

World Bank agro-science won't solve the food crisis

by Marcia Merry Baker

The Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) held its 25th annual meeting on Oct. 29-Nov. 2, in the auditorium of the World Bank in Washington, D.C. This is the group associated with agencies that backed the "Green Revolution" in agriculture of the 1960s and '70s. This year's conference, the largest in CGIAR's history, generated international publicity for the viewpoint that backing for agricultural research and development can feed billions of people.

This point was stressed by many notables, including former World Bank President Robert McNamara, who specifically referred to providing food for the projected world population of 8 billion people 30 years from now, through adequate funding for agricultural researchers today. One week earlier, McNamara gave the World Food Prize award to a CGIAR scientist, Gurdev Singh Khush, and a fellow researcher, Dr. Henry Beachell, for work on developing "miracle rice."

Sound good? Here's the hitch. The sponsors and controllers of the CGIAR agriculture drive are the very international agencies and private financial interests deliberately preventing agricultural infrastructure development, and the utilization of other essentials (inputs, processing, transport) that would allow nations to achieve food security through the development of their economies. The CGIAR backers interconnect with the world agriculture commodities cartels of companies controlling agricultural trade, including seeds and livestock breeds. They are demanding sweeping patents and "intellectual property rights" for any and all agro-science breakthroughs, in order to tighten their financial and political control. For example, a small cartel of seven companies now dominates all major world seed production and sales. They include Cargill, ICI Garst (Imperial Chemical Industries, of

the U.K., whose board includes former U.S. Federal Reserve chairman Paul Volcker), Monsanto, and Ciba Geigy/Sandoz.

The Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas stressed the point of private patent rights in a new publication ("Agriculture, Technology and the Economy," Fall 1996), whose release was timed to coincide with the CGIAR conference. It notes, "Today's stronger intellectual property rights for agricultural innovations have spurred private sector research, which has increased to nearly \$4 billion annually" in the United States.

Thus, CGIAR backers may talk about agro-science, and appear to be pro-progress, but this is just one side of a controlled debate over whether technology can feed billions more people in the world. Emblematic of the other side, is the "zero growth" view, presented by Lester Brown of the Washington, D.C.-based Worldwatch Institute. The two sides of this controlled debate can be expected to be played up at the Nov. 13-17 World Food Summit in Rome, the headquarters of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, for which the CGIAR event served as a pre-summit meeting. The topic of the Rome summit is food security. In December, the World Trade Organization will hold a similar conference in Singapore.

Therefore, we present here relevant background and profiles on some of the false friends of science in agriculture. The local researcher working on a better plant cultivar may be a well-meaning individual, and contribute to a food "miracle," but the controllers of the World Bank's CGIAR system at the top are thwarting agricultural advances and national food security.

History of CGIAR

The Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research is a World Bank consortium of 16 international agricul-

tural research centers, each with a board of trustees, and separate operations. They include such institutions as Peru's CIP (Centro Internacional de la Papa), specializing in potatoes; Mexico's CIMMYT (Centro Internacional de Mejoramiento de Maiz y Trigo), which was the center of the early Green Revolution breakthroughs; and the Philippines' IIRRI (International Rice Research Institute), home to improved rice varieties now in use on 70% of world's rice-growing land.

CGIAR was established in 1971, by the World Bank, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, the United Nations Development Program, and nine governments, with money from the Ford and Rockefeller foundations.

What are their stated objectives? "Sustainable agriculture" is the current theme, repeated as needed for every climate and culture. For example, page 91 of CGIAR's 1995-96 Annual Report reprints a CGIAR news release from Aug. 4, 1996, which warns, "Half of Remaining Tropical Forests Considered at Risk." It states that "ICFRAF [International Center for Research in Agroforestry], CIFOR [Center for International Forestry Research], and national and international institutes, NGOs [non-governmental organizations], and universities have joined forces in a global effort to combat unsustainable slash-and-burn practices in a CGIAR systemwide program . . . to reduce global warming, conserve forest biodiversity, alleviate poverty, and increase food security by developing sustainable alternatives to slash-and-burn agriculture."

One full chapter of the CGIAR Annual Report is devoted to the issue of "gender" in the staffing of CGIAR.

World Bank control

The current chairman of CGIAR is Ismail Serageldin, who is also vice president of the World Bank for Environmentally Sustainable Development. The first chairman of CGIAR, in 1971, Richard H. Demuth, had worked for the World Bank for 25 years before CGIAR was formed. Former World Bank President Robert McNamara is on the World Food Prize Council of Advisers, associated with CGIAR Nobel scientist Norman Borlaug, of "miracle wheat" fame.

Speaking of the Washington, D.C. CGIAR conference—attended by scientists, farmers, NGOs, charities, and funding agencies—Serageldin, said, "This is the first time all these actors are coming together on such a scale." And Serageldin found a way, in his many media interviews, to stress all kinds of benefits of agriculture research, but to avoid the question of national economic development. Serageldin identifies agricultural research as relevant to solving three problems in poor nations: achieving food security, protecting the environment, and ending poverty. He stresses high returns on investments in agricultural research, from larger crop output, by making food easier to produce. Higher-yielding crops reduce pressure on farms to expand into marginal areas. And, Serageldin points to prospects for breeding plants that allow farmers to cut down on use of farm chemicals.

Anything but national economic development

The agenda for the CGIAR six-day "centers week," as its annual meeting is called, covered a wide variety of topics, with the conspicuous exception of national economic and food development questions.

The first day's sessions began with remarks from World Bank President James Wolfensohn, who likes to bill himself as a fan of agriculture, followed by Maurice Strong, a top environmentalist and former chairman of the 1992 UN "Earth Summit" in Rio, who delivered the "Sir John Crawford Memorial Lecture."

Oct. 29 was dedicated to "Focus on Regional Challenges," with reports from the heads of the research institutes in each area of the world: sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Ibero-America and the Caribbean, and West and North Africa.

Oct. 30 focussed on "Opportunities in Agricultural Research," with the emphasis on collaboration among NGOs, the private sector, and other research institutions outside the CGIAR orbit.

Oct. 31 covered agricultural science in the UN, the World Bank globalist view, with the agenda topic, "Toward a Global Action Plan for Research Partnership." Then the CGIAR business meeting took place, which included a presentation on "CGIAR Participation in the World Food Summit" in Rome.

The business meeting continued for the next two days, and included the issue of biotechnology, as well as CGIAR efforts in central and eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union.

What marks the history of activities of the CGIAR's 16 research stations? According to CGIAR coordinators, it's the development of "super-crops." The Green Revolution's production of "miracle rice" varieties, and "miracle wheat," is legendary. There is also a "super"-cassava, and improved wheats and potatoes that can be planted in warmer climates.

However, the World Bank strategists counterpose this kind of goal—whose benefits are obvious for increasing food supplies—to the goal of building up the national agricultural sectors of nations (including water, power, transport, inputs, and other infrastructure), which the World Bank and food commodities cartels oppose.

CGIAR Chairman Serageldin gave out plenty of World Bank jargon in press interviews at the conference, playing down national economic development, and playing up "magic bullet" food-supply research. He said that, at a certain stage, agriculture development in a nation gets "more complex." The idea is to find ways to improve the crop yields of poor soils, to improve farm output in areas where some of the world's poorest people live; and that this should be done (*not* by infrastructure construction), but by means such as making plants more tolerant to poor weather, pests, and disease. And thus, says Serageldin, improved crops and farming techniques—but not infrastructure and national development—will improve the lot of small farmers.