

**For Immediate Release**

**Contact Satellite Press Office: +44 (0) 20 7608 5210**

International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development

## **AFRICAN FARMING FAILS TO REACH POTENTIAL**

WASHINGTON/LONDON/NAIROBI/DELHI, 15 April 2008 - Agricultural output in Africa south of the Sahara will not produce larger harvests without greater use of fertilisers, says a report commissioned by the World Bank and the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation. Agriculture accounts for an average of 32% of the region's GDP, but overall per capita yields declined from 1970 to 1980 and since then have stagnated. Soil moisture stress affects more than 80% of Africa's agricultural land, limiting nutrient uptake. So both water and soil organic matter need to be conserved together.

The report, the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), says genetic erosion is another concern, as many crops, like tef and yams, and species which are considered relatively unimportant globally, are local staples. Africa is also the only region where per capita fish supplies are falling. The report examines the potential of agricultural knowledge, science and technology (AKST) for reducing hunger and poverty, improving rural livelihoods, and working towards environmentally, socially and economically sustainable development.

The warnings come in one of the Assessment's five regional reports, on Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The other reports cover Central and West Asia and North Africa; East, South and South-East Asia and the Pacific; Latin America and the Caribbean; and North America and Europe. There is also a comprehensive Global Assessment.

The IAASTD authors say AKST has had some notable successes, including the adoption of improved crops, trees and livestock breeds; bio-control of pests; and integrated management of natural resources. But the number of poor people is increasing, 30% of Africans are chronically hungry, and there are similar levels of malnutrition among children under five.

The lack of micronutrient-rich foods reduces agriculture's potential for improving health, while tropical diseases and HIV/Aids are major problems. The region needs to exploit both surface and ground water, and to improve livestock, not relying solely on hardy and disease-resistant indigenous breeds with low productivity. It should not rush to produce first-generation biofuels, which are likely to put pressure on forests and marginal lands.

Most farmers in the region face uncertainty and high risks, which they try to minimise. But risk avoidance often comes at the cost of maximising profits, so agriculture falls far below its potential. Understanding how farmers and pastoralists cope can illuminate the way in which agriculture serves multiple functions.

Regional knowledge, understanding and uptake of new agricultural technologies tend to be patchy, while education still focuses on learning facts rather than developing problem-solving skills. And the region is unique in having governments and formal education working largely in languages not spoken as first languages by most of their people.

The authors' detailed recommendations on using AKST to help the region include a call to make modern technologies available, and increasing trade and marketing opportunities. It could also explore the potential for paying farmers who provide environmental services, perhaps by leaving valuable wetlands undrained or by using forests to reduce carbon emissions. The authors note that the dominance of external funding for AKST in Africa has meant unreliable long-term funding and loss of control over the relevance and direction of new AKST.

The Assessment says liberalising agricultural trade appears not to have helped small farmers or rural communities appreciably in much of the world. Opening national agricultural markets to international

[www.agassessment.org](http://www.agassessment.org)

[www.greenfacts.org/en/agriculture-iaastd/](http://www.greenfacts.org/en/agriculture-iaastd/)

competition before basic infrastructure and national institutions are in place can undermine agriculture, poverty alleviation, the environment and food security.

Our knowledge must also be redirected to address inequities. The Assessment says: "AKST alone cannot solve these problems... but it can make a major contribution..." In many countries, it says, food is taken for granted, and farmers are poorly rewarded for putting it on our tables, let alone as stewards of almost a third of the Earth's land. Investment in agricultural science and its extension to farmers has decreased, yet we still urgently need sustainable, environmentally sound and equitable ways to produce food.

The authors say we have little time to lose if we are to change course. Continuing with current trends would exhaust our resources and put our children's future in jeopardy. Professor Judi Wakhungu, IAASTD co-chair said:

"If we don't take action, the problems of environmental degradation and food insecurity will continue to increase. We must cooperate now, because no single institution, no single nation, no single region, can tackle this issue alone. The time is now."