



SEARCH



One of the most serious problems facing agriculture today is to ensure that adequate nutrition is provided to people around the world. In many developing countries, this difficulty is compounded by factors such as rising populations, environmental degradation, resource depletion, climatic variability, and by increasing volatility in the prices of food and many essential agricultural inputs.

After a brief respite in the late 20th century, the number of people experiencing the kind of serious poverty that is often associated with food shortages, is now on the rise again. In 2012, the FAO estimated that 870 million people could be classified as food-insecure with this figure projected to rise in the future.

How can we respond to this challenge confronting some of the most vulnerable people on the planet? Two papers in this issue of World Agriculture make useful contributions to this debate in two different but interconnected areas, namely targeting the rural poor in fragile and remote areas and the role of the private sector in providing advice on seed and inputs to African farmers.

Those regions that are most at risk from food insecurity tend also be relatively poor and often have marginal or degraded farming systems. Typically farmers in such regions missed out from many, or all, of the benefits of the Green Revolution that

brought such immense yield gains in the 1970s and 1980s to mainstream cereal growers in many parts of Asia and the Americas.

The review article by Barbier (pp. 23-28) details the spiral of decline that confronts many of the rural poor as they are forced into increasingly unsustainable and unproductive farming practices that can result in land degradation and poverty traps.

A key challenge facing policymakers is to address the various ways in which such rural communities become isolated from mainstream commerce and communication. One example of such isolation is a lack of access to good quality advice and training in farming practices of the sort that was traditionally provided by national extension services.

Lamontagne-Godwin *et al.* (pp. 29- 34) address the topic of advice for farmers by examining the role of small-scale private sector seed and agrochemical retailers in advising farmers in Uganda. Why are these relatively unqualified middlemen involved in giving technical advice to farmers and thereby influencing crop yields and food security?

Surely such advice is normally provided by the State in the form of extension services staffed by well-trained professional officers? Sadly, this is no longer the case in much of the world

In many parts of East Africa, and indeed in much of the rest of the world (including developed countries), public sector extension services have been dramatically reduced in recent decades. As with many other aspects of agricultural R&D spending, extension services have suffered budget cuts and staff reductions.

In some cases in Africa, even though staff levels have sometimes been maintained, shortsighted economy drives have seen radical cuts in vehicle and fuel allowances that make it impossible for officers to travel to farms, especially in remote areas where the need for advice is often the most acute.

In many developing countries, a highly effective Training and Visit system was introduced by the World Bank in the 1970s and 80s to underpin the Green Revolution by merging national extension bodies into a single service in each country. However, many of these single agencies collapsed when funding was withdrawn in the 1990s.

While in a few cases there has been a commendable increase in bottom-up approaches, these are often linked to short-term projects funded by external donors such as NGOs. They, therefore, tend not to have strong linkages to central governments and can be lacking in strategic long-term objectives.

As a result, in countries such as Uganda, we have the kind of unsatisfactory scenario outlined by Lamontagne-Godwin *et al.* where for many farmers the national public sector extension services have all but disappeared. In their place a largely ad hoc

group of relatively unskilled and untrained seed and agrochemical retailers appear to be the primary source of advice for many farmers.

In such cases, it is probably too late to turn the clock back and reinvent the 1970s model of comprehensive national extension services, especially given the economic constraints being experienced by many developing countries.

However, it should be possible to use any remaining extension personnel in targeted programmes to improve the training of these retailers, and perhaps to establish other meaningful public- private partnerships to ensure that the poorest farmers get useful, unbiased advice within their communities on a regular basis.

This is only one small linkage in the long and complex chain from lab to farm to fork but if it is broken, the rural poor are even less likely to better themselves and the environment in which they live.

1315

 [Denis J Murphy](#)

 15th May 2013

Comments