

NEWS & VIEWS

UPDATE **1**



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24 June, Cairo, Egypt



Sparking policy connections for water and food security

The three-days of dialogue and discussion at the conference aim to spark the sharing of experiences and ideas among 150 policy makers, development experts and researchers from some 30 countries. During their first day together, they explored common approaches that can be adopted among drylands countries and regions to improve water and food security and rural livelihoods.

Many of the technologies and approaches for improving food and water security are known. So why are these solutions not more firmly in place in national policies? What can be done to improve the link between research and action to benefit rural communities? And, more specifically, how can this group encourage practical action that will support drylands countries in the creation of evidence-based policies for water and food security.

The sessions were centered around four themes that will be synthesized into action points and hopefully, targets that can guide countries and their development partners for future programs. Some highlights:

Dr Abdessalam Ould Ahmed of the FAO, spear-headed talk of a wider new focus on water scarcity and support for agriculture which has been perhaps lacking in recent years. He also pointed to the situation prevalent even in many developing countries where obesity in some members of the population sits alongside widespread malnutrition. Both of these, of course, are serious food policy concerns.

More action, less discussion

Dr. Hussein Hajj Hassan, Lebanon's Minister of Agriculture, pointed out that to encourage more secure water supply, a combination of political discussion and innovative science and technology solutions is needed. We need more action, and less discussion, he said.

Increasing climate variability and competition for water brings an even harder fight to protect natural resources for future generations, explained Dr. Ahmed Mahmoud Ali Algizawi, Egypt's Minister of Agriculture and Land Reclamation. The



solutions, he said, included bringing more land into production as well as the deployment of new technologies to boost the production capacity on existing farmlands.

Bringing a perspective from Yemen, Eng. Farid Ahmed Moga-war, Minister of Agriculture and Irrigation, reported that half of the country's population is involved in agriculture, despite the water shortages that affect many areas. Some 60% of rural people are smallholders. But Yemen has a tradition of dealing with water scarcity, he said, with ancient water systems, working alongside new dams. Other strengths include a diversity of climate conditions allowing year-round production of crops, and a growing provision of extension services and marketing assistance. But still, new approaches to address and reduce poverty are needed, he explained.

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Bringing science into policymaking

The critical role of science and technology in addressing food security and development challenges was expressly articulated by Dr. Mahmoud Solh, Director General of ICARDA in his talk today. He highlighted the results several countries have experienced across Sub-Saharan Africa, West Asia and Central Asia from implementing science in their national programs. For example, Ethiopia has been able to increase lentil production three-fold and chickpeas by 60% from focused efforts over the last 10 years. Emphasizing the need for integrated approach in ensuring water and food security, Dr. Solh called for Ministries of Agriculture to work hand in hand with their respective Ministries of Finance and Planning to develop solutions that are sustainable and deliver on various goals - economic, social and environmental.

The deployment of a new generation of scientists to deliver integrated solutions in the field was urged by Dr Hammou Lamraani of Canada's IDRC. Policy-to- action currently has a missing link, he said.

Other speakers spoke of the need to find more land, more available water, better water technology, greater focus on efficient agriculture and bigger efforts on reclamation of areas such as salt-affected lands.

The need for varied incentives



What are the obstacles to having more effective policies in place? And what incentives can be applied to improve the water and food security situation for countries? Steven Schonberger, the World Bank's Water and Agriculture Manager for the MENA region, challenged colleagues to take a wider view of incentives in their water and food security approaches.

Along with macroeconomic concerns, policymaking can also be driven by goals like resource conservation, employment generation and other social development issues. He reminded the group of the water-food-energy nexus as a series of linked issues that affect most developing countries in some way. He cited the efforts in the MENA region to address water scarcity and highlighted the lack of accountability among various stakeholders as a gap to be addressed. He called for more investment in assessment and monitoring of water resources, basin management and reforms in water services delivery. Reflecting on incentives, Mr. Schonberger offered that probably the most effective incentive - capable of mobilizing action and change - is resource scarcity.



Conference themes

The conference examines four themes over the three days, where experts and policy makers will share experiences and synthesize ideas for action points and solutions that can become long-term strategies for improving water and food security in drylands countries.



Theme 1 is centred on incentives for sustainable and efficient water allocation and management - the use of financial and other instruments to improve the efficiency in water allocation. Amongst the monetary considerations are opportunity cost pricing and consumption based charges, putting a real economic value on water. New incentives are needed for efficient water use to allow positive impact on productivity, efficiency, food security and environmental sustainability.

Theme 2 debates interactions between water management, food security and employment. With appropriate water policies comes hope for expansion of irrigation creating new jobs and new opportunities for agriculture. Higher agricultural intensity delivers higher yields, multiple cropping and requires more labour. Infrastructure works for irrigation and water systems also requires labour for construction.

Theme 3 looks at coping with water scarcity – the water and food security nexus policy dialogue. It shares lessons across projects and activities understanding the knowledge gaps in project design and discussing trends in land and water management across regions. In particular debate will focus on the weak linkage between available technical knowledge and application on the ground in the field. Another key concern - increasingly scarce natural resources.

Theme 4 looks at policies for enhancing food security. The focus here is on policies for improving large- scale food security with debate on success stories on enhancing national food security, water charges and water allocation. Again it looks at improved management for environmental sustainability.