

International Fertilizer Industry Association
key elements of the intervention

While policymakers are to be congratulated for their efforts to promote specific agricultural practices and to certify ecologically friendly biofuels, for example, we must be realistic that policy cycles tend to have difficulty keeping up with how quickly things change.

The context for our discussion is evolving at a breakneck speed: many of the issues that have dominated headlines in the past six months would not have been on the agenda two years ago. We have the lowest cereal stock-to-use ratios in over 2 decades, despite record harvests (globally) for many of the past eight years. We've already heard about growing demand for biofuels, but technical uses of agricultural output are already significant: for example, it is not well known that about 10% of the feedstock for organic chemicals production in Europe is derived from raw materials like animal and vegetable oils, starch, cellulose, carbohydrates and others. This trend will not diminish and is combined with the growing demand from China, India and, indeed, many people with growing incomes in developing countries.

This is compounded by increasing competition for land and water -- as we have already heard -- and labour: more people now live in cities than in rural areas. The urban share of the population will keep growing, meaning that farmers must feed more and more people per capita.

We know that there is less impact from increasing production on existing lands than encroaching on uncultivated habitats. We must employ an approach that an American researcher called Ken Cassman calls ecological intensification.

This is not the time for camping on our ideologies: it is false to oppose traditional methods and modern techniques. The solution lies in integrating them in site-specific solutions. This means that farmers must have access to a full range of options -- and the knowledge and means to employ them appropriately. Sustainable agriculture is knowledge-intensive, so it is critical to invest in research on an ongoing basis in order to being able to adapt. But developing new science and technology is not enough...we need to promote their spread and use. This requires an important investment in extension in both developed and developing countries.