



**Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research
Statement on Rising World Food Prices, April 2008**

World agriculture is suddenly under great stress. Prices of basic commodities are soaring. Food riots have spread across countries one after the other, like falling dominoes, causing political tremors felt in the offices of presidents. The poor, though, have felt it the most. It is clear this historic 30-year global era of low food prices has come to a close; the numbers couldn't be more clear: Wheat prices rose 120 percent last year, rice 75 percent. For poor families, it means the cost of a loaf of bread has almost doubled, and a two-kilogram bag of rice may be half of the money a family earns in a day in some parts of the world. Now we are entering a period when we can expect to see higher food prices and more food price volatility overall.

Now is the time for policymakers to put together a comprehensive plan to ensure long-term food availability and security, as well as short-term relief. The crisis calls for urgent, yet prudent action. One conclusion stands above the rest: The world community must invest now and for the long term in problem-solving agricultural research. Evidence shows this research will produce higher yielding crops – toward a common goal of greater farm productivity while conserving our natural resources.

Such an approach has succeeded in the past. Investment in agriculture research has “paid off handsomely,” delivering an average rate of return of 43 percent in 700 projects evaluated in developing countries, according to the World Bank’s World Development Report 2008. Without 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; and 13 to 15 million more children would be malnourished, according to a review of CGIAR’s effectiveness.

The 15 centers sponsored by CGIAR have produced hundreds of examples showing how research greatly improved crop yields and people’s lives. Across eastern and southern Africa, more than 50 varieties of drought-resistant maize varieties developed by CGIAR researchers are now being grown on roughly 1 million hectares, resulting in yield gains of up to 30 percent over varieties they replace. In Bangladesh, a flood-tolerant rice variety grown on six million hectares increases farmers’ yields two to three fold while also withstanding complete submergence for as long as two weeks. Crops resilient to extreme weather volatility also provide solutions in adapting to climate change, which scientists estimate could cause agriculture production to drop by as much as 50 percent in many African countries and by 30 percent in Central and South Asia.

Farming systems are also helping to optimize agriculture production while conserving natural resources, a balance of growing importance as resources such as water and land become increasingly scarce. For example, zero-till technology has generated benefits estimated at US\$147 million per year through higher crop yields, lower production costs and savings in water and energy. Agroforestry systems are strengthening soil fertility in southern Africa, essential for increased productivity.

In addition, advances in addressing pests and diseases are helping to avert potentially catastrophic crop losses. Now, for instance, researchers are working to prevent the

spread of a new form of wheat stem rust, Ug99, 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. Existing wheat varieties are being replaced with varieties resistant to wheat stem rust. In sub-Saharan Africa, biological control of the cassava mealybug and green mite, both menacing pests to this root crop, has successfully staved off staggering losses of cassava, a crop vital for food security in that part of the world.

Despite these achievements, the current food price crisis underscores the need for greater investment in agriculture research to bring solutions such as those outlined above to scale and to foster innovations that meet the new and multi-faceted challenges behind the new face of agriculture. Overall, in responding to the global food crisis, governments and international groups must take great care to ensure that measures promote equity, stabilize and reduce food prices, and minimize trade distortions. One component of the 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