

A FOOD SECURE WORLD: HOW AUSTRALIA CAN HELP.

Address to the National Press Club

By Mr James Ingram AO

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It is a pleasure and honour to share this platform with Ajay Vashee, President of the International Federation of Agricultural Producers. I did so with several of his predecessors. The first time was at the 1982 annual IFAP meeting in London, shortly after I took over leadership of the World Food Programme. On that occasion several African women farmers passionately intervened from the floor to argue that women's essential role in African farming was ignored. They left a deep and lasting impression on me. WFP development projects improved as a result.

Before turning to the Crawford Fund's report, *A Food Secure World: how Australia can help*, I want to thank publicly the members of our Task Force for their imagination, commitment and hard work. They gave generously of their time and expertise though of course no one of us necessarily subscribes to all our recommendations. I particularly want to thank Dr. Denis Blight, the chief executive of the Crawford Fund for taking this initiative. He and Dr. Gabrielle Persley are the principal authors of our report.

The focus of our recommendations is on Australia's overseas aid program but there are many relevant to other areas of public policy. This means that consideration and implementation of our report demands a whole of government approach. For that reason the report is being copied to the Prime Minister and other members of the Ministry by the Chairman of the Crawford Fund, the Honourable Neil Andrew.

It is in a spirit of optimism that I speak to you today. Our purpose is to focus the attention of the Australian government on the importance of global food security and to provide it with a plan to guide Australian policy over the years ahead. The Rudd government's concern for the world's poor and its long term foreign policy vision give me hope that it will pick up the challenge we present and stick with it.

But let there be no doubt, the challenge is formidable. Just a few months ago the spike in global food and energy prices was at the top of the agenda. Now media attention and government action have shifted to fear of global recession. Though food prices have declined the potentially devastating long-term food crisis did not go away. It simply ceased to be a problem in the rich world. But for the poor in developing countries, who may spend up to 80 per cent of their incomes on food, the price of food is always a concern, a concern that will deepen unless decisive action is taken by governments and sustained over decades.

The international agenda is driven by rich countries. The welfare of the world's one billion poor farmers and their families last became a first order issue in the 1970s, when remedial action was taken at the inter-governmental level. Since then the international community grew complacent. Investment in agricultural research and development and aid from rich countries for agriculture in developing countries declined.

The nub of the long-term problem is that demand for food will double within the next 50 years. The global population is projected to increase by from two to three billion to around nine billion. Demand for a wider variety of more nutritious foods will increase as incomes rise in middle income countries. That is already happening on a significant scale in China, India and elsewhere and will accelerate.

We know that time is running out for the international community to take concerted action on climate change. Equally, the recent crisis over world food prices signals the urgent need for global action to ensure future food security. Mr. Vashee has argued before the United Nations that there is every reason why farmers in developing countries should play their part in assuring food security while reducing their dependence on fossil fuels. Farmers everywhere must do likewise. They must also make more sustainable use of available land and water.

Mr Vashee identified three requirements to enable this to happen, namely: appropriate government policies; intensified scientific research, development and extension; and the establishment of partnerships between research organizations in developed and developing countries and between such organisations and farming communities. These same themes underlie many of our specific recommendations.

Nevertheless there is some danger that if priority is given heedlessly to carbon abatement we could end up with as much famine and hunger as

we have today. For example, if markets are distorted by subsidizing ethanol production based on a basic food grain like maize there could be a negative impact on availability of food. The challenge is to speed up research on production of bio-fuels from grasses and woody plant material.

Overall, we recommend that Australia respond to the food security crisis in two ways: firstly, by increasing our food exports and second by helping developing countries which share some of our geographical handicaps to create productive, sustainable farming systems backed by policies appropriate to their particular circumstances.

The long-term likely secular rise in food prices stands to benefit Australia by enhancing our export earnings. But we need to do a lot more than we have done in the recent past in support of our farmers if we are to play our part in helping ensure that sufficient food is available for all. The value of Australian exports of food and fibre is some four times as much as the value of our consumption. This is an extraordinary achievement in a continent that is not well endowed climatically and lacks large expanses of fertile soil. The history of agriculture in Australia shows that enterprising farmers, backed by first class research and good policies, can overcome those disadvantages. As everywhere mistakes were made but we have shown an unusual capability to learn from them. We Australians can be proud of our agricultural development.

The hotter, drier climate likely to emerge in much of Australia may impede our ability to take full advantage of our potential to help ourselves and others unless we step up appropriate research, stimulate its rapid dissemination and invest in necessary infrastructure. Unfortunately, we have been living on the accumulated knowledge and investments of the past. That must not be allowed to continue. Among other things, the decline in numbers of students taking up relevant sciences must be reversed. As we strengthen our own capacities so our ability to help others will increase.

If we invest wisely in scientific research there will be opportunity to intensify and extend food production in our North. Indeed that makes sense for Australia as insurance against a worse than projected climate outcome in temperate Australia. We therefore express our strong support for the efforts of others who support such a focus. In particular we urge that an international dimension be added to the proposed Tropical

Innovation Precinct currently under consideration by governments, CSIRO and universities.

To some our most surprising, even controversial, recommendation is that Australian aid to Sub-Saharan Africa be progressively and substantially increased. Unfortunately the Green Revolution that enabled the massive increase in cereal production in much of Asia, where diets improved and fear of famine ended despite rapid population growth, passed Africa by. The time has come to give priority to ensuring that the hundreds of millions of poor African farmers and their families are given the same opportunity to grow their productivity and incomes.

Much of sub Saharan Africa has a similar climate to Australia's semi-arid and more humid tropical regions. An aid program that inter alia helped African research institutes enhance their expertise in agricultural and related disciplines would almost certainly lead to synergies with an intensified research effort in northern Australia. The extraordinary achievements of ACIAR in collaborative research in Asia over nearly thirty years provides a foundation to proceed along lines we recommend.

(In urging that our aid program sharply increase the proportion devoted to agriculture we recommend much more than support for research. We propose an integrated set of measures to support rural development in the poorest areas of Sub-Saharan Africa and the remaining areas of extreme poverty in the Asia-Pacific region.)

As a former diplomat and chief executive of AusAid's predecessor I know better than most that aid is mainly about furthering foreign policy objectives, though it has an altruistic dimension also. Africa is seen as remote from our concerns which focus on Asia and the South Pacific. However, we tend to see our geography from an east coast perspective. Perth is a deal closer to Harare than Sydney is to Kolkata. Perth is also only 500 kilometres closer to Beijing than to Harare. The truth is that our national interest extends into the Indian Ocean.

Here I would make a plea that government expand its conception of 'national interest'. Climate change, whose potential adverse effects are similar in Africa and Australia, together with projected much bigger populations in developing countries and increased global inter-connectedness, could lead to vast people movements and general instability including wars over water and access to food. The greater is food insecurity in poor countries the more likely are these fears to be

realized. The long term hunger challenge is not just a challenge to our altruism. Dealing with it successfully is in our national interest.

Even more than now, in a more crowded world, Australia will be seen as privileged, enjoying advantages not shared by more densely populated countries in Asia and Africa. As a middle power that aspires to 'punch above its weight' in global affairs, and with unique capacities and responsibilities for agricultural development, Australia can play a valuable leadership role. Our report provides a blueprint that will assist our government to do so, if it grasps the challenge.
