

**McGill Conference
on Global Food Security**

September 24-26, 2008



From its beginning AIC recognized the moral obligation of scientists and professionals working in agriculture to increase food production by improving agricultural techniques, varieties and technical inputs. To clearly promote this obligation, AIC adopted *Food for All* as its motto.

The responsibility lives on today and is apparent in AIC's commitment to promoting agriculture as the sustainable resource base. For example, AIC's International Twinning Partnership Program (ITPP) provides a mechanism for sharing skills and expertise among agrologists across Canada and globally unites scientists and professionals from various disciplines under the same major goals – food security, poverty alleviation, sustainable agricultural practices and strengthening the capacity of agricultural organizations.

With food security a major goal of the ITPP, the McGill conference on global food security, held September 24-26, 2008, provided provocative points of view, some contentious, on the causes, consequences and proposed policy directions for world food security. Following are key points made at the conference. For more information go to: <http://www.mcgill.ca/globalfoodsecurity/>

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Participants heard from 30 speakers and 22 panelists from Canada, US, Europe, Asia, Africa, Caribbean and Latin America. They came with a variety of experiences and perceptions on the current food security crisis, and included High Commissioners, Chancellors, researchers, economists, medical doctors, lawyers, policy analysts, development workers, relief workers, deans, professors, producers and scientists.

The conference was co-chaired by the Right Honourable Joe Clark, Professor, Centre for Developing Area Studies, McGill University and Mr. Richard Pound, Chancellor, McGill University. The idea for the conference came from Dr. Chandra Madramootoo, Dean of the Faculty of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, McGill University, and he became its driving force.

The conference opened Wednesday evening with introductions and a public lecture on *World Food Supplies: Challenges and Future Prospects* by Kanayo F Nwanze, Vice President, International Fund for Agricultural Development.

Thursday and Friday sessions were grouped under six areas:

- Voices from the Field
- The World Food Situation
- Underlying Factors
- The International Response
- Getting Food to the People – Success Stories, and
- The Way Forward – Elements of a Framework for Managing the Crisis

Following are some of the descriptions given, facts shared and remarks made in each area. While you may not agree with all of them, read them, reflect on them and think about what you can do to address this growing global problem.

Voices from the Field and the World Food Situation

Who is suffering most?

- Those most critically affected are those in greatest need, the rural landless, pastoralists, rural small farmers who are net buyers and the urban poor.
- 700 to 800 million people were without adequate access to food before the food crisis. Since then, additional numbers of people have fallen below the poverty line and, of greater importance, the number already below the line who have fallen even deeper into poverty as a result of the food crisis.
- Many developing countries have economies that are highly dependent on agriculture, and the majority of the poor are in the rural areas.
- Globally the number of producers relying on off farm income is increasing.

How high are food prices around the globe?

- In the past three years grain prices in China are up 65% and meat and fish are up 8 times the 2005 price.
- Rice is 4.5 times the 2001 price in Uzbekistan
- Globally 49% of farmers rely on off farm income
- Prices will come down but they will still be about 20% higher than the 2005 level.
- Food prices will remain high and volatile due to climate change and increasing oil prices.
- Shortfalls in production are weather related and temporary.

A key statement from this section was: “We cannot eat retroactively.” Damage to children from insufficient nutrition in their formative years cannot be totally reversed and negatively impacts them and their societies for their entire lives.

Underlying Factors

How have trade and market forces affected the situation?

- Speculation in commodities on futures markets has been fueled by the need for a profitable area to invest since the high tech crash and then real estate investment losses.
- Speculation and trading on commodities artificially shifts prices (overshooting the value).
- There is an increased demand for food, especially high protein, processed, and high value foods due to an increase in the middle income populations of countries with growing economies such as Brazil, Russia, India and China.
- Trade barriers are used when they suit, China has tariffs for cotton but has not used them because cotton was in high demand.
- China recently ceased tax incentives for grain exports to discourage export and help meet the needs of the domestic market.
- Trade policies deter higher production. Tariffs on imports send the message to outside producers to reduce production and taxes on production being exported discourages higher production from domestic producers.
- Export taxes lower production and import tariff restrictions tell suppliers outside to reduce production.
- Governments are pressured to keep the cost of food low so poor urban and rural landless can afford to eat but, when kept artificially low, the policy reduces the incentive for people to farm.

- The economies of developing countries are too vulnerable to global trends, unlike the European and North American economies which developed with agricultural production for domestic consumption isolated from outside forces and little or no competition in export commodities.

What other major factors have affected food security?

- In 1978 over 18% of Official Development Assistance was going to agricultural production. In 2008 it is 3%.
- Many countries with surplus arable land and surplus unskilled labour are today net importers of food.
- Agricultural research has a gestation period of 7 to 15 years and funding for agricultural research has dropped consistently since the 1970s. We would not accept a reduction in funding for health research or education, why have we accepted it for agriculture?
- There are significant post-harvest losses in developing countries – 30 to 40% of fruits and vegetables and 10 to 20% of grains.
- The use of land and food grains for biofuel has helped to create the current food (price) crisis.
- Biofuels drove global grain prices up on a 30% weighted average from 2000 to 2007.
- China has ceased its projects based on biofuels due to the competition it creates for land to grow food.

The International Response - Getting Food to the People, Success Stories

What did we hear from those working in food aid and international development?

- If the first Millennium Development Goal - to end poverty and hunger - is met, achieving the other goals will follow. Targets for this goal include:
 - Halve between 1990 and 2015 the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day;
 - Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all including women and young people.
 - Halve between 1990 and 2015 the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.
- Poverty is the result of hunger and hunger is also the result of poverty.
- Food security is a government responsibility
- There are universal rights such as the right to food and the right to water.
- We should use a two track strategy – immediate food aid and long term development.
- Contrary to popular belief, Development Assistance or “Aid” does not create dependency.
- Large investments such as China’s large farms in Sudan, Saudi Arabia in Thailand or multinationals in Zambia, where what is produced is exported to the investor with little or no returns to the country of production, is not an effective model of Public-Private Partnership to follow.

The Way Forward

What are the elements of a framework to increase global food security?

- Investment is essential to reverse the current trend
- We need to create and maintain public support for agricultural production
- We need to promote local entrepreneurship through Public-Private Partnership
- We need to improve the gap between the actual and the potential productivity especially for sorghum, millet, pigeon pea, chick pea and other subsistence farmed crops.
- We need to incorporate livestock into food security strategies.
- We need to change trade barriers and incentives so they promote more production, not inhibit it.
- Market oriented regulation is needed to stop hoarding and discourage futures speculation in commodities.
- Trade policy regimes must leave adequate policy space to use agriculture as an engine for development.
- We need to improve the purchasing power of the poor so they can afford food at costs that give a fair incentive to producers
- We need domestic policies to address “market imperfections”. There is a great imbalance in the global trade strength of developed vs developing countries.

What are the basic elements of a framework for building food security?

- Property rights.
- Risk management.
- Research and development to assist in increasing production on such things as the rice specifically bred to survive total submersion for days.
- Infrastructure to increase access to inputs, water (irrigation) and markets.
- Economic market access.
- Policies that encourage production for domestic consumption first.
- Increased investment in agriculture, agricultural research, agricultural development and infrastructure to get produce to market and inputs to farms.
- Reduction of post harvest losses through technical improvements in post harvest storage and handling (eg: collapsible crates and polyhouse drying) and in processing (eg: incubator centres for small level processing of produce.)
- Increasing extension services to get recent knowledge of science and practices to producers and their production problems to researchers.
- Increase the drastically low grain reserves.
- Change biofuel policies so there is a decrease in using food sources for biofuels.
- Put the farmer at the centre of the discussion to learn from them, ensure we have an accurate understanding of the problem and the type of impact any proposed interventions will have.

What are some of the questions that need to be answered?

- Should domestic markets open more?
- Should governments introduce a price policy or an income policy to address food insecurity?
- Should governments introduce a farm policy or development policy to promote economic health?
- How can we best get corporate social responsibility behind the solutions?
- How can we personally build conviction to solve the problem?
(One suggestion was to fast on World Food Day, October 16th and, while fasting reflect on the number of people in the world who are hungry and build our personal conviction to assist in the efforts.)

The most memorable quote from the conference:

“Paradigms are shoved, they don’t just shift.”