

Media Release

Agricultural research: increasing the influence of farmers

What research is needed to eradicate hunger? Is Switzerland on the right track? These questions were the focus of a public event organised by SWISSAID and the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE) and held yesterday evening at the University of Bern. All participants agreed on one fundamental issue: the world needs a change of direction in global agriculture and agricultural research – in favour of small-scale farming and multi-functional agriculture.

Agricultural research is facing enormous challenges. Climate change, scarce natural resources such as soil, water, and fossil energies, and threats to biodiversity mean that “business as usual” is simply not an option. This is further exacerbated by population growth and a lack of political strategies to reduce the culture of disposal in industrialised countries. At the event, SWISSAID Director Caroline Morel called for policies to redirect agricultural research: “A third of all foodstuffs are disposed of; at the same time, a billion people are starving. This also has to become an issue for research.”

Agricultural research is still too one-sidedly focusing on the goal of increasing yields. “We need a well-developed rural area – economically, socially, and ecologically,” says Hans Hurni, director of the National Centre of Competence in Research North-South and CDE founding president. “Some 40% of the global population work in agriculture. Of these, 99% are small-scale producers. Research for development must begin with their problems and needs.”

“Modern science has pervaded agriculture, turning agricultural research – agrobiolgy, agrogenetics, agrochemistry, agromechanics – into the spearhead of industrial agriculture,” criticises Assétou Samaké, a molecular biologist from Mali and SWISSAID project partner. But continuing to bear the costs of this – both for people and for nature – is no longer sustainable. Scientists and researchers must learn from experience and farmers’ knowledge,” says Samaké. Only a handful of the biggest seed and agricultural chemistry firms – including the Swiss firm, Syngenta – control the agricultural market. Their economic and political influence also affects publicly-financed agricultural research and calls its independence into question.

The panel discussion confirmed the calls for a change in paradigm, but stopped short of agreeing what shape this would take. National Council MP Maya Graf (Green Party) was in favour of directing research funding towards the needs and knowledge of farmers, while ETH Agronomist Nina Buchmann backed a broader approach that would include all technologies. Francis Egger of the Swiss Farmer’s Association stressed that a stronger regional focus was needed and that regional food sovereignty should be taken into account: “At the end of the day, Mali has to feed Mali.”

For further documentation on the event as well as photos and a video, please visit www.swissaid.ch and www.cde.unibe.ch .

For more information and interviews please contact:

- Tina Goethe, SWISSAID, Tel. 076-516 5957; t.goethe@swissaid.ch
- Hans Hurni, CDE, Tel. 079 382 64 63, hans.hurni@cde.unibe.ch;
- Thomas Breu, CDE, Tel. 079 277 94 54; thomas.breu@cde.unibe.ch