

A boost for West African farming

In the first decade of the 21st century, agricultural research has made huge strides. With the development of high yielding, drought resistant crops, low cost techniques for control of weeds and pests, and new systems to bring farmers the inputs and information they need, farming should be enjoying a boom. Sadly however, the majority of these innovations and discoveries do not make it beyond the boundaries of the research station where they are developed. Getting research findings into use by the people who need them is not as easy as it may seem.

So how does a proven bit of research become a reality in the farmer's field? One thing is clear: it must be profitable, not only for the farmers who use it, but for the companies who supply it. And that means that scientists can't confine themselves to their research stations and laboratories – they need to get involved with the world of business.

Encouraging partnership between researchers and private sector companies is at the heart of a new approach to boost agricultural production in Africa. The RIU (Research into Use) Best Bet initiative has received funding from the UK Government to invest in research/industry partnerships that can prove their capacity to bring new technologies to farmers' fields. An initial funding round for East, Central and Southern Africa has already taken place. Over 100 teams submitted proposals covering the production, processing and marketing of crops, livestock, fisheries and aquaculture. Of these, eleven were shortlisted, and given financial support to develop more detailed business plans.

The teams were then invited to Nairobi to present their plans in person to an expert panel from the African business, finance, research and development communities. Four were successful, and received start-up funds totalling US\$2.5 million. Their innovative technologies included a method for forecasting and controlling armyworm, a new seed treatment against the parasitic weed Striga, and an approach to scaling up the production and distribution of new rice varieties specifically bred for Africa (NERICA).

Now, West African researchers and entrepreneurs have their chance to compete for funding. In December 2009 the RIU Best Bets put out a call for proposals from West Africa, giving a deadline of January 29th 2010. Research/business partnerships are invited to write a concept note outlining the nature of their technology and how it will be turned into a viable business. Bids need to fulfil various criteria. In particular, the proposal must get a piece of agricultural research into use, addressing a problem faced by farmers or others in the agricultural supply chain, and thereby alleviate poverty. The judging panel will consider the scientific, business and social strengths of each proposal, in making their selection.

The Best Bets concept is a significant one. Until recently, donor funding has primarily focussed on generating new knowledge. Little attention or finance have been given to achieving practical benefits from the knowledge gained. Best Bets therefore represents a changing emphasis on the part of the supporting donor, the UK Department for International Development (DFID). The message is clear: we know how to bring rural communities out of poverty; now let's get on and do it. At the start of a new decade, it's surely the right step forward.

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