

An international effort to fight hunger and disease

An Irish professor of genetics is a leading advocate in an effort to encourage European scientists to take on research relevant to the developing world, writes **Dick Ahlstrom**

Fighting hunger and disease sounds more like the work of a humanitarian than of a mainstream scientist. Yet this is the challenge being put to the research community by a new international effort to counter the growing humanitarian crisis in the developing world.

European Action on Global Life Sciences (EAGLES), is a new body set up to foster scientific exchange between developed and developing countries. Its mission is simple, to make people understand the scale of the crisis and encourage them to do something to help, says co-founder and EAGLES coordinator, Prof David McConnell.

"Africa is dying. Africans are talking about Africa dying before their eyes," says McConnell, professor of genetics at Trinity College Dublin. "What we want to do is influence public and policy opinion so Europe will be focused on these enormous humanitarian problems. Ours is a political programme, it is to change political thinking."

EAGLES has links to the European Federation of Biotechnology which promotes the study and use of biotechnology, but EAGLES remains independent from it. The initiative started after the Commission asked the EFB to develop European links with biotechnology in China, says Prof McConnell.

He and co-founders Dr Borge Diderichsen, president of the EFB and Prof Huanming Yang, director of Beijing Genome Institute in China, all thought that linkages should expand beyond China and the notion of EAGLES began to take shape.

The initiative formally came to life at a life-sciences meeting last year in Brussels when Dr Ismail Serageldin, director of the New Library of Alexandria,

Egypt, was selected as chair of EAGLES and Prof McConnell and Prof Yang as vice-chairs.

The idea is not to promote the use of biotechnology or other life sciences in developing countries but to bring together researchers from rich and poor countries to see how science in the developed world might be harnessed for the good of struggling societies in the developing world.

Thirst, hunger and disease are killing people in poor countries, says Prof McConnell. "So many of these problems are actually biological," and western scientists should focus their attention on research that helps to reduce these problems.

He cites an example of how research could help. The cassava is a key food source in tropical countries and the world's fourth most important source of starch after rice, maize, and wheat. Yet western researchers largely ignore the plant because it is not widely grown in rich countries.

Even limited research efforts to improve disease resistance or increase yields could have a major impact on hunger in the developing world, says Prof McConnell. "Our commitment on this in Europe has been minuscule. We are not focusing our resources in light of the scale of the problem."

EAGLES chair Dr Serageldin, writing in the journal *Science* in 2002, outlined the scale of the problem, noting that 40,000 people died from hunger-related causes every day. "Will we accept such human degradation as inevitable? Or will we strive to help the less fortunate . . . It is not resources that are lacking; it is the will to harness them."

The statistics he quotes are startling. The 15 richest people in the world have more wealth than the combined GDP of all of sub-Saharan Africa with its 550 million people. "It is inconceivable that of the 1,233 drugs that have been approved in the last decade, only 11 were for treating tropical diseases, and of these, half were intended for livestock, not humans," Dr Serageldin states.

He and colleagues in EAGLES hope to do something about this by fostering connections between scientists. "What we are going to do is create a platform and contact points for developing world speakers here in Europe," says Prof McConnell.

Linkages should help "to build up very strong research programmes, corporate connections, training programmes so Europe will focus more of its life science research on [Third World] problems."

Such a drive should have powerful resonance for researchers here, he believes. "We in Ireland should be sensitive of this. Deep in the Irish psyche is

the fact that the greatest power on earth allowed one million to die and another million to leave during the Famine. What will Africans say 50 years from now, looking at their devastated countries?"

Learn more about the EAGLES initiative by visiting its website at: www.efb-eagles.org

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