

Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research

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AUSTRALIAN SCIENTISTS SERVE WORLD AGRICULTURE

Canberra -- Farmers the world over have a few things to learn from the Australians, according to scientists meeting in Canberra 29 May - 4 June.

Whether it be in adapting a simple farming practice for small farmers in North Africa or collecting wild bananas in Papua New Guinea, Australian scientists and Australian dollars are in the forefront of the war against hunger. "The record of direct Australian participation in international agricultural research is magnificent," says CGIAR Chairman W. David Hopper, Senior Vice President of the World Bank, "especially when compared with the size of its population."

Australia is hosting this week the annual mid-term meeting of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), a donor group that annually provides over US \$200 million for research and training to increase food production in the Third World. In addition to the nearly 30 Australian scientists who work at the thirteen research centers supported by the CGIAR, Australia has been a member of the Group since its founding in 1971 and last year contributed \$6.1 million to its research programs.

"Australia has produced and continues to produce men and women of talent and vision who have recognized the contribution international agricultural research can make toward human development, and have not hesitated to immerse themselves in that process," says Hopper. "The long, illustrious and continuing line of Australian involvement began with Sir John Crawford, whose legacy is to be found in every single component of the CGIAR," Hopper said.

Sir John, formerly vice chancellor of Australian National University and president of the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research at the time of his death in 1984, was instrumental in the founding of the CGIAR, and served as first chairman of its Technical Advisory Committee. The Crawford Fund, Victoria, is an Australian support organization for international agricultural research and was named in his honor.

Following in Sir John's footsteps, ten distinguished Australian agricultural leaders are now serving on the governing boards of CGIAR-supported research centers.

On the scientific side, Australian experience in pasture improvement has been especially important to the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) in Aleppo, Syria.

"In Australia only, among the industrialized countries, is the concept and practice of integrated cropping and livestock systems familiar," according to Dr. Philip Cocks, former member of the South Australian Department of Agriculture who heads the ICARDA pasture, forage, and livestock program.

"This concept is of great significance to the countries of West Asia and North Africa, where livestock provide a buffer against the unpredictable climate and are vital to the welfare of the farming communities."

The work of Dr. Suzanne Sharrock in Papua New Guinea will benefit an entirely different segment of the developing world. A plant explorer with the International Board of Plant Genetic Resources (IBPGR), another CGIAR-supported center, Dr. Sharrock is collecting wild banana and plantain species that may someday be used to conquer diseases in these vital staples of the humid tropics. Sources of disease resistance, as well as other desirable characteristics, are often found in the wild relatives of domesticated plants. The location and conservation of wild species is important both to new biotechnological techniques and to old-fashioned plant improvement by field breeding processes. Dr. Sharrock, whose study is financed by a grant from ACIAR, will bring her collection to the laboratories of the Department of

Primary Industries, Nambour, New Queensland, for preservation by tissue culture techniques.

Australian scientists have also taken on special research tasks on behalf of the CGIAR. In the mid-1980s, Professor Jock Anderson of the University of New England, Armidale, coordinated a major study on the impact of the CGIAR-supported research. The study, which included nearly 25 separate research projects covering all areas of the tropical world, was published under the title Science and Food, the CGIAR and Its Partners. More recently, Dr. Gabrielle Persley of the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research led a study on biotechnology for developing country agriculture. [Editors: see release entitled 'Who Owns Biotechnology'.]

Other Australians who head major research programs within the CGIAR system include Alison McCusker, head of the research program at IBPGR, Italy; John Tothill, head of the plant science division of the International Livestock Centre for Africa (ILCA), Ethiopia; Ken Fischer, Deputy Director General for Research at the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), Nigeria; Derek Byerlee, director of the economics program, and Anthony Fischer, director of the wheat program, at the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT), Mexico; Douglas Laing, Deputy Director General of the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), Colombia and Grahame Quick, director of agricultural engineering, and John Flynn, head of the economics department, International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in the Philippines.