

Panel intervention at IFAD Innovation Talks No. 6 on “The role of the public sector in the assimilation process of agri-technologies: The Israeli Model”.

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As Prepared for Delivery

Dear Minister Forer and other representatives of Israel’s Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and Israeli innovation and technology organizations; dear Vice-President Ziller and other colleagues from IFAD; distinguished guests; ladies and gentlemen: good afternoon.

As we know, technological innovations has been a major driving force for increasing agricultural productivity and promoting agricultural development in both developed and developing countries. Possibly, no other country in the world knows that better than Israel.

Israel is also an example of a core belief that drives our work at IFAD: investing in agriculture is an effective way of promoting the development not just of farmers and rural areas, but also of the whole society. If today Israel is a wealthy nation is greatly because its founding fathers had a clear vision that food production and food security are the foundations on which to build a stable country.

In the past, the choice of agricultural technologies and their adoption was based mainly in the need to increase farmers’ production and productivity and, therefore, income. Now, the world has become more complex, and the choice of technologies is also influenced by trade, social development, environmental, education, food safety and quality and animal welfare regulations and policies.

The agricultural sector faces new challenges to meet growing demands for food and, at the same time, to be environmentally and socially sustainable, allowing smallholders to overcome poverty and all its associated problems.

This growing complexity adds to the evidence that our current food systems –the way in which we produce, distribute and consume food– are not working in the direction of achieving the world without hunger and poverty we committed ourselves as global society to deliver in the Agenda 2030. These facts prompted UN’s Secretary-General Antonio Gutierrez to convene the Food Systems Summit in autumn this year. In the run-up to it, the question we are looking into in this event –how the public sector can promote the assimilation of new agricultural technologies– acquires particular relevance.

At IFAD, we have a holistic view of agriculture-related issues. For us, agriculture is embedded in the wider issue of rural development, in which technology and innovation play a key role. A role poised to be even more important in these pandemic times in which movement and social interaction are so limited. So, when we talk about technologies, we don't talk only of productivity and production-increasing technologies, but also about technologies to prevent and mitigate the impact of climate change, avert food waste or guarantee financial inclusion and access to basic social services of rural communities.

No doubt, the impact of new agricultural technologies depends on how actors in both the private and public sectors manage to adapt institutionally and organizationally for taking advantage of possible positive effects of new technologies. Institutions such as IFAD can play a key role in designing and implementing programs and financing mechanisms in partnership with governments and other global organizations to foster innovation in poverty reduction interventions in rural areas.

In the last two years, IFAD has approved major policies to support these efforts.

On one hand, the new private sector strategy that aims to mobilize private funding and investments into rural micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), expanding access to markets and increasing income and job opportunities for IFAD's target groups.

On the other hand, the Information and Communications Technologies for Development (ICT4D) strategy seeks to maximize IFAD's capacity to use technology to increase the impact of rural development initiatives and improve the economic and social conditions of rural people through increased agricultural productivity, market participation and household resilience.

Let me highlight our commitment to expand the use of technology with some examples from IFAD's portfolio in the Latin American and Caribbean region, where we have fully embraced a culture of innovation.

In Brazil, IFAD's largest country program in the region, IFAD-supported projects have adopted and tested several technologies for the use of water resources suited for the semiarid conditions of the country's Northeast. They include rainwater harvest through cisterns, grey water reuse technologies, underground dams, mobile water treatment plants, and desalination systems as part of the federal government's Programa Água Doce (the Fresh Water Program). These technologies are designed to produce drinking water, as well as water for agricultural use by rural communities in the semiarid of the country that has limited access to water resources.

Also in Brazil, IFAD supports the piloting of applied integrated production systems developed by Embrapa to use the effluent from desalinators in bio saline agriculture such as in forage production and aquaculture, and other technologies related to the use of salt-rich waters for agriculture and aquaculture.

Thus, in Guatemala, the recently approved GUATEINNOVA project, cofinanced with the World Bank, will invest on critical technology to enhance climate resilience, commercialization potential, and reduce input costs and production loss. It will also support eligible entrepreneurs selected through an Innovation Challenge Fund who would design and pilot new post-harvest or food safety technologies in Guatemala.

In Argentina, the PROSAF project, to be approved by the end of the year, will promote the use of innovative ICT4D solutions to support production processes, to enhance the marketing of products through e-commerce platforms, to access digital financial services through alliances with Fintech

companies and with Agritech companies for the participatory guarantee systems for ecological agriculture through block-chains.

IFAD, through its Rural Poor Stimulus Facility will strengthen providers of innovative technologies (AgriTech) and accessible digital financial services (FinTech) catering to the needs of smallholders already attended by IFAD funded projects in six countries. The target of this grant are 400 producer organizations and rural SMEs interested in using new technologies and services through digital platforms.

Looking into the future, we are also starting conversation with the European Union regarding their program of Digital Innovations hubs as policy instrument aimed primarily at the digitalization of industries in general, but also at facilitating the implementation of specific key technologies, such as artificial intelligence, precision agriculture and eHealth.

Finally, some people may say that this is an impossible dream, that technology and small farmers don't match. Many said the same when Israel claimed that it would transform the Negev desert into a productive agricultural area and history proved them wrong.

Thank you.