

WORLD FOOD SUMMIT: FIVE YEARS LATER

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More Research and Better Policies Are Essential for Achieving the World Food Summit Goal

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POVERTY AND HUNGER ARE NOW
THE WORLD'S MOST SERIOUS
PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEMS.

SINCE THE GREAT MAJORITY OF THE
WORLD'S POOR AND MALNOURISHED
PEOPLE DEPEND DIRECTLY OR
INDIRECTLY ON AGRICULTURE FOR
THEIR LIVELIHOODS,



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sustainable options for ending hunger and poverty

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one might say that agriculture is letting them down. It would be more accurate, however, to say that governments around the world are letting agriculture down.

In their current circumstances, the rural poor simply do not have access to enough food or income to keep them healthy and productive. If we are to achieve the goal set by the World Food Summit, it is essential that small farmers in developing countries become more productive. But it is no use going about our business as usual while telling poor farmers they must produce more. These farmers are doing as well as they can without better technologies and better policies. And both developing and developed countries must play their part in bringing about these improvements.

Poverty is concentrated in rural areas, so the heart of any strategy to achieve food security must involve broad-based efforts to develop agriculture, fisheries, and forests. Because agriculture is at the center of rural life, the livelihoods of rural poor people are never far removed from agriculture, even when they are neither farmers nor farm workers. When agriculture is insufficiently productive, the results are high unit costs for food, poverty, food insecurity, poor nutrition, and excessive migration from the farms to the cities. When farmers and farm workers earn little or no money, they cannot pay for the goods and services produced by rural nonfarmers. This stagnation contributes in turn to urban unemployment and underemployment.

Yet agriculture, when it is highly productive, has the potential to lift up whole economies. IFPRI research shows that for every new dollar of income earned by farmers in poor developing countries, income in the economy as a whole rises by up to US\$2.60. As farmers begin to earn more money, they demand more goods and services, thereby generating jobs, income, and growth throughout the economy.

The Need for Publicly Funded Agricultural Research

Many farmers in developing countries are struggling to produce in poor environmental conditions with few tools for coping with drought, pests, and disease. Agricultural research is needed to help these farmers reduce their risk, improve their productivity, and protect their natural resources. To give poor farmers access to the full range of approaches to tackling their problems, researchers should combine indigenous knowledge with all appropriate scientific tools and methods—not only conventional research methods, but also agroecology and agricultural biotechnology, including genetic engineering.

Although agricultural research offers large potential benefits to farmers, its indirect effects on poverty and food insecurity may be even greater. When millions of farmers in Asia adopted high-yielding cereal varieties in the 1970s, for instance, output increased dramatically and unit costs fell by 30–40 percent. This cost savings in turn led to lower food prices and helped boost the number of jobs available off the farms, to the great benefit of poor people in both rural and urban areas. And today, for example, researchers' efforts to breed staple crops rich in micronutrients offer promising solutions to widespread micronutrient malnutrition in developing countries.

Yet the kind of agricultural research that will benefit small farmers in developing countries is severely underfunded. The private sector does not undertake such research because

the expected financial gains do not cover the costs. The gains to society and to poor people, however, are high. Social rates of return to most past investments in agricultural research have exceeded 20 percent a year. For developing-country governments this is a most worthwhile investment. Yet low-income developing countries invest less than 0.5 percent of the value of farm production in agricultural research, compared with 2–5 percent in higher-income countries.

Good Policies Are Also Needed

Besides the technological tools for producing more agricultural goods, farmers also require sound and supportive public policies. We know a great deal about what types of policies can help lead to food security. Government actions must help ensure that agricultural and rural development is broad based and that small farmers and other poor people have access to resources. At the same time governments must invest in education, health, clean water, nutrition, and rural infrastructure. They must adopt practices of good governance such as democratic decisionmaking, the rule of law, transparency, sound public administration, and respect for human rights. Their trade, macroeconomic, and sectoral policies must not discriminate against agriculture and must favor poverty reduction and food security. Policies must also provide incentives for sustainable natural resource management, such as secure property rights for small farmers and fishers. Above all, poor people must participate in making decisions and implementing programs that affect them.

Developed-country policies also make a difference. We know, for instance, that developed countries must replace their trade-distorting policies with policies promoting free and fair trade for developing countries.

Yet we live in a dynamic world, and policymakers require new information about what policies work and what policies don't. Because of rapid globalization, advances in science and technology, and driving forces like urbanization, most past policy knowledge is rapidly becoming outdated. As a result policy research is needed, from the household level to the national level, on how to help poor people and poor countries cope with, and even thrive amid, these changes.

A Win-Win Proposition

At present, both developing and developed countries are forgoing the substantial returns that could come from greater investments in agriculture. On average, developing countries devote just 7.5 percent of government expenditures to agriculture. In Sub-Saharan Africa, where agriculture contributes 30–80 percent of gross domestic output, the figure is even lower.

Developed countries can also benefit from greater aid to developing-country agriculture. According to IFPRI research, every dollar invested in agricultural research for developing countries increases their imports of goods and services by more than US\$4, with US\$1 going to agricultural imports. Developed-country farmers even make use of crop varieties bred for use in developing countries. For example, every dollar the United States has invested in international wheat research has led to US\$190 in benefits for U.S. consumers and farmers.

Looking Ahead

The World Food Summit goal dovetails with IFPRI's 2020 Vision for Food, Agriculture, and the Environment, which is a vision of a world free of hunger and malnutrition by 2020. The 2020 Vision Initiative attempts to identify the actions needed through consultations, policy analysis, and an understanding of the major future driving forces in the world. Specific policy measures must naturally be tailored to each country, but this initiative has shown that governments in all countries must focus on generating public goods such as education, health care, agricultural research, infrastructure, and appropriate institutions and on creating an environment that will enable other actors to be effective in overcoming hunger, poverty, and malnutrition. Where national governments have made such commitments, their progress has been substantial.

In support of these national efforts, continued creation of international public goods for food and agriculture is essential to achieve the World Food Summit goal. Along these lines, the Future Harvest centers supported by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), in collaboration with national agricultural research systems and other partners, have worked to increase food availability, reduce food insecurity, improve child nutrition, and protect the environment and biodiversity over the past 30 years. Building on past successes, the Future Harvest centers will continue to work with other international and national agricultural research institutions to bring about a world free of hunger and malnutrition, where natural resources are sustainably managed. With your support and collaboration, together we can achieve the World Food Summit goal and the 2020 Vision.

Future HarvestSM Centers sponsored by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR)

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CIFOR - Center for International Forestry Research - www.cifor.cgiar.org

CIMMYT - Centro Internacional de Mejoramiento de Maiz y Trigo - www.cimmyt.org

CIP - Centro Internacional de la Papa - www.cipotato.org

ICARDA - International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas - www.icarda.cgiar.org

ICLARM - International Center for Living Aquatic Resources Management - www.iclarm.org

ICRAF - International Centre for Research in Agroforestry - www.icraf.cgiar.org

ICRISAT - International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics - www.icrisat.org

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ILRI - International Livestock Research Institute - www.cgiar.org/ilri

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IRRI - International Rice Research Institute - www.irri.org

ISNAR - International Service for National Agricultural Research - www.isnar.cgiar.org

IWMI - International Water Management Institute - www.cgiar.org/iwmi

WARDA - West Africa Rice Development Association - www.warda.cgiar.org

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