



The Joint FAO/IAEA Division at 40

Better cooperation, less duplication of effort and shared approaches to building a peaceful and prosperous world...

The creation in October 1964 of the Joint FAO/IAEA Division of Nuclear Techniques in Food and Agriculture marked the beginning of what is certainly a unique and arguably the best example of inter-agency cooperation within the whole UN family.

The aim of setting up the Joint Division was to use the talents and resources of both Organizations for broadening cooperation between their member countries in applying nuclear science and technology in a safe, secure and effective manner for providing their people with more, better and safer food and other agricultural products while sustaining natural resources. Its uniqueness stems both from the nature of the technology itself and from the fact that all activities for applying it to food and agriculture within the UN system are conceived, planned and executed jointly by IAEA, FAO and their Member States only after their scrutiny and approval by their Governing Bodies — implicitly providing a “nod of approval” from both the world’s Ministries of Agriculture and the world’s Atomic Energy Authorities.

Real benefits. Yet, however close and harmonious the cooperation and however sophisticated the technology, it would not amount to anything if the benefits were not felt by the people and countries themselves. Looking back over these 40 years of cooperation, there have been many real benefits. Some of the most notable and sustainable examples that come to mind are the millions of hectares of higher yielding or more disease resistant food and industrial crops grown in fields all over the world from using radiation-induced mutations; the huge savings in fertilizer applications made possible by using isotopes to more effectively determine optimal placement and timing of use or to let plants fix nitrogen from the atmosphere; the eradication of screwworm from Libya, fruit flies from several countries in Latin America and the tsetse fly from Zanzibar using the Sterile Insect Technique; and the widespread use of immunoassay technology now being made by countries in all regions to diagnose and



progressively control transboundary animal diseases like rinderpest and foot-and-mouth.

But past performance is no guarantee of future success. Today, both FAO and IAEA strive to mobilize commitment and action for meeting the World Food Summit and Millennium Development Goals of reducing hunger, poverty and environmental degradation through sustainable agriculture and rural development. The Joint Division is an integral part of that effort, concentrating on monitoring advances in nuclear technology and related biotechnologies and fostering the production and sharing of knowledge, know-how and techniques among governments, scientists, farmers and all others connected with food supply chains where these hold potential for bringing value.

Globalization, developments in international and national law and policy and the entry of increasingly diverse actors such as NGOs into the social dimensions of science and decision-making on its applications are just some the factors that have made this task more challenging than ever before. It is evident that no matter how useful, these techniques and products do not by themselves provide answers to all questions or solutions to all problems. They are, nevertheless among the alternatives to be considered and integrated within the broader spectrum of science and traditional knowledge-based approaches. Some are controversial and not surprisingly societies’ attitude towards them differ widely across countries depending on their views on where the balance lies between the risks and benefits of their use. It’s therefore essential

that national policies and legal and regulatory frameworks consistent with international standards are in place to assess and manage the risks if these applications are to be accepted for adoption in food and agriculture. But equally important to build consensus and concerted action, there must be a free flow of objective information as well as communication with all groups of society on all possible uses and consequences.

Knowledge and technology. Much remains to be done to remove the scourge of hunger from our midst and empower the food and agricultural sector to play its critical role in promoting sustainable development. The Joint Division has responded well to meeting these challenges, helping countries adapt to both for the rapidly changing landscape of agriculture and the evolving conditions for generating and sharing

knowledge and technology derived from the nuclear and biological sciences while taking into account the underlying diversity of social and economic contexts.,br> Retaining scientific rigour, objectivity and balance were key factors in its success over these 40 years. Others were vigorously pursuing its original objective of ensuring that all the knowledge and experience within FAO, IAEA and the global agricultural community including non-government and civil society actors were brought progressively into the process of decision-making on the Joint Division's Programme. All these helped it move from "single issues" towards increasingly holistic approaches to understanding and responding to global, regional and national needs and setting its priorities accordingly. Building on this recipe will be the roadmap for further success in the future.

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October 2004