

Speech to High Level Conference, FAO, 3 June 2008

Emile Frison, Chair of the Alliance of Centres supported by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research and Director General of Bioversity International.

Mr Chairman, Excellencies, distinguished delegates: the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) and the centres supported by it are very pleased to be co-organizing this conference with FAO and the other Rome-based agencies.

It was mentioned by Mr Diouf that many factors that have come together to contribute to the global food price crisis. I want to focus on one that has perhaps not received as much attention as it might have.

Investment in agricultural research and development for developing countries has been declining steadily for the past 20 years.

And yet, investment in agricultural research and development is of fundamental importance. The World Bank's own report Agriculture for Development, notes that such investment has "an average internal rate of return of 43 percent".

Such research has been at the heart of the work of the CGIAR. For every \$1 invested in Alliance research, \$9 worth of additional food is produced in developing countries, where it is needed most. And the investment continues to pay off, year after year.

The CGIAR Centres are fully prepared to contribute to the resolution of the crisis, not only in the short term but especially with medium and long-term actions that will minimise the risks of a reoccurrence.

There are no simple solutions and no magic bullets. We must boost research to increase productivity for globally important staples, but we cannot concentrate only on these. Locally important crops and livestock are often the key source of sustenance for poor, rural people and production in such diversity-based systems, which are most common in marginal areas, must be increased to improve food security and nutrition for the poorest farmers.

Success will require collective action among all key actors and players. We recognize that we cannot do this work alone. The CGIAR Centres will work in concert with other international institutions, such as FAO, IFAD, the World Food Programme and the World Bank, and with regional, national and local partners.

The Alliance of CGIAR Centres has prepared an action plan that will be made available to you. In it, we set out ways in which, with our partners, we can act in the short, medium and long-term.

The list is lengthy; let me select some highlights.

In the short term, although food and seed aid are needed to address urgent humanitarian needs, they must be provided in ways that do not distort local markets or diminish the incentives for developing country farmers to produce more food. How can we help them do so?

By working with partners to step up the availability of higher yielding and better adapted crop varieties and livestock breeds. Alliance research has shown how such varieties, along with specific, low tech methods for delivering small amounts of fertilizers and harvesting rainfall, can increase yields. This is just one of the immediate actions that can boost local food supplies; others are detailed in the action plan.

The research is done. We know how to proceed. But in the short-term we need a greater push to put in place appropriate policies and to work with extension agents, farmers' groups, NGOs, local and national partners and others to enable this research to contribute to alleviating the immediate problems.

In the medium and long term, agricultural production will need to respond to an increasing demand for food, and yet harvests will have to come from a shrinking land area, and will have to use less fuel, fertilizer and water. Farmers will need stress-tolerant varieties and production systems that deliver high and stable yields, against the background of a complex global market environment and in the face of more marked extremes of climate, falling and polluted water tables and decreasing biodiversity.

Over this timescale, the Centres know what needs to be done, but more public research will be needed before the results reach farmers. As an example, let me point to CGIAR research that is identifying the best sources of adaptations that will allow crops to withstand heat stress, which climate scientists tell us is likely to be one of the primary challenges of changing climates. Work is still needed, however, to clearly identify the sources of adaptations and to integrate them into varieties and livestock breeds that will be productive under the novel weather patterns that are coming.

There are many other areas in which the CGIAR and its partners can contribute: policies, integrated agriculture, soil and water management, better deployment of biodiversity and so on. To do so, however, there will have to be a drastic increase in research and development for agriculture, which remains the most potent force for lifting people out of poverty.

I therefore would like to call for a significant resurgence of investment in agricultural research and development at local, national and international levels. Without it, we believe that while the world may deal with this food price crisis, the fundamental problems will remain to haunt us in the future.

I thank you for your attention.