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SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT: THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
TWENTY-FIRST
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMISTS

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Section Summary

Readers should not need reminding that the overall theme for the Conference has been *Sustainable Agricultural Development: The Role of International Cooperation*. The aim of Section I was to lay out the background for an informed debate of the main theme. It began with a broad assessment of the future of the food and agricultural system considering major priorities and elements of strategy. Kirit Parikh, with his current vantage point as Director of the Indira Gandhi Centre, and former role as Head of the Food and Agricultural Programme at the International Institute of Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), chose the issue of food security (principally in developing countries) as the dominant and enduring challenge for the future. He argued, as have others at this Conference, that 'getting prices right' will not make a major contribution to this problem because of inelastic aggregate supply response. In that situation, and given that low food prices alleviate the problems of the poor, the meaning of the 'getting prices right' slogan is far from clear. Instead, echoing Theodore Schultz, he argued that the key strategy lies with policies to stimulate production and productivity growth.

This is the argument also put forward by Nikos Alexandratos, who, armed with the FAO projection of production and demand in developing countries up to AD2000, stresses the strategy of investment in productive capacity. The two plenary papers, and the relevant discussion openings, indicated that agriculture, particularly in developing countries, remains at the top of the agenda. There are still problems relating to sustaining the growth of output, many issues concerning equity in distribution, and a strong debate on pricing policies.

The first invited paper session was designed to give the Conference an opportunity to debate issues of privatization, open competition and the political process of reducing government interference in markets. Ulrich Koester's paper considered the efficiency of markets in agricultural development, while the paper by Lawrence Smith and Ann Thomson considered the balance between public and private sectors. Both papers, but Koester's in particular, accepted that there were good grounds for maintaining a good deal of government control over trade, but argued for progressive reduction of government interference in domestic markets. Smith and Thomson set out criteria which might help determine where government intervention might still be needed, but argue using the 'new institutional' economics for a case-by-case approach

rather than sweeping generalizations. As Koester argues, it is a matter of weighing 'government failure' against 'market failure'. There was surprisingly little dissent by the discussants or from the floor.

The second invited paper session was designed to begin to air the issue of sustainability in the context of global strategies. Richard Norgaard's paper provided a stimulating challenge to the profession by arguing that the paradigm of neo-classical economics and our usual tool-kit is inadequate, and when logically applied can, and does, lead to unsustainable paths of development. He emphasized the necessity of recognizing the worth of physical science-based paradigms of sustainability, and the fact that these would lead to other solutions and cannot readily be integrated with our own models. Sustainability, as he stated, is seen as a matter of intergenerational equity, with the current distribution of property rights leading to market situations of over-exploitation of resources and unsustainability. This provoked a particularly sharp and important rejoinder from the floor, emphasizing that current inter-personal, inter-country inequity is not only at the heart of the property rights issue, but that now fashionable concern for intergenerational equity may cause us to overlook the fundamental problem of current inequity.

In a complementary paper, K.N. Ninan and H. Chandrashekar considered the practical requirements of sustainable agricultural growth strategies for Indian agriculture. They argued for a return to a more integrated form of farming relying less on purchased chemical inputs, and for investment strategies to reduce production instability.

Chairpersons: David Colman, Georges Bublout, Michel Petit.

Rapporteurs: Michio Kanai, Willis Oluoch-Kosura, N.K. Mukherjee.

Floor discussion: H. Popp, D. Belshaw, J. Kola, V.I. Isaksson, G. Schmitt, M. Petit, J.C. Wetts and Dilip Shah.