

# Food for the future

## *A bleak picture ahead*



Over the next four decades, the world's population will grow by 2.3 billion and become richer. Meeting the demand of the world's 9.1 billion inhabitants in 2050 will require 70 per cent more food than we currently produce. So unless we take the right decisions today, we risk finding the global cupboard dangerously bare tomorrow.

All the more so as in the years ahead, the world food system must deal with the growing challenge of climate change which may reduce potential agricultural output by up to 30 per cent in Africa, and by up to 21 per cent in developing countries as a whole, but also with exacerbated transboundary animal and plant pests and diseases. At the same time, the sector will have to cope with a smaller agricultural labour force as some 600 million people move from the countryside to the cities, and with increased competition for land and natural resources, including from the bioenergy sector.

How we respond to these challenges will determine how well we can feed the world tomorrow. But, just as important, we must also see to it that people are fed today. That means ending the plight of the 1.02 billion people currently suffering hunger and malnutrition by acting decisively to eradicate hunger completely and rapidly.

With last century's Green Revolution, the world succeeded in averting a massive famine in Asia and Latin America in the 1970s by spending 17 per cent of development aid in building irrigation schemes, seed production systems, fertilizer and feed plants, rural roads and storage facilities.

In rising to a similar challenge today, the path we follow must necessarily be a different one – besides boosting investment in agriculture, we need to make more efficient use of energy, chemical inputs and natural resources, and focus more on the needs of smallholders and rural farming households.

In this connection, one significant challenge will be water as we will need simultaneously to expand the land area under irrigation while using proportionately less water. The key to squaring that circle lies in water-harvesting and techniques that improve water use efficiency and soil moisture.

As the rural and farm population is reduced, agriculture will increasingly become more capital- and knowledge- intensive to produce more and higher quality food for bigger and richer urban populations. Therefore substantial investments will be needed, including in research and development because future production increases must overwhelmingly come from sustainable yield increases and improved cropping intensity rather than from bringing more land into cultivation.

Farmers too will need to be better trained to take up the new methods and technologies, and that will require spending on education and agricultural extension. Most of those investments will come from the private sector and from farmers themselves.

However, to make private investments in agriculture attractive, substantial sums of public money must also be spent on infrastructure, education, technology and extension systems. Investments are needed in facilities and equipments. Outside of mere subsistence agriculture there is no point in producing food unless there are roads and vehicles to bring it to markets, unless there indeed is a market, and unless produce can be stored and kept from perishing.

But naturally neither funding nor record harvests will by themselves be enough to secure that everyone has the food they need. If people go hungry today it is not because the world is not producing enough food but because such food is not produced by the 70 per cent of the poor whose main livelihood is agriculture and who cannot afford to eat their fill.

Thus feeding everyone in 2050 will also require poverty reduction strategies, social safety nets for both poor producers and consumers and rural development programmes. It will need better governance and the establishment of the kind of socio-economic conditions that improve people's access to food. Also important is a reform of the agricultural trade system so that it is not only free but also equitable.

The High-Level Expert Forum on How to Feed the World in 2050 will inform the World Summit on Food Security scheduled in Rome on 16, 17 and 18 November 2009 when Heads of State and Government from FAO's 192 Member Nations will take

important decisions on policies and strategies to ensure that everyone has enough to eat both today and tomorrow.

In 2050 what to eat will no longer be a problem for many of those of us already getting on in years. But I see it as my solemn duty, as it is surely ours as a global community, to do all we can to banish the spectre of hunger forever and make sure that our children and grandchildren can eat their fill and enjoy a healthy life. (*Jacques Diouf, Director-General of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation., The Hindu, 9 October 2009*)