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Organic agriculture can contribute to fighting hunger

But chemical fertilizers needed to feed the world

Contact:
Christopher Matthews
Media Relations, FAO
christopher.matthews@fao.org
(+39) 06 570 53762

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10 December 2007, Rome – FAO has no reason to believe that organic agriculture can substitute for conventional farming systems in ensuring the world's food security, Dr. Jacques Diouf, FAO Director-General, said here today.

Dr. Diouf was commenting on recent press and media reports suggesting that FAO endorses organic agriculture (OA) as the solution to world hunger.

"We should use organic agriculture and promote it," Dr. Diouf said. "It produces wholesome, nutritious food and represents a growing source of income for developed and developing countries. But you cannot feed six billion people today and nine billion in 2050 without judicious use of chemical fertilizers."

Organic farming generally bars the use of any chemical inputs. Nearly 31 million hectares, or roughly two percent of the world's farmland, was farmed organically in 2005, generating sales of some US$ 24 billion in the EU, US, Canada and Asia in 2006.

In May of this year, FAO hosted an international conference on organic agriculture. One of the papers presented for discussion – not an FAO document - argued that organic agriculture could produce enough food for the current world population.

Insufficient potential

However, according to FAO, data and models regarding the productivity of organic as opposed to conventional farming show that the potential of organic agriculture is far from large enough to feed the world.

Organically-grown products generally attract higher prices than conventionally grown ones and therefore represent a good source of income for farmers. However, they must meet certain farming and quality standards and require capacity-building, large investments and efficient organization along the production and marketing chains, which puts them beyond the reach of most resource-poor farmers of developing countries.

Judicious use

Judicious use of chemical inputs, especially fertilizers, could help significantly boost food production in Sub-Saharan Africa, where

farmers use less than one tenth of the fertilizer applied by their Asian counterparts, Dr. Diouf said. Much of African soil suffers from constraints such as acidity and lowered fertility and is greatly in need of soil amendments and nutrients.

In its annual World Development Report, the World Bank noted this year, that “low fertilizer use is one of the major constraints on increasing agricultural productivity in Sub-Sahara Africa”.

Malawi, for years a recipient of food aid, has recently boosted its maize production after adopting a policy of providing small-scale farmers with seeds and fertilizers.

“However, chemical inputs must be used with care,” Dr. Diouf said. “You have to choose the right inputs, right amounts, and apply them in the right way and at the right time."

Higher productivity with lower inputs can be obtained from such systems as Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and Conservation Agriculture (CA), Dr. Diouf noted. IPM can reduce pesticide use by 50% in the case of cotton and vegetable production and up to 100 percent with rice. CA and no-tillage agriculture reduces labour requirements by doing away with ploughing and can use 30 percent less fertilizer and 20 percent less pesticides.

The key elements in feeding the world now and in the future will be increased public and private investments, the right policies and technologies, knowledge and capacity building, grounded in sound ecosystem management. “There is no one solution to the problem of feeding the world’s hungry and poor,” Dr. Diouf concluded.

World leaders, international figures and distinguished researchers and academics will examine how to ensure the world's future food supply next year when FAO is due to host a High-Level Meeting on “Feeding the World in 2050”.

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