

NEWS

ICC Expert Summit on Food Security, 29–30 June 2009

Stanley P. Cauvain

spc@baketran.demon.co.uk

Over 60 ICC and invited experts from 28 countries gathered in Vienna on the 29 and 30 June to address the issue of food security with the aim of considering the ‘critical research and development needs for a safe, sustainable and sufficient food and feed supply’. The meeting comprised a series of short ‘scene-setting’ presentations before delegates split into working parties (Figure 1) to consider different elements of food security and to develop ideas which could form the basis of suitable research proposals.

The Rome Declaration on World Food Security (FAO, 13–17 November 1996) stated that ‘Food security exists when all people, at all times, have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active life ...’ and it was in this context that the assembled experts split into three working parties to consider:

1. Staple food security for all in an age of climate change;
2. Food and feed safety for all;
3. Nutrition and health for all.

The potential impact of climate change was a common theme, which emerged from the deliberations of all of the working parties. Global climate change poses significant challenges in terms of both the availability and the nutritional quality of staple foods and both issues will need to be addressed to help deliver food security. Not only is it likely that the crops grown in a given region will change in nature



Figure 1 An ICC Expert Summit working group.

and quality but also that considerable attention will need to be given to adapting agricultural practices as patterns of rainfall are also likely to change. New breeding initiatives may help deliver improved nutritional qualities in staple crops and improve the underlying diet of all but they must also be sustainable in the environmental conditions of the future.

Dr. Antonio Di Giulio from Directorate E (Food, Agriculture and Biotechnology) in the European Commission reminded attendees that there are in excess of 1.2 billion obese people while at the same time there is a similar number of malnourished in the world. This was a sobering thought which the attendees took on board as they considered food security and the roles that scientists and technologists could play in meeting the needs of both of these sections of the world’s population and it was emphasized constantly in both the formal and informal discussions during the Summit.

One phrase, which was often repeated in the presentations and discussions, was that we should ‘Think globally but act locally’. This philosophy recognizes that responses to particular food security needs must be tailored and delivered in manners appropriate to the relevant regions and ethnic backgrounds around the world. In this context the value of the dissemination and exchange of scientific and technical information was clearly identified in all of the working groups. It was agreed that this will need to be an ‘inclusive’ process with the lessons and knowledge related to agricultural practices from parts of the world where crops are already grown under conditions of ‘climatic stress’, being taken on board by those regions yet to experience such agricultural environments.

A strong and common theme discussed in all groups was to use crop science and technology in practical ways to improve quality and increase yields of staple foods. Practical ways of dealing with the latter include finding solutions to reducing both pre- and post-harvest losses. Practical work to reduce potential storage losses through the actions of pests and spoilage mechanisms could significantly contribute to food security, as could the reduction of wastage during the processing of plant-based foods into forms suitable for human and animal consumption.



Figure 2 Prof. John Taylor, ICC president, addressing delegates at the ICC expert summit.

The need for greater understanding of how and why both desirable and undesirable minor and trace elements find their way into crops and the human food chain emerged as a continuing theme during the workshops. If ways could be found to limit the uptake of undesirable elements by crops then expensive (in the food security sense) processing losses could be reduced through reduced rejection rates. It was considered that the development of new, rapid, robust and inexpensive testing methods would greatly help in reducing wastage and delivering future food security.

The debates, which took place during this ICC Summit, were wide-ranging and detailed as the extensive challenges associated with food security were considered by the working groups. At the end of the ICC Expert Summit the various outputs were collated and summarized to form a draft of an agreed 'Declaration' on food security, which will later be made public. Prof. John Taylor, ICC President (Figure 2), undertook the difficult task of chairing the drafting of the declaration and ably guided the assembled experts through the process.

The construction of the Summit Declaration was the start of a second phase of activity for the experts involved as the ideas which had been generated in the debates were taken away by the organizing committee (Figure 3) and working group chairs with the objective of developing ideas for potential projects and aligning these with relevant funding opportunities. Some of the different funding options had been identified in the presentations, which preceded the group workshop activities. These included World Bank



Figure 3 The organizing committee welcomes delegates to the ICC expert summit on food security.

(Randall Purcell, Department of Agricultural and Rural Development, World Bank, USA), FAO/IAEA (Britt Maestroni, Joint FAO/IAEA Division, Austria), UNIDO (Dejene Tezera, Industrial Development Officer, UNIDO Headquarters Vienna, Austria) and EU 7th Framework options.

The support of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Agricultural, Forestry, Environment and Water Management was invaluable. After delivering an initial welcome Dr. Elfriede Fuhrmann remained an active participant in the event and her continued presence further cemented the close relationship enjoyed by ICC and the Austrian Ministry. Dr. Fuhrmann was also a kind host at an official reception in the Austrian Ministry building. This was the only social event of the meeting and even then the conversations remained focused on the 'job-in-hand'.

The success of the Summit and the potential for its outputs owe much to the networking of the experts who attended. These could be seen in both the group workshops and plenary sessions. In the breaks the exchange of ideas as to how science and technology could contribute to improving food security meant that there was always the constant buzz and hum of conversation as the networking continued.

The Summit was considering a serious and fundamental issue and the commitment of all involved was always evident. Whatever the final outputs from this ICC Summit we hope that this gathering of experts and the networking, which took place, will already have made a contribution to future food security.