

FOOD AID WILL HELP BUY PEACE

Our agricultural science can play a key role in the security of the region

JOHN ANDERSON

The correlation between food security and national security is a direct one, as recent history shows. And agricultural aid is aid that works for the benefit of developing countries as well as Australia. Yet globally there has been a dangerous trend away from overseas development assistance to agriculture.

One of the most important contributions Australia can make to global stability and sustainability at a time of immense and potentially precarious global change is to help to feed people, and feed them well.

And there is no better time than now to take account of the impact of food security science, with the federal government formulating its white paper on foreign policy, which will include foreign aid. This is our opportunity to more sharply focus on food security and tap the skills, experience and expertise of the Australian agriculture sector. This can also use the tremendous existing goodwill built from decades of partnerships and "science diplomacy".

There is an extensive literature on the drivers of conflict. The interrelationship between poverty and food insecurity on the one hand and national and regional conflict, peace and security on the other is complex but I was pleased to notice in the coverage of the recent G20 agricultural ministers meeting their conclusion that "agriculture is a part of global security politics".

The most recent example is provided by Syria, where three years of drought, the consequential shortage of food and the failure of government to respond adequately led to mass migration to the cities. Poverty and unemployment provide a fertile breeding ground for discontent and its exploitation by extremist groups, leading to civil war and mass emigration. There is comparable evidence from Somalia and Sudan.

Extreme weather events seem to have become more frequent in recent decades and are predicted to further increase throughout this century. Such events will see more flooding and erosion of agricultural lands and increasing incidence of drought, as well as the physical stress placed on the poor as heatwaves become more frequent and longer.

Food insecurity caused by population growth, combined with this climate variability, should be of critical concern across much of Africa, the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region. If the situation deteriorates, it is highly probable that civic unrest will promote opportunities for fanaticism, terrorism and plain old banditry, including in our own region.

Most people appreciate the

good performance of our farmers who, like developing world farmers, work in harsh and changing conditions to adapt and adopt new technologies and farming practices. But the significant contribution of our science to our own food production and to global agricultural productivity and stability is also vital and perhaps less well appreciated.

Examples of Australian ingenuity that have made a big difference to global agriculture include a heat-tolerant vaccine to prevent the devastating Newcastle disease of chickens which provides families in Asia and Africa with more protein and income; an environmentally and farmer-friendly bait from brewery waste to kill fruit flies, a major pest of horticulture throughout Asia; and the Australian "happy seeder" that allows direct seeding of wheat into rice stubble to reduce pollution from burning, increase production and reduce fuel and labour costs in the rice-wheat belts of South Asia.

There's no doubt that these and many other technologies and associated training bolster food security and farm productivity, lead to increased food and incomes, help farming families educate their children, benefit the environment and support regional economic growth and peace.

Beyond making us a good global citizen, supporting agricultural research for food security provides Australia with benefits worth more than we spend on it through our aid program. This is because new scientific tools and insights in developing countries can be applied to Australian agriculture because we share soil, water and climatic conditions, have interests in the same crops and livestock, and are troubled by similar pests and diseases.

Investment in agricultural research and development is a highly effective and efficient contribution to increased agricultural productivity, with significant benefits to Australia's agriculture, biosecurity and expertise.

Conservative, independent evaluations of just a proportion of the investments by the main delivery agency of our agricultural aid activities, the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research, show returns to research investments in the order of 50:1 among ACIAR's developing country partners, along with significant social, environmental and capacity building benefits.

Australia, for all the excellent work it does, could lead the way for other countries and devote an increasing proportion of its aid budget to food security. Investment in international agricultural research is aid that works but it also provides the opportunity for us to be "doing well by doing good".

John Anderson, chairman of the Crawford Fund, is a former Nationals leader and deputy prime minister. This column is based on a speech in Canberra last night to the Food Security and National Security in the Melanesian Arc forum.

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