

Where Science and Emergencies Meet: As crises become more frequent, agricultural research finds a big new role



A new report argues persuasively that agricultural research has a vital role to play in dramatically increasing food security in disaster situations as well as economic development in their aftermath. This can be achieved, it says, by undertaking action as well as strategic research with those responsible for either preparing the agricultural sector for disasters (such as climate change or an outbreak of bird flu), or giving the sector some relief during disasters (such as droughts or floods), or providing options that speed the recovery of the sector following a disaster (such as war or economic meltdown). The report recommends that international agricultural research centres take a risk and "take on" the emergency response sector by listening to, and learning from, local communities and their relief workers.

One out of every twelve people in Eastern and Southern Africa is a direct victim of war, political instability or natural disaster. Every year in the region, on average 10.8 million people are internally displaced as a result of some form of politically motivated violent conflict, and another 26.8 million people are affected by natural disaster. Not included in these figures are the millions of people who are severely affected by agricultural pests and diseases or crises of other kinds, such as rapidly rising food prices. These figures are provided in a new report exploring how international agricultural research can help prevent and cope with disasters as well as speed up the recovery process.

Catherine Longley and her co-authors of this report developed for the CGIAR Collective Action in Eastern and Southern Africa initiative, contend that the number of people affected by crises in this region as elsewhere "is expected to rise with increased climate variability, which will lead to more frequent and more intense extreme events such as drought, floods, and cyclones".

There is clearly a need to do something to address this growing threat. Is research part of the answer? If so, what sort of research?

The authors begin to answer these questions by examining what sort of research actually takes place under crisis conditions in Eastern and Southern Africa. Although as many as 13 CGIAR centres are conducting research under crisis conditions, most of these initiatives, such as the Consortium for Improving Agricultural Livelihoods in Central Africa, are working in a crisis context rather than on ameliorating the crisis itself or its impacts. In contrast, ambitious CGIAR centre work in the Democratic Republic of the Congo explicitly aims to rebuild structures for agricultural research damaged by the conflicts in that country. The report deems both kinds of agricultural research projects—those conducted within crisis situations and those conducted expressly to mitigate the impacts of a crisis—equally valid approaches to agricultural development, provided that they are based on a good understanding of actual needs.

Although the report illustrates many ways CGIAR centres support and advise agencies making emergency and recovery interventions, the authors maintain that agricultural research systems—national as well as regional and international—are ill-equipped to understand how humanitarian relief systems operate or to deal with the uncertainty inherent in politically unstable situations. At the same time, many of those within the humanitarian sector bemoan the fact that their well-intentioned agencies continue to fail to learn and implement lessons from past disaster relief operations; these relief workers believe that they will stop history from tragically repeating itself only if they develop and use new learning systems. Both relief workers and agencies and agricultural scientists and institutions appear to need greater knowledge and learning capacity to work more effectively in disaster situations and to speed development in their aftermath.

The Collective Action report recommends that CGIAR centres working in disaster situations, or working to help countries prevent them or recover from them, modify their traditional research roles so that they more actively promote the generation of knowledge and learning that allows agricultural interventions to have greater impacts. The centres could, for example, actively promote the services they could provide to other actors coordinating or implementing projects to help regions prepare for disasters, to help them provide relief from ongoing disasters, or to help them recover from disasters.

The authors outline types of research interventions that could deliver 'international public goods', such as good practice guidelines for rebuilding agricultural productivity after a crisis. Among first steps for the partners making up Collective Action, they suggest, would be to:

- find ways to consolidate the many currently disjointed pieces of research that might be harnessed and coordinated for the express purpose of mitigating disasters and their impacts
- identify and fill (or get filled) any gaps in current research with potential to provide relief from disasters
- Identify and enlist all key stakeholders able to get this disaster-focused research into fast and broad use.

By necessity, the kind of disaster action- and service-oriented research this Collective Action report advocates requires that scientists and their institutions move out of their comfort zones (aka "ivory towers") and find cost-effective ways to work with and within a wealth of local to regional, informal and formal, and activist to academic, organizations and networks. In addition, this research demands that all partners become adept at learning from (rather than rationalizing) past mistakes and failures.

The full report can be accessed at: http://www.ilri.org/regionalplan/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=38&Itemid=57 Or contact Catherine Longley, the lead author of the report: k.longley@cgiar.org

The collective action underpinning the research: Researchers from six CGIAR centres collaborated in writing this report, which was reviewed and improved at a consultation on the needs of agricultural research in crisis situations funded by Canada's International Development Research Centre. This consultation, held in Nairobi on May 21 & 22, 2008 was attended by 35 representatives of national, regional, international and multilateral research, development and humanitarian organizations.

Newsbytes

Rehabilitating agricultural research in Southern Sudan

Richard Jones, representing the Consortium for Agricultural Research and Rehabilitation in Southern Sudan (CARRSS) was in Juba, Southern Sudan from 11-13 August at the request of George Leju, Director General of Extension, Research and Training, in the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) of the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS). The purpose of the visit was to finalize the contract between MAF/GoSS and ICRISAT under the Support to Agriculture and Forestry Development Project (SAFDP) being funded jointly by the World Bank administered multi-donor trust fund and the GoSS. There is a strong desire by MAF/GoSS to finalize the details of the contract and George Leju organized two meetings with World Bank officials to sort out the contracting details that will hopefully be completed by the end of September. The visit ended on a meeting with Dr Samson Kwaje, Minister of Agriculture and Forestry who is a pant pathologist by training and who stressed his support for CARRSS.

Rehabilitating livelihoods following natural disasters – WorldFish's work with Partners

Half the world's poor live in coastal areas. These areas are already under threat due to poorly planned development but challenges are made worse with climate change causing more floods and extreme weather events such as hurricanes and tsunamis. In developing countries it is the fishing communities, the vast majority living in poverty along the coast, that are often the worst affected. Following the 2004 Asian tsunami, WorldFish and partners developed a framework to rehabilitate livelihoods following such natural disasters. WorldFish applied its approach following the November 2007 tsunami that hit the Solomon Islands and in the wake of hurricane Sidr that killed over 3,000 people, flattened villages, caused hundreds of thousands of people to evacuate their homes and affected up to seven million Bangladeshis. www.worldfishcenter.org

Update from the Agriculture and Health Research Platform (AHRP)

A major conference – the Global Ministerial Forum on Research for Health will be held in Bamako, Mali in November 2008. This conference, held every 4 years, charts the way ahead for international research on health-related issues. The focus on "research for health" (not simply health research) signals a new understanding of the need to form intersectoral collaborations. As one of several preparatory meeting for Bamako, the Ministerial Conference on Research for Health in the African Region was held in Algiers in June. The AHRP submitted a paper on agriculture and health research and facilitated a session on "Collaborations". Discussion was anchored in a paper by Dr Gillespie (IFPRI) on potential collaboration between health and agriculture, and the results of a survey of 700 institutions from 44 African countries. The AHRP is an initiative of eleven Alliance Centres in partnership with health research and development organizations, notably the World Health Organization.

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Newsletter team:
Ravi Prabhu, Michael Hailu, Rebecca Selvarajah-Jaffery, Susan MacMillan, Reagan Sirengo and Eric Ouma

Questions, comments, feedback? Please email: r.selvarajah-jaffery@cgiar.org

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