

Feeding the world in the 21st century: new challenges abound

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Agriculture, one of humankind's oldest activities, is today as dynamic as it was when the first farmers began experimenting with wild grains. But the essential task of agriculture -- feeding all of humanity -- is more complicated, and beset by more challenges, than ever before.

Public attention is increasingly focusing on the economic, social and political causes and consequences of rising food prices, but also on issues like food safety and border-crossing pests and diseases. There is a new awakening to the role that agriculture plays in the global economy, in maintaining the health of our communities, and in strengthening the security of nations.

Indeed, agriculture will play a determining role in tackling the difficult challenges that face humanity at the beginning of this 21st century. Whether these are climate change, finding new sources of energy, depletion of natural resources, or large-scale human migration, agriculture will be both a cause of problems and a part of their solution.

Challenge number 1: feeding more people

By 2050 the world will have to feed a population of nine billion inhabitants, 50 percent more people than today. That will require a second green revolution capable of doubling food production in the first half of this century.

Challenge number 2: coping with climate change

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has clearly stated that global warming and extreme weather events will disproportionately affect the poorest regions of the world. The cyclone that recently hit Bangladesh and caused thousands of victims is an unfortunate and dramatic example of this.

In sub-Saharan Africa, climate change could cause yields from rainfed agriculture to fall by 50 percent by 2020. Mitigating these impacts will depend on the development of more resistant crop varieties and greater investment in irrigation, food storage facilities, and the transportation and communications infrastructure needed to efficiently distribute food. At the same time, building a more equitable international trade regime will be fundamental in helping Africa meet these challenges.

Challenge number 3: responsibly managing the new bio-fuel sector

We need to be fully aware of the potential risks to food security of converting food crops into fuel. But we also need to look at the new income opportunities that bioenergy offers farmers. Strategic policies and decisions in this area need to be based on careful analysis of the agricultural situation in the countries concerned and the status of their land and water resources.

In June FAO will convene a high-level conference on food security and the challenges of climate change and bioenergy that should pave the way for an international bioenergy charter that simultaneously considers the requirements of food security, agricultural

sustainability and environmental protection -- and also the need to ensure that benefits, from this new and rapidly growing market, reach the poor.

Challenge number 4: cross-border pests and diseases

In recent years FAO, in partnership with the OIE and WHO, has played a lead role in combating avian influenza, one of the most destructive and terrifying animal diseases to have emerged in decades. Since 2003, bird flu has killed hundreds of millions of domestic fowl in 60 countries. But with FAO's assistance, more than 130 countries have been able to adopt appropriate protection measures. The Organization has raised more than US\$150 million to combat the disease which, so far, has failed to mutate into a strain capable of infecting humans. But there is no room for complacency -- the threat remains very real and requires close vigilance.

Challenge number 5: re-tooling FAO

The challenges described above require that FAO more proactive, and more efficient than ever.

Last week in Rome, 192 countries that make up FAO's governing conference, wrapped up talks on the future of agriculture, and on the future of the UN organization whose job it is to help the countries of the world harness agriculture to feed and employ their people -- that is, FAO itself.

During their deliberations, our member countries approved a budget increase that will, after years of cuts, allow FAO to both continue this work and undertake a series of sweeping institutional reforms that will allow us to better respond to the challenge of today's new world environment.

Together with its members, FAO will soon begin reviewing proposals for how to improve and reform FAO that have resulted from a recently-conducted independent external evaluation of the organization. A plan of action will address issues such as FAO's vision and programme priorities, reform in governance, culture change, administrative and management systems, restructuring and efficiency measures in order to build an organization better able to face the new challenges of the 21st century.

The first major conclusion of the evaluation is that "If FAO were to disappear tomorrow, it would need to be re-invented". The evaluators acknowledged the need for a global organization able to provide a high-level and politically impartial platform for dealing with pressing issues and taking the decisions needed to effect collective action at the international level.

We here at FAO are heartened by this conclusion. It is indeed our strong sense that no other organization can match the scope of FAO's experience and mandate in relation to agriculture, food, fisheries, forestry and the management of the natural resources of land and water. And so as we look out over a new landscape of still-emerging challenges and threats to world food security, we are filled with a renewed sense of purpose, and our commitment to tackling the problem of world hunger at its source remains firmer than ever.