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Special Section

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A consortium of Future Harvest Centers, backed and assisted by international and national organizations, has begun to carry out plans to help farmers in Afghanistan recover after war and the worst drought in 40 years. The consortium grew out of a meeting held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in January 2002, supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The meeting brought together 74 participants from 34 organizations.

In order to provide immediate relief, the consortium organized supplies of much-needed seed for farmers to plant in the spring and autumn 2002 growing seasons. Approximately 3500 tonnes of seed were made available in the spring and another 10000 tonnes will be shipped in autumn.

"We'll need to work hard and we'll need to work fast so that when farm families are able to return to their fields they'll have something to plant," said Adel El-Beltagy, Director General of the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), which is leading the consortium. "But the effort mustn't stop there," he continued. "Once the emergency situation is



An Afghan farmer sows seed provided by the Future Harvest consortium this spring.

addressed, we need to turn our attention to the seed supply infrastructure in Afghanistan. The objective is a fully functioning seed sector able to produce and supply farmers with the improved crop varieties they need."

About 85% of Afghanistan's 24 million inhabitants are directly dependent on agriculture. Beyond the immediate need for seeds, the consortium will work to rebuild all aspects of farming in the country. That includes tools and training, which recovery efforts often overlook when responding to emergency situations.

Abdul Rahman Manan, the former director of Afghanistan's national agricultural research service

who is now working as an ICARDA Consultant in Kabul, said Afghanistan's agriculture is facing an unprecedented challenge. "It is not just a matter of repatriating traditional food crops or providing fertilizers and other agricultural inputs," Mr Manan said. "The country's entire agricultural production system has been disrupted. But with the consortium's collective scientific expertise and available resources, we can bring significant progress to Afghanistan more quickly."

By Surendra Varma, s.varma@cgiar.org, Head, Communication, Documentation and Information Services, ICARDA

Initial members of the consortium include the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), CARE International, the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT), the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT), the International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI) and Future Harvest. Substantial initial funding for the consortium was provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). New members will be added as the programme moves forward.



Wheat seed stacked and waiting for distribution to farmers.