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Contact Satellite Press Office: +44 (0) 20 7608 5210

International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development

AGRICULTURE- THE NEED FOR CHANGE

WASHINGTON/LONDON/NAIROBI/DELHI - 15th April 2008. The way the world grows its food will have to change radically to better serve the poor and hungry if the world is to cope with a growing population and climate change while avoiding social breakdown and environmental collapse. That is the message from the report of the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development, a major new report by over 400 scientists which is launched today.

The assessment was considered by 64 governments at an intergovernmental plenary in Johannesburg last week.

The authors' brief was to examine hunger, poverty, the environment and equity together. Professor Robert Watson Director of IAASTD said those on the margins are ill-served by the present system: "The incentives for science to address the issues that matter to the poor are weak... the poorest developing countries are net losers under most trade liberalization scenarios."

Modern agriculture has brought significant increases in food production. But the benefits have been spread unevenly and have come at an increasingly intolerable price, paid by small-scale farmers, workers, rural communities and the environment.

It says the willingness of many people to tackle the basics of combining production, social and environmental goals is marred by "contentious political and economic stances". One of the IAASTD co-chairs, Dr Hans Herren, explains: "Specifically, this refers to the many OECD member countries who are deeply opposed to any changes in trade regimes or subsidy systems. Without reforms here many poorer countries will have a very hard time... "

The report has assessed that the way to meet the challenges lies in putting in place institutional, economic and legal frameworks that combine productivity with the protection and conservation of natural resources like soils, water, forests, and biodiversity while meeting production needs.

In many countries, it says, food is taken for granted, and farmers and farm workers are in many cases poorly rewarded for acting as stewards of almost a third of the Earth's land. Investment directed toward securing the public interest in agricultural science, education and training and extension to farmers has decreased at a time when it is most needed.

The authors have assessed evidence across a wide range of knowledge that is rarely brought together. They conclude we have little time to lose if we are to change course. Continuing with current trends would exhaust our resources and put our children's future in jeopardy.

Professor Bob Watson, Director of IAASTD said: "To argue, as we do, that continuing to focus on production alone will undermine our agricultural capital and leave us with an increasingly degraded and divided planet is to reiterate an old message. But it is a message that has not always had resonance in some parts of the world. If those with power are now willing to hear it, then we may hope for more equitable policies that do take the interests of the poor into account."

Professor Judi Wakhungu, said "We must cooperate now, because no single institution, no single nation, no single region, can tackle this issue alone. The time is now."

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