

Commonwealth asked to do more for food security

Dr Denis Blight, Crawford Fund and member of the Commonwealth Round Table in Australia Steering Committee

At the turn of the 19th century, the British Colonial Office realised that it had neglected developments in the colonies in general and in agriculture in particular.

A senior colonial official said 'It has always been a weak spot in our colonial administration that, whilst we have sent good governors, judges and clerical staff to colonies, until recently we have done very little to assist them in developing their agriculture or in rendering the countries more habitable, and the colonies have had to work out their own salvation as best they could or to look to other countries for guidance and men.'

A particular concern were problems of pests and diseases of men, livestock and crops and the role of insects and arachnids in this pestilence. Sleeping sickness and its effects on Europeans and Africans were described as 'melancholy'. It was time, many felt, for a more constructive form of colonialism. This led to the formation in 1910 of the Imperial Entomology Committee, championed in the House of Commons by none other than Winston Churchill. The Committee was the first progenitor of the Commonwealth Agricultural Bureau, now known as CAB International, of which I was the chief executive from 2000 to 2006.

The emphasis on agriculture and agricultural research in international development has periodically strengthened and faded. So, when the threat of famine appeared in Asia in the 1950s and 1960s bilateral and multilateral agencies increased support for agriculture and agricultural research creating a 'green revolution' that saw growth in agricultural productivity outstrip growth in demand for food. But in the late 1980s and 1990s, complacency set in and new priorities such as health and governance emerged. The proportion of aid and national budgets devoted to agriculture and agricultural research fell away. Organisations such as CAB International suffered serious cuts in their core budgets.

This pattern was also evident in the bilateral programs of the in the bilateral aid programs of Commonwealth countries such as Canada and Australia and in the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC) – where technical assistance in agriculture had once been a dominant theme. Nobody seemed to notice that in the 1990s, agricultural productivity growth

began to slow and food production fall behind surging demand from increasing populations and more demands from the emerging economies such as India and China.

The impact of this neglect reached crisis point in the early years of the 21st century. We noticed it in food price rises on our supermarket shelves but the impact was more devastating in the poorest countries and particularly Africa. Fortunately, the crisis served a purpose of shocking governments into action. A series of reports, including one from a task force of the Crawford Fund led by Mr J C Ingram, a former Director of the World Food Program, analysed the causes of the crisis with forensic skill and pointed to the need for better government policies in agriculture, more investment in rural development in general, and more funding for agricultural research and training in particular. Governments and donors, and particularly the Australian Government responded positively to the recommendations of the Crawford Fund report.

By way of contrast the CFTC which once had a high priority on agriculture and rural development has not revived its support for this sector in any substantial way. Moreover, the Commonwealth Secretariat in London seems to have lost any expertise in the agriculture sector. This is a great pity as the Commonwealth and the CFTC as a neutral, 'friendly', trusted or non-bilateral donor would be in a good position to help particularly the poorer members of the Commonwealth think through the sensitive food security policy options and provide research and training assistance to strengthen national policy formation in those countries. To do so, it would need to substantially restructure its own staffing and/or form partnerships with bodies such as the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) that do have the expertise. A small grant to enable IFPRI to give particular attention to the policy development needs of small island states and the least developed Commonwealth countries in Africa would, I should think, be a highly cost-effective form of aid.