



MEDIA RELEASE

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UNDERINVESTMENT IN AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES THREATENS FOOD SECURITY

“It is highly unlikely that the world will be able to feed its expanding population in 40 years time unless we start to ramp up investments in agriculture and natural resources,” says Dr. Colin Chartres, the Director General of the International Water Management Institute. Agriculture is currently a poor cousin in terms of overseas development assistance (ODA), with its share of ODA dropping from 17 to 3% of total ODA between 1982 and 2006. This was due in part to the success of the green revolution which dramatically increased cereal production in the 1960s and 1970s and politicians consequently thinking that food security was no longer a problem. “This year’s food crisis was certainly a wake-up call in this regard,” says Chartres.

The world now has approximately 1 billion poor people, who are having increasing difficulties in feeding and clothing themselves, let alone being able to treat their ailments and access education. Imagine the impact of food prices doubling on a family surviving on \$5 a day.

Whilst the green revolution saw significant improvements in livelihoods for many poor people, the current food crisis occurs at a time when factors not present 30 years ago have come into play. These include significant urbanization, dietary changes, biofuel production and climate change. All of these factors are competing with agriculture for land and, in particular, water resources.

Last year the International Water Management Institute published a detailed analysis of what has to be done if we are going to be able to feed the extra 2.3 billion mouths expected by 2050. However, as yet, there has been little change in funding for the research and development (R&D) that is absolutely vital if we are to meet this challenge. This is in spite of the World Bank indicating that R&D is far more effective than subsidies in stimulating production. There has been a significant correlation between declining investment in agricultural R&D and agricultural productivity gains over the last 20 years, with the latter dropping on average from 3-6% per year to 1-2% per year.

“Water, along with sunlight, fertilizers and good soil is a fundamental input to agricultural productivity increases,” says Chartres. “Future agricultural productivity increases will depend on us being able to supply sufficient water for irrigation and on the better management of rainfed agricultural systems.” Australians probably don’t underestimate the significance of climate change and variability on water resources and agricultural productivity given what has happened in the Murray-Darling Basin, but the potential impacts of climate change are not well understood elsewhere. For example, in Central Asia the rivers feeding the agricultural systems upstream of the Aral Sea, already an ecological disaster, are expected to lose 30% of their flow as glaciers melt and the snow line retreats upwards over the next 2-3 decades.

Chartres calls for an immediate doubling of investment in funding for agricultural R&D. However, he says that as well as using this money to deliver research outputs that can be turned into improved productivity and livelihoods on the ground, much attention needs to be given to training a new generation of scientists and engineers capable of implementation of innovation in agriculture. Similarly, governments will have to sweep away traditional and outmoded institutional arrangements for water governance and commit to a robust reform process just as is happening in the Murray-Darling Basin. Without such an across-the-board commitment to investment and reform, the dinner table will look very bare for an increasing number of people. Increasing poverty and discontent will play right into the hands of those who wish to further destabilize economies and the current social order.

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Note to Editors :

Dr. Colin Chartres is the Director General of the Sri Lanka-based International Water Management Institute (IWMI), a centre affiliated to the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). IWMI is a non-profit, scientific research organization focusing on the sustainable use of water and land resources in agriculture, to benefit poor people in developing countries. IWMI’s Mission is ‘Improving the management of water and land resources for food, livelihoods and nature.’ IWMI has its headquarters in Sri Lanka and regional offices in Africa and Asia. The Institute works in partnership with developing countries, international and national research institutes, universities and other organizations to develop tools and technologies that contribute to poverty reduction as well as food and livelihood security.

For more information on IWMI and its work visit: www.iwmi.org.

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