Guest Editorial: Agricultural Development as a tool in combating terrorism

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Code Number: PY01002

Millions of Afghans are facing starvation today, not because of current and imminent hostilities wreaking havoc with their food system, but because of twenty-two years of war, grinding poverty and a third consecutive year of drought. Five million people there have little access to food and no means to buy their way out of starvation, according to the UN's World Food Programme (WFP) (http://www.wfp.org/) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (http://www.fao.org/). Many other countries experience similar problems arising from poverty, conflict and drought. The International Water Management Institute estimates (http://www.cgiar.org/iwmi) that one-third of the world's population will experience severe water scarcity within 25 years.

In a June 2001 "Special Alert," these two UN food agencies warned
that the Afghan situation was "rapidly deteriorating and will continue to worsen." Emergency food aid might be needed for as long as 10 months, until the next harvest, according to the report. Ironically, food security in Afghanistan has been further undermined this year by the loss of income resulting from a sizeable decrease in poppy cultivation by the world's largest producer. The reduction has rid the world of 3-4,000 tons of opium and derivatives - a nice contribution to the West's "other" war, the one on drugs - but it has also reduced the income of Afghanistan's predominantly rural population which now depends even more heavily than before on their drought-starved grain crops.

Help might be on the way, however. Scientists at the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT), (http://www.cimmyt.org/) and other international and national organisations are at work on a range of strategies to combat the problem of drought in farming systems of resource-poor farmers. In conjunction with partners in national research programmes in South Asia, CIMMYT are perfecting "reduced-till" and bed-planting systems that trap and conserve moisture while reducing costs. They have also screened CIMMYT's vast collection of breeding materials, and are well on their way to releasing new wheat varieties with remarkable drought tolerance and improved pest and disease resistance. These new technologies will be made available not just to Afghans, but to resource-poor farmers around the world.

Today some 85% of the wheat varieties released by developing countries are based on CIMMYT products. CIMMYT's clientele thus numbers in the billions, though its wheat research budget (about $20 million) is less than half that allocated to agricultural research in the U.S. State of Michigan, with only 8,000 full-time farmers.

It may appear self-serving for a former member of the Board of Trustees of CIMMYT, a public "not-for-profit" institution, to argue that its research and that of similar organisations is an integral part of the war against terrorism. But formulating this particular argument more broadly might make a point worth consideration: is peace without food security feasible? Oslo's International Peace Research Institute (http://www.prio.no/) asked just that question several years ago and amply documented their conclusion that peace and hunger are incompatible.
If this seems self-evident, an additional question arises in the current context: is there room in a $40 billion plus budget against terrorism for research to improve the wheat systems for poor, drought-affected countries such as Afghanistan, or yam production in a hundred poor countries, or maize yields in southern Africa where 50% of the diet is based on that one crop? Almost surely not.

International agricultural institutes will hardly be expecting extra funding. Quite the contrary. Even in the best of times, their research depends on meager handouts from foreign aid budgets. In times of crisis and recession, governments closely examine these expenditures. Organizations such as CIMMYT, that exist entirely on such "discretionary" funding, are often the first to be hit.

Since September 11, the U.S. administration has repeatedly stressed that its war against terrorism will be comprehensive and long-term. Others around the world have suggested that the U.S. examine the underlying causes of terrorist acts. If the new war is to be effective, the U.S. and its allies must aim not just to destroy terrorists, but to create an anti-terrorist environment. In other words, a comprehensive campaign will at least address the causes of future, if not past, acts of terrorism. The obvious bears stating: the campaign against terrorism has to be both comprehensive and long-term, as President Bush emphasizes. Dealing with the Afghanistan problem will provide the first opportunity to test this strategy and this commitment, and well it should. It is not too early for the international community to consider what additional elements might be needed to constitute a truly comprehensive assault on terrorism. Helping poor countries achieve food security might be the place to start. Breeding grounds of terrorism can become fertile fields of wheat and maize.

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