

**Delany:** Did you return to the community where your family lived or did you settle somewhere else?

**Chitsunge:** Interestingly enough, the place where I ended up buying a farm is where my great-grandmother was born Cullinan, a place where the world-famous diamond came from that’s sitting on the Queen of England’s crown. That’s just ten kilometers from the Cullinan diamond mine, and that’s where my great-grandmother originally came from, so perhaps it’s an ancestral draw. So I’ve ended up there and working very closely with the communities that are there.