

**Message from Prof. Dr Adel El-Beltagy, Director General
International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA)
on the Observance of the World Food Day**

The International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) is pleased to join the international community to commemorate the World Food Day 2004 on the theme "Biodiversity for Food Security."

Located in the heart of the Near East where a large number of food and feed crops originated, ICARDA is responsible for the conservation of genetic resources of barley, lentil, faba bean, durum and bread wheat, chickpea, and a number of forage and pasture legumes, including their wild relatives.

ICARDA's regional mandate covers Central and West Asia and North Africa (CWANA), a region uniquely rich in dryland agrobiodiversity including the wild progenitors and relatives of a number of food and feed crops. These species have evolved under harsh conditions of temperature and drought, and cultivated species have been farmed and selected over 10,000 years, each one adapted to a specific niche. This unique treasure of genes holds the promise upon which future plant-breeding efforts are based.

However, the agrobiodiversity in the region is being lost at a phenomenal rate. The need to feed ever-increasing populations is pushing agriculture and rangeland frontiers into more and more marginal land, exerting more pressure on the already fragile ecosystems. The effects of climate change are already being felt, and are placing agriculture at risk. This situation is worsened by intermittent conflicts in the region.

Since its foundation, ICARDA has been working in close collaboration with national and international research institutions on germplasm collection and conservation. The Center now holds more than 131,000 accessions of its mandate crops collected from all over the world. ICARDA also places a major emphasis on the conservation of biodiversity in its natural habitats and protects it from the risk of being lost. But, sustainable conservation of biodiversity requires that the global community double its efforts to eliminate conflicts that lead to biodiversity destruction, improve the management of natural resources, and diversify livelihood options for the poor in marginal areas. Working together, we can conserve the earth's biodiversity and ensure food security for all.