



A New Oasis Brings Relief to the World's Drylands

International agricultural research centers offer a novel integrated approach that empowers rural communities in the fight against desertification

Tunis, 19 June 2006 – Agricultural scientists presented today a proven, community-oriented approach for combating desertification, which has been applied with promising results in Tunisia and seven other countries of North Africa and the Middle East. The scientists also announced the launch of a new initiative, called Oasis, which will strengthen research on desertification worldwide.

The scientists were representing the Centers supported by the Consultative Group on International Agriculture, or CGIAR, at the International Scientific Conference on Desertification and Drylands Research.

Often, researchers deal with the agricultural and environmental challenges of desertification separately, according to William Dar, director general of the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) and without adequate community participation. But increasingly CGIAR researchers and their partners are working in an integrated way with dryland communities, Dar explained, “to build better livelihoods, while at the same time saving the land.”

Under this new approach, researchers and development specialists interact with farmers intensively to introduce a wide range of new crop varieties and practices. As farmers gradually adopt these, they diversify their production, reducing risk in the face of drought and other stresses and providing more vegetative cover, which protects the soil and other natural sources from degradation.

A critical feature of the approach, Dar stresses, is the empowerment of community organizations to design and implement development initiatives themselves, based on negotiated community action plans. “Working with two communities in each of eight countries, we have found this approach to be highly effective,” Dar noted. “It makes a big difference when the communities themselves can shape research and development to local realities.”

In Tunisia, according to Ali Nefzaoui, a livestock specialist with the International Center for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA), the approach has been well received by the two trial communities in southeastern Tunisia, each with about 800 families, as well as by central and local government. “Before,” he explains, “local development was organized according to political boundaries with close government supervision. But now our policy makers see the value of local empowerment and are prepared to support more participatory approaches in the country’s rangelands.”

All across North Africa and the Middle East, added Richard Thomas, director of research on combating desertification at ICARDA, central governments are realizing that they can no longer afford to attend to every need of rural communities, so they’re proving increasingly receptive to an approach that enables rural people to meet their own needs in ways that are technologically sound and culturally appropriate.”

“This integrated approach is backed by solid multidisciplinary research,” Thomas emphasized. Over the years, he commented, the Centers supported by the CGIAR have registered a long list of gains in harnessing global knowledge in the fight to reduce desertification. For example, many thousands of farmers have adopted new varieties of crops, such as millet and barley, that are well suited to harsh dryland climates.

Growing numbers of farmers are also taking up improved practices for maintaining soil fertility, reducing erosion, and deriving more crop and livestock production from diminished water supplies, Thomas explained. Moreover, researchers are getting messages across to key decision makers about innovative policies and strategies that can empower rural people to cope with desertification.

But given the huge scope of the desertification threat, greater efforts are needed. Toward this end, the CGIAR is launching Oasis, which represents a major new contribution to the CGIAR’s partnership with the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).

“Oasis will better integrate and coordinate the research of eight CGIAR Centers in partner organizations across the developing world,” said Dar. “By pooling knowledge and sharing research expertise and facilities, he noted, “Oasis will accelerate progress through research for sustainable development with the larger global campaign against desertification.

Oasis will be convened jointly by ICRISAT and ICARDA and involve six other Centers supported by the CGIAR. The initiative will operate within UNCCD’s global anti-desertification framework, which has been ratified by 191 nations.

The CGIAR is a strategic alliance of 64 countries, international and regional organizations and private foundations supporting 15 international agricultural research Centers that work with national agricultural research systems, the private sector and civil society. The alliance mobilizes agricultural science to reduce poverty, foster human well-being, promote agricultural growth and protect the environment.

Contacts: Rex Navarro, ICRISAT, India, phone +91-40-30713223, rex.navarro@cgiar.org; Surendra Varma, ICARDA, Syria, phone +963-21-2213433, s.varma@cgiar.org; Catherine Mgendi, CGIAR, Kenya, phone +254-20-4223035, c.mgendi@cgiar.org. Oasis Web site: www.oasisglobal.net