

Agriculture and rural development



Background Briefs
Development issues and efforts

What did you have for dinner last night? How far did the food travel before it got to your dinner plate? Most likely whatever you ate traveled a great distance—possibly tens of thousands of miles—before arriving at the supermarket.

In the developing world food is often grown much closer to where people live. Other than food aid, local small-scale agriculture produces most of the food consumed in Africa, Asia and South America. But small-scale agriculture provides more than food. It also helps with poverty reduction, food security and environmental sustainability.

Agriculture is the main source of economic growth and poverty reduction in many poor countries. By improving incomes and nutrition, increased agricultural productivity can help reduce the passing of malnutrition from one generation to the next. In addition, savings from agriculture provide the means to educate children. Unfortunately, most of the land suitable for agriculture is already in production. Therefore, meeting current and future food needs in the developing world will require rapid increases in productivity.

To help developing countries make gains in agricultural productivity, agricultural projects must look beyond agriculture. They need to help the rural poor participate in local and international markets, diversify agricultural output and improve the quality of produce. As well, establishing the capacity for processing food will add value to products grown. In short, projects need to look at the community's broader goal of rural development. The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) is working with various non-governmental groups (NGOs) to do just that.

For example, in Afghanistan, a community-based CIDA project offers farming families access to a livelihood that does not rely on growing opium poppies. One of the alternatives is raising honeybees. The project provided six families in one village with two hives of bees each, basic training in caring for the bees and retrieving honey. Two hives produce 11 kilos of honey in four months so that women, who have few economic opportunities, are able to add to family income by selling the honey.

CIDA has also supported an agro-forestry research institute in the tropics. In Malawi, soils are depleted because previous farming methods remove more plant nutrients and organic matter from the soil than is put back. As a result, it is difficult to grow sufficient food. Farmers are now encouraged to grow trees and shrubs among their crops and on livestock pastures. The results are improved soil quality, animal fodder provided by tree trimming, and the elimination of the need to use expensive fertilizers. Some farmers have quadrupled their maize yields over those of other farmers. Agro-forestry encourages the planting of indigenous fruit trees, from which farmers can also harvest and sell traditional medicinal products.

In Uganda, after a severe decline in world coffee prices, CIDA offered support for former coffee growers to raise vanilla beans. Most Ugandan vanilla is raised organically and the climate permits two harvests per year. Vanilla is a very labour intensive crop and well suited to small-scale farm production. Many thousands of Ugandans have switched to vanilla production.



Canadian International
Development Agency

Agence canadienne de
développement international

TC² © 2009 The Critical Thinking Consortium
www.tc2.ca