

A Plan of Action for Confronting Global Food Price Inflation

From the Alliance of the CGIAR Centers

While global food price inflation has many underlying causes, one that has perhaps not received sufficient attention is relative neglect of the agricultural sector by many countries, including a lack of adequate funding for agricultural research. This complacency must be brought to an end through a sharp departure from business as usual.

In the first instance, comprehensive social protection initiatives – such as food and cash transfers and employment programs – are needed to protect poor consumers from the immediate and longer term impacts of reduced access to food, resulting from high prices. Equally urgent are health and nutrition programs targeted to vulnerable groups, such as mothers and young children. Those interventions must be coordinated with the delivery of emergency food aid. To achieve a permanent solution to the current food crisis, however, requires more rapid spread of new technologies that offer farmers a proven and sustainable means of producing more food on less land and with less chemical fertilizer and water.

The Alliance of the Centers supported by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) contributes importantly to the development of such technologies. On that basis, it is playing an active role in immediate actions aimed at resolving the food crisis as well as in medium- and long-term steps needed to reduce the risk that such crises might reoccur. The success of those measures depends, not on quick fixes, but on collective action involving all the key actors in agricultural development.

In that spirit, the Alliance will work in concert with other international organizations that share our commitment to achieving global food security, including the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), World Food Programme (WFP) and World Bank, as well as regional organizations, national governments, and the civil society and business communities.

The resulting integrated effort must be complemented by immediate support designed to enhance the effectiveness of agricultural extension, markets and policies across the developing world. Although food and seed aid are also required to address urgent humanitarian needs, they must be provided in ways that do not distort local markets and diminish the incentives of developing country farmers to produce more food.

Immediate Actions

Alliance research has shown that high-yielding varieties and improved practices for managing crops and natural resources, together with appropriate policies, can bring about significant and sustainable increases in agricultural productivity. Our research has also demonstrated the value of focusing, not just on globally important staples, but also on locally important crops, which are often the key source of sustenance for the rural poor. Production of such crops, which is prevalent in marginal areas, must be increased to improve the food security and nutrition of the poorest consumers.

The Alliance proposes to assist national agricultural research and extension systems in the following tasks, working closely also with FAO, IFAD, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and small- and medium-scale agroenterprises:

1. Step up the dissemination of higher yielding, better adapted crop varieties and livestock and fish breeds.

Large-scale, coordinated campaigns are required to multiply and distribute seed of high yielding varieties of cereals, legumes and other food crops that are already available and can contribute immediately to strengthening food security. Major efforts are also needed to widen the availability of improved livestock breeds and low-cost animal feeds as well as more productive strains of fish adapted to local conditions, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. With the aim of enriching the diets of poor consumers, it is important to accelerate the multiplication of seed of neglected and underutilized species possessing high nutritional value. The Alliance will provide the necessary technical backstopping for those tasks, including methods for rapid multiplication of improved seeds.

2. Accelerate the introduction of more effective and sustainable soil and water management practices.

In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Latin America, integrated approaches have been developed and proved effective for achieving sustainable increases in agricultural productivity. Among those are integrated aquaculture-agriculture, agroforestry and improved crop-livestock systems. To realize their potential requires better geographical targeting of such approaches and stronger support for the national extension systems, NGOs and private-sector actors whose work is essential for successfully promoting their adoption.

Most developing countries face significant water and soil nutrient constraints, which limit productivity and are made worse by rising fertilizer prices. To overcome those constraints it is important to achieve more efficient fertilizer use through integrated soil fertility management, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa; improve water management and storage in rainfed agriculture; and enhance water productivity in irrigated areas. Alliance research has resulted in proven methods for accomplishing those tasks. We will work with the institutional partners mentioned previously to support rapid introduction of improved management practices to farmers in vulnerable food-deficit areas.

3. Speed up the implementation of appropriate policies.

Alliance research has shown that a number of current policies worsen the impacts of rising food prices. For instance, the governments of various developing countries have put in place bans on agricultural exports. Such policies ultimately aggravate the food price crisis and should therefore be reversed. Meanwhile, industrialized countries have also made matters worse by subsidizing the use of grain and oilseeds for biofuel production. There should be a moratorium on such support until bioenergy technologies can be developed that do not compete with food. In addition to removing counterproductive policies, policies are urgently needed to improve small-scale land users' management of natural resources, including soil, water and fisheries. The Alliance will promote the necessary changes in policy through advocacy, dialogue with international and national policy makers and close collaboration with international and national partners.

Meeting the Challenges Ahead

To prevent the recurrence of food crises, the Alliance and its partners will focus on the major development challenges that lie ahead. To respond to increasing global demand for food, agriculture must deliver larger harvests from a constant or shrinking land base. Moreover, it must do so in an increasingly complex global economy and in the face of worsening environmental constraints, such as climate change, declining water quality and quantity as well as diminished biodiversity, which reduces the resilience of agricultural systems.

Farmers can successfully meet those challenges only if they have more stress-tolerant crop varieties, together with new production systems that offer high, stable and sustainable yields, while conserving natural resources. Whether farmers obtain such technologies depends, in turn, on the capacity of research and extension systems at all levels to provide farmers with adequate support. Bringing together all of those vital elements of sustainable agriculture requires a series of medium- and longer term actions.

Medium-Term Measures

Alliance research will generate many new options for tackling some of the challenges described earlier. As options in the categories listed below are demonstrated to be effective, the Alliance will support national and regional partners as well as the FAO, IFAD, United Nations and World Bank: in disseminating them to farmers and other key stakeholders:

1. Stronger support for agricultural research and extension systems as well as farmers' organisations, with the aims of upgrading research-to-farm "pipelines" and building new generations of skilled agricultural scientists, extension agents, NGO staff and farmer leaders, who can provide better service to rural people in developing countries. The Alliance will assist by providing partners with reliable technical backstopping.
2. More productive crops and animals that show greater resilience in the face of changing climatic conditions and pest and disease pressures. New developments in the biosciences will be critical for generating more productive and robust crop varieties, livestock breeds and tree species and for achieving more effective use of underutilized plant species. All of those materials are vital for creating more resilient production systems, based on active farmer management of biodiversity
3. More integrated approaches to achieve sustainable increases in agricultural productivity through, for instance, improved management of ground water and widespread use of low-cost practices (such as crop rotations and intercropping) that better enable small farmers to manage soil fertility and agrobiodiversity.
4. Equitable policies and institutional arrangements (e.g., agricultural insurance schemes and payment for environmental services) that enable small farmers to adopt sustainable agricultural practices, strengthen their participation in competitive value chains for higher value products and protect their rights of access to water resources.

Longer Term Steps

It takes years and even decades to translate scientific breakthroughs into tools, technologies, practices and policies that are relevant and useful to farmers, NGOs, policy makers and other stakeholders across the developing world. That is the work for which the Alliance Centres are

particularly qualified. In the longer term, they will apply science, in collaboration with international, national, regional and local partners, to achieve the following aims:

1. Deploy vaccines, crop varieties with durable disease resistance and pest tolerance, and integrated pest management practices to combat emerging diseases in crops, livestock, fisheries and tree-based systems.
2. Develop viable alternatives to deforestation (such as community-based forest management and payment for environmental services), while seeking to intensify agricultural production on land already under cultivation and thus curb current rates of land clearing. Those measures are essential for adapting agriculture to climate change and for mitigating future emissions of greenhouse gases.
3. Strengthen capacity in the agricultural sciences (including the policy and institutional spheres) at the national and regional levels, while building the aptitude of farmers, NGOs and small- and medium-scale entrepreneurs to be full and equal partners in research for development. To achieve those ends will require a major increase in investment in capacity building.
4. Develop agricultural systems for the 21st century that exploit biological processes more efficiently and sustainably, that is, derive more food and other materials, such as cellulose, from plants, trees, animals and fish. A significant investment in advanced research is needed to bring such systems within the reach of small farmers.
5. Secure increased investment in agricultural research and rural infrastructure at the national and international levels to achieve sustainable agricultural production and development. Such investment is a prerequisite for successfully implementing the medium- and long-term measures outlined in this action plan, with the aim of minimizing the risks of future food crises.