

International initiative to improve food security for developing countries



Casava, an important crop in the developing world. Copyright Thinkstock / visual7

Sam Dryden, director of Agricultural Development at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation:

“We are pleased to join with the UK and Indian governments in their commitment to global food security. This joint program is an opportunity for high-impact research partnerships to flourish among scientists in the developing and developed worlds. The end result will be new pathways out of poverty for the millions of smallholder farming families who depend on agriculture to support and feed their families.”

In early 2011 research funders from the UK and USA and government departments in the UK and India announced a £20M research initiative to harness science to improve food security in the developing world.

The new initiative is being managed by the UK Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) and will fund teams from the UK, India and developing countries to work on research projects to improve the sustainability of vital food crops. The research will particularly investigate ways to improve the disease-resistance and stress-tolerance of staple crops in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

The £20M fund is made up of contributions from BBSRC, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (through a grant to BBSRC), the UK Department for International Development and the Indian Department of Biotechnology.

Funding will be awarded to teams that can show that their research can improve food security and increase sustainable crop yields within the next 5-10 years.

The Issue

Over one billion people globally are already undernourished and food security is a major issue with the world’s population forecast to reach nine billion by 2050. Environmental change, new trading patterns and urbanisation are all expected to increase pressures on food security in coming years.

David Willetts, UK Minister for Universities and Science, who signed a letter of intent with the Indian government in late 2010 said: “Global food security is one of the greatest challenges we face in the 21st century and I am delighted that

Key facts

£20M
funding being made available.

9Bn
predicted world population by 2050

1Bn
people currently undernourished.



Sorghum, an important crop in many developing countries. Copyright iStockphoto / N Vasuki Rao

the UK is leading the way with this important initiative.

“This global collaboration will benefit millions of people leading to improved food production in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia and increasing the body of knowledge on food security worldwide.”

Stephen O’Brien, UK Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development said: “Millions of people in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia are dependent on staple crops such as maize and rice both as a source of food and income. If disease or difficult growing conditions limit their harvest then the consequences can be devastating, with families unable to afford medical care or school fees, and children at real risk of becoming malnourished.

“Reducing the unpredictability of growing crops helps to ensure that the poorest countries are able to feed their people, cope with sudden global food price changes, and ultimately boost economic growth.”

The Initiative

The new initiative will place particular emphasis on improving the sustainable production of staple food crops across sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. These include cassava, maize, rice, sorghum and wheat. By placing significant emphasis on these crops the initiative partners expect to be able to improve food security and quality of life for the largest possible number of people.

The initiative also aims to maximise the impact of the research funded by supporting a more comprehensive approach to improving productivity and yield, for example

by tackling crop resistance to drought or flood. By funding international researchers tackling problems across different countries and regions promising research from one country can easily be shared and tested more widely in different regions and conditions to provide the widest possible benefit.

Professor Douglas Kell, BBSRC Chief Executive, said: “Global society faces huge challenges in the coming years and securing safe, affordable and nutritious food for everyone is one of the biggest. Scientists and organisations across the world have the capabilities and expertise to make a real difference in meeting the global food security challenge but no single organisation or country can do this on its own. By working together and by coordinating our activity we can maximise the impact of our investment and of international science. The joint programme that we are announcing today is a groundbreaking example of how we can do so.”

Each project funded under the initiative will include partners from the UK and a developing nation. This approach, used by BBSRC and DFID in previous programmes, aims to build scientific capacity in developing countries, with the aim of developing research teams and projects that tackle other local scientific challenges.

About BBSRC

BBSRC is the UK funding agency for research in the life sciences and the largest single public funder of agriculture and food-related research.

Sponsored by Government, in 2010/11 BBSRC is investing around £470 million in a wide range of research that makes a significant contribution to the quality of life in the UK and beyond and supports a number of important industrial stakeholders, including the agriculture, food, chemical, healthcare and pharmaceutical sectors.

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