



CGIAR Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research

Statement on Rising World Food Prices and the Way Ahead for Africa,

May 2008

For several decades, food was cheap. Food was so affordable for most people that they took low prices for granted, and most policymakers turned to other issues. But the era of inexpensive food has come to a swift end. The reasons are varied, but the fundamental cause rests with a huge rise in demand for food crops and a supply that hasn't been able to keep pace. Political complacency on global agricultural issues, once the rule, now is over, and it is easy to understand why. The price of staple foods, such as wheat and rice, has skyrocketed in the last year, and food riots have spread from one developing world country to the next.

Policymakers know they must act in a comprehensive way to ensure long-term food availability and security as well as short-term relief. The crisis calls for urgent yet prudent action. One conclusion is clear, especially in sub-Saharan Africa: the world community must invest for the long term in problem-solving agricultural research. Evidence shows this research will produce higher-yielding and disease-resistant crops – toward a common goal of greater farm productivity while conserving our natural resources. The proof is all around us in farmers' fields, in Africa and beyond.

Improved crop varieties developed by CGIAR scientists have begun to take root across the continent. Three examples, among many, are:

- Improved maize varieties and hybrids accounted for 80 percent of total maize plantings in Kenya in 2006, and 73 percent of plantings in Zimbabwe;
- Improved disease-resistant strains of cassava, the continent's fastest growing food staple, accounted for more than half of the plantings in Nigeria; and
- New high-yielding rice varieties that grow well under difficult rainfed conditions are being cultivated on more than 200,000 hectares in more than 20 countries in Africa.

The *World Development Report 2008*, published by the World Bank, focused on the importance of agriculture and found that investment in agricultural research has "paid off handsomely," delivering an average rate of return of 43 percent in 700 projects evaluated in developing countries. Without the CGIAR's investment in agricultural work since its founding in 1971, world food production would be 4 to 5 percent lower today; developing countries would produce 7 to 8 percent less food; world food and feed grain prices would be 18 to 21 percent higher; and 13 to 15 million more children would be malnourished, according to a rigorous study of the CGIAR impact.

Another key initiative, especially at a time of great concern about climate change, has been to preserve the wealth of genetic resources, namely seeds, stored in genebanks. Such efforts will help scientists solve current and future problems caused by pests and diseases. Now, for instance, researchers are seeking ways to replace existing wheat varieties with varieties resistant to wheat stem rust, a devastating disease which has moved from Africa to the Middle East in the last few years, threatening one of the world's most important crops.

The challenge now is to find a way ahead that creates greater supplies of food without doing harm to economies or the environment. Governments and international groups must choose policies wisely. Some actions are likely to help stabilize and reduce food prices; others may help certain groups at the expense of others, or actually make food prices more volatile in the long run and seriously distort trade. Engaging in policies such as banning exports and hoarding certain food staples could spell disaster in the future and do little to help the people who really need it. Massive delivery of food or seed aid, while generous, well-meaning, and often the first response from donors, needs to be done in a way that builds local markets rather than destroys them. Food aid, for instance, should include substantial amounts of food purchased from local communities, benefiting local farmers as well as giving sustenance for the truly needy.

Such an example shows that this crisis also can be turned into opportunities for farmers, with careful and calculated responses. Small-holder farmers can use new research to produce higher crop yields and then benefit even more from the higher food prices. Farmers who breed livestock also can earn more from milk and meat sales, providing a new route out of poverty.

The long-term way ahead is clear: invest in research and preserve the diversity of genetic resources – steps that will make a difference from farmers' fields to the homes of people around the world.

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About the CGIAR: The Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), established in 1971, is a strategic partnership of countries, international and regional organizations and private foundations supporting the work of 15 international agricultural research Centers. In collaboration with national agricultural research systems, civil society and the private sector, the CGIAR fosters sustainable agricultural growth through high-quality science aimed at benefiting the poor through stronger food security, better human nutrition and health, higher incomes and improved management of natural resources. For further information visit www.cgiar.org