

Laudatio SFIAR Research Award 2011

Held at the World Food Day Symposium "Food Price Volatility and Food Security" organized by BLW / SDC on 11 October 2011 in Bern.

Dear symposium participants, dear SFIAR Award winners

It is my great pleasure to introduce today the winning team of the SFIAR Research Award 2011 and to share the reasons of the SFIAR Selection Committee for selecting the winning team. My name is Felix Hintermann, I am the Secretary of SFIAR. I am giving this laudatio speech on behalf of Manfred Kaufmann from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. He is the current president of SFIAR and apologizes for not being able to be here today.

Before we come to the appreciation of the Award winner, let me shortly introduce SFIAR and the aim and scope of the SFIAR Research Award. SFIAR is the acronym of the Swiss Forum for International Agricultural Research. It is an informal multi-stakeholder group of Swiss Institutions and private individuals interested in agricultural research for development. SFIAR members come from research institutions, NGO's, the private sector, farmers' organizations and public agencies. The main objectives of SFIAR are to promote collaboration between and visibility of Swiss actors in agricultural research for development and to play an advocacy role at policy level.

In line with these objectives, since 2008, SFIAR confers each year a research award, in order to support relevant agricultural research for development. SFIAR awards new, innovative and result oriented research that addresses the agricultural development challenges of developing and emerging countries. The SFIAR award is handed out each year at the occasion of a pertinent event related to agriculture or research. SFIAR is grateful to the organizers of this important symposium for having integrated the SFIAR Award Ceremony into their program. The call for proposals of the SFIAR Award 2011 was directed at research teams. Among several very interesting proposals of high quality, the Award Selection Committee has selected the Cassava Research Team, led by Dr. Hervé Vanderschuren of the Plant Biotechnology Lab of ETH Zurich as the winner of the SFIAR Award 2011. They are receiving the Award for their contribution entitled: ***"Cassava research - technology transfer and capacity building: Making tropical crop technologies available where it can have an impact"***.

The activities of the Cassava Research Team aim at developing improved Cassava varieties by both conventional breeding and genetic engineering. Over the last decade, cassava plants resistant to the cassava mosaic disease and the cassava brown streak disease have been developed. The strategy of combining traditional breeding of farmer preferred cultivars and genetic engineering holds the promise of providing farmers with cassava resistant to multiple viral diseases. Further research is targeted to increase storage life of harvested roots, to improve nutritional value and to study crop responses to drought and other abiotic stresses.

The Cassava Research Team puts a specific emphasis on training and education for researchers from developing countries. Large capacity development and technology transfer activities, involve training of African, South American and Asian scientists at both ETH Zurich and in their respective countries. Due to these efforts, the cassava transformation technology is now available in several laboratories in Africa and hopefully soon in Asia.

In the following, I would like to share the reasons of the SFIAR Award Committee for the selection of the Cassava Research Team as award winner:

First and foremost, the results of the Cassava Research Team are highly relevant. They are directly addressing yield constraints of the developing world's fourth most important crop. Cassava is the staple food of nearly a billion people in 105 countries, where the root provides as much as a third of daily calories. And it has enormous potential – at present, according to estimates from FAO, average cassava yields are barely 20% of those obtained under optimum conditions. Cassava is grown mainly by small scale farmers in areas that have little or no access to improved varieties. Despite growing demand and its production potential, cassava so far remained an “orphan crop”, largely neglected by agricultural research.

Second, the Selection Committee was impressed how the Cassava Research Team has combined its research activities with technology transfer, and large-scale capacity development of both individuals and institutions. This will help to ascertain that local institutions have increased access to trained scientists in the future and that the technology is available in countries that can benefit from it.

Third, the Cassava Research Team follows a multi-level approach: research is focusing on Cassava improvements on disease resistance, drought tolerance, post-harvest deterioration, and nutritional value. As such, it responds to different challenges along the whole Cassava value chain from production to storing and consumption.

Forth, research and capacity development activities have been implemented over a time-span of more than 15 years now. This allowed to move from very basic and fundamental research to practical applications in developing countries. It is exactly such long-term collaborations that allow to strengthen not only individual researchers, but whole research institutions in developing countries.

And last but not least, the Selection Committee was impressed by the scientific quality of the results of the Cassava Research Team. This is reflected in many publications in scientific journals and the numerous requests for technology transfer to Africa and Asia.

The nomination of the Cassava Research Team by the SFIAR Award Selection Committee triggered a passionate discussion in the last SFIAR general meeting. A minority of SFIAR members did not agree with the nomination and were challenging the hypothesis that genetically improved Cassava is a relevant contribution to development. They stated that so far genetic engineering technology is not delivering benefits for smallholder farmers in developing countries. They also mentioned that potential negative health impacts of the genetically engineered Cassava plants have not been studied yet.

It is not surprising for a multi-stakeholder forum such as SFIAR with its diverse membership structure that such a fundamental disaccord on the topic of genetic engineering occurs - it simply mirrors the very polarized discussion on genetically modified organisms in society as a whole. However, the majority of SFIAR members endorsed the nomination of the Selection Committee based on the reasons provided above. SFIAR members also emphasized that granting its 2011 research Award to a research team that works on genetic engineering of Cassava does not represent a paradigm shift of SFIAR regarding this technology: For SFIAR, genetic engineering is not a universal solution for agricultural development. But the majority of SFIAR members acknowledge the potential of genetic engineering as one element of a large toolbox of instruments, technologies and approaches to improve agricultural yields in developing countries.

To come back to the genetically engineered improved Cassava traits and to the question of benefits and impact: Whether the potential benefits of improved Cassava traits are to be materialized depends not only on the technology itself, but even more on its acceptance in society and the legal framework in developing countries. These factors are to a large extent beyond the control of the Cassava Research Team. Ultimately, the decisions on acceptance or rejection of genetically engineered plants are to be made independently in each country. And it goes without saying that these decisions must encompass a sound analysis of risks and benefits.

But having placed the Cassava Research Team in the broader context of the controversial debate on agricultural biotechnology and genetic engineering does not belittle the impressive achievements and results of the Team in research, capacity development and technology transfer. Wholeheartedly, on behalf of SFIAR, I would like to congratulate Dr. Hervé Vanderschuren and his entire team for winning the SFIAR Award 2011. I would like to invite him now to give us some more in-depth explanation about the activities and results of the Cassava Research team and ask the symposium participants to welcome him with applause. Mr. Vanderschuren, the floor is yours...