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Agricultural research for developing nations

A one-month tour of agriculture in another part of the world may not qualify a person as an expert, no matter how intensive the exposure, but it certainly does help to give one a real-life perspective on the importance of self-sufficient food production to the vitality of a nation, and a greater appreciation of many things we have come to take for granted in this country.

Late in 1978 I had an opportunity to participate on a team of international agriculturists to conduct the quinquennial review of the research program conducted by the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) headquartered at Hyderabad, India, and to visit on my own the International Rice Research Institute at Los Banos, in the Philippines. After stops in Upper Volta, Senegal, India, and the Philippines, and learning about the research of these two centers on sorghum, pearl millet, chickpea, pigeonpea, groundnuts, and rice, one can quickly perceive the importance of improved varieties and cultural practices to the well-being of the millions of people who depend on these crops for their basic food needs. One cannot help but be impressed with the vigor with which the scientists at these international centers attack the magnitude of the problems of crop improvement.

As a plant pathologist, I was heartened by the extensive programs to develop disease-resistant varieties, involving thousands of breeding lines whose promising progeny could be tested under a variety of environmental conditions throughout the world. As an agricultural administrator, I was encouraged by the cooperation of plant breeders, geneticists, entomologists, plant physiologists, plant pathologists, agricultural engineers, and economists in their focus on the problem of improved crop production. With the need for more food from a dependable supply so clearly identified, their agricultural research goals are easily defined.

How does this need relate to programs of agricul-

tural research in this country and in our individual states? It is my view that much is to be gained by placing world agriculture on a sound and dependable basis. Raised living standards, economic stability, and world peace are all potential achievements of the successful battle to overcome hunger and malnutrition in developing countries. The U.S. government made a commitment to aid these countries through research and education by enacting in 1975 the Title XII Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act. This act proposes to support a partnership between the U.S. government and state agricultural research and educational institutions to conduct research and training programs involving the Third World countries. While I commend this partnership, I must also express disappointment that the cumbersome bureaucracy associated with it has prevented any notable achievements as yet. On the other hand, the International Centers for Agricultural Research sponsored by the Consultative Group for Agricultural Research located in developing countries around the world are in place and generally functioning effectively.

My impression is that any Title XII-sponsored program that does not take the consultative group-sponsored-centers into consideration and build on the complementarity of the two programs will likely fail in time. With problems so complex and immense there is no danger of overlap of programs if they are initially planned with cooperation and coordination in mind.

I salute the international agricultural centers for their execution of the concept to work on the practical agricultural needs of the developing regions of the world, and I urge the U.S. institutions that plan to involve themselves in Title XII or other foreign assistance programs of agricultural research and education to coordinate them with appropriate international centers.

Together the programs could make lasting advancements in agriculture in the world. Apart, the chances for success are lessened significantly.