



WORLD FOOD SECURITY: CAN PRIVATE SECTOR R&D FEED THE POOR?

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PAST NEGLECT OF VEGETABLE BREEDING NOW COSTS CONSUMERS AND PRODUCERS

Australian vegetable crops face unnecessary threats from exotic pests and diseases because of a lack of support for public plant breeding programs and a wishful reliance on multinational seed companies.

This was the message given by Dr Dyno Keatinge, Director General of the World Vegetable Center (AVRDC), speaking at the 2009 Crawford Fund International Conference "World Food Security: Can Private Sector R&D Feed the Poor?" in Parliament House, Canberra on 27-28 October.

Speakers including senior Federal politicians, senior representatives from The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, The UN World Food Program, A Green Revolution in Africa, Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture, and Monsanto, addressed the intersecting roles of the private, not for profit and public sectors in global food security and how to get the private sector better engaged for the benefit of the rural poor.

In welcoming delegates to the event, The Hon Neil Andrew AO, chairman of the Crawford Fund, noted that while some technologies, such as the mobile phone, flourish in the developing world, desperately needed agricultural technologies don't find their way to the countries that need them.

"While this is an issue giving rise to considerable controversy, especially questions such as intellectual property rights, multinational profits, the development of GMO's for the developing world and biopiracy, the private sector can and does provide much-needed R&D," he said.

Dr Keatinge claimed that Australia made an error by cutting its support for long-term public plant breeding after having lost most national seed companies to foreign takeovers – with farmers now having to rely almost solely for new vegetable varieties on multinational seed companies.

AVRDC - The World Vegetable Center is the only international agricultural research centre focused wholly on vegetable research and development. Founded almost 40 years ago and headquartered in Taiwan, it has major global programs in vegetable breeding for poor farmers, including the development of indigenous vegetables, particularly in Africa.

"The recent outbreak of the new disease Tomato Yellow Leaf Curl Virus in Australia had a devastating effect on Queensland's tomato industry and there is no local capacity to respond. But its eventual arrival was predictable," Dr Keatinge reported.

"It is a widespread disease in much of Asia which AVRDC has been working on for years, and Australia has not participated in collaborative preventative breeding work with AVRDC to protect its own industry. In an age of increasing air travel, trade and changing weather patterns it is not enough to simply rely on quarantine to protect Australia's vegetable industries."

AVRDC has made major breakthroughs in breeding of globally important crops like tomatoes and about three quarters of seed companies in Asia use its lines. Because so little breeding work has been done for Africa the recent release of just two of the Center's lines in East Africa boosted national productions in Tanzania alone by over 40%, replacing varieties that had been around for over 80 years.

"Small seed companies have been a vital partner for our work in the developing world by producing and marketing the Center's varieties to smallholder farmers. A strong partnership between the public and private sectors is essential to make available to farmers the best varieties at affordable prices. This works well in Australia's larger pastoral industries and even in the development of some small new industries. This is only possible where the public sector is supported."

"Australia's vegetable industry is small by world standards, and it has been difficult for any small seed company to survive and to breed varieties for the country's varied climatic zones. Even the few publicly bred varieties are often produced in partnership with the large international seed companies who control the country's seed distribution chain," he reported.

Dr Keatinge believes the whole community can be worse off if local seed companies die out along with local public breeding efforts.

"The variety of vegetables available to consumers and producers is reduced and the country is ill-prepared to cope with new pests and diseases, as it is simply not economically viable for large international companies to respond to every local industry need. By default Australia is increasingly relying on the international agricultural research organisations to do its public vegetable breeding. But it is Australian vegetable consumers and producers who are the eventual losers in this situation," he reported.

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Speakers at this year's Crawford Fund annual event include:

- *The Hon Stephen Smith MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs opening the event;*
- *The Hon Bob McMullan MP, Parliamentary Secretary for International Development Assistance making the inaugural Sir John Crawford Memorial Address;*
- *Ms Josette Sheeran, Executive Director of the World Food Program;*
- *Dr Prabhu Pingali of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation;*
- *Dr Marco Ferroni, Executive Director, Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture;*
- *Dr Namanga Ngongi, President of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa;*
- *Ms Janice Armstrong from Monsanto Company*
- *Professor Philip Pardey, an internationally renowned Australian agricultural economist*
- *Leaders from public good international and Australian agricultural research centres*

Further press [materials](#) and [background](#) on website or by contacting Cathy Reade, 0413575934

The Crawford Fund's mission is to increase Australia's engagement in international agricultural research, development and education for the benefit of developing countries and Australia.

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