

The Best Covid-19 Responses Point the Way to Feeding the World Sustainably

by Erik Fyrwald

Today is World Food Day, also marking the 75th anniversary of the formation of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the United Nations agency dedicated to defeating hunger. Like so many of 2020's major occasions, World Food Day this year will have to be celebrated under difficult circumstances, as we can come together only virtually.



Yet the event remains special this year – both because food security has been placed at the center of the world stage by the Covid-19 pandemic, and because we find ourselves at a turning point. On this particular World Food Day, we are well positioned to build a truly sustainable food system. To meet this vital goal, we need to step up and work together across the agriculture and food value chain with farmers, governments, NGOs, companies and academic institutions all contributing.

The example of the pandemic response

The year 2020, for all its difficulties and challenges, presents a unique opportunity to effect change – an opportunity to meet other urgent needs by harnessing the spirit of collaboration embodied in the best responses to Covid-19. As the pandemic has swept the world, individuals, organizations and countries that have worked together and learned from each other, placing

people's health at the center of their responses, have had the most success in preventing transmission of the virus. At the same time, governments, scientists, healthcare organizations and manufacturers are joining forces to develop vaccines and treatments for the virus in record time.

In much the same way, collaboration is the key to overcoming challenges in the food system that no single organization or government can solve alone. The essential role of collaboration in food security was recognized last week, when the World Food Program, launched by the FAO in 1961, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In the announcement, Nobel Chairwoman Berit Reiss-Andersen praised the program for its "key role in multilateral cooperation in making food security an instrument of peace."

As a global leader in crop science innovation, Syngenta has a great deal of experience in how global cooperation can contribute to food security. From our perspective, the honor awarded by the Nobel committee to the World Food Program sharply underscores the need for countries around the world to embrace a science-based regulatory framework that can nurture and promote current and future innovation in the field of agriculture.

It is noteworthy that a second Nobel Prize was awarded this year to another collaborative effort that directly affected the global food system. Emmanuelle Charpentier and Jennifer Doudna were recognized for their contributions to chemistry, specifically for important advances in genome editing, a process that has revolutionized the development of new seeds for sustainable agriculture. Working on different continents, the two chemists were key figures in a highly collaborative global effort, drawing on the skills and insights of dozens of talented researchers.

New paths for collaboration

As the CEO of an agricultural company and a member of the World Food Program's Farm to Market Initiative, I see much more room for cooperation to improve food security and sustainability. For instance, to establish consistent, science-based standards for the use of crop protection and seed products that help farmers grow healthy crops in healthy soils despite increasing weather extremes, it will require cooperation among regulators, private enterprises and NGOs. To address such existential threats to global agriculture as deforestation, desertification, soil erosion, drought, flooding, high temperatures, high winds and cross-border pest infestations, we all need to work together.



Collaboration is clearly needed to combat climate change, the greatest of these existential threats. Today, we no longer need to debate about which solutions we can bring to the table – we need to act together to bring every solution to the table. 2020 has the potential to trigger a turning point in our shared efforts to limit the ravages of global warming.

Fortunately, those who work in agriculture have already seen a significant uptick in cooperation. Producers of crop protection products and seeds have partnered in recent years with such organizations as the World Food Program, The Nature Conservancy, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa and the Dutch NGO Solidaridad. Strategic partnerships are being formed between the private sector and some of the world's leading agricultural institutes. Few of these organizations would have partnered with an agrochemical company even as recently as five years ago. But it is increasingly clear that, together, we can solve the issues that stand in the way of achieving sustainable agriculture and food security for all.

The promise of carbon farming

As we consider the best ways to fight climate change, one is through the everyday work of farmers around the world. Agriculture has always released significant quantities of CO₂ into the atmosphere, as the process of controlling weeds by turning topsoil mixes carbon compounds with oxygen. The result is that some 133 billion tons of carbon has been released from the earth's soil since humans started farming – or roughly 25 percent of anthropogenic carbon emissions since the start of the First Industrial Revolution.

Lead: Carolin / David Ingram

We can end this cycle by rewarding farmers for conservation tillage and rotating their crops regularly, practices that sequester carbon and make the soil richer. We can incentivize this behavior by establishing carbon credit markets, paying farmers for the documented practice of climate-friendly planting techniques.



In the U.S., Syngenta is a member of the CEO Climate Dialogue, involving 21 companies with more than \$1.4 trillion combined annual revenue and four leading environmental nonprofit organizations. We are committed to working together to advance durable, bipartisan federal climate policy in the United States.

We bring private capital and business know-how to climate solutions. As a group, we believe that policy should be ambitious in its emissions reduction goals. In addition, we believe policy can and should protect economic competitiveness, capture least-cost emissions reductions, and promote equity for workers and communities.

And we should consider labels for foods based on the climate-friendly agriculture that has been used to produce them. I believe consumers will pay a premium for climate-friendly benefits, recognizing and rewarding farmers accordingly.

A future founded on collaboration

Promising soil-climate initiatives are already taking shape, but building a successful market for agricultural carbon credits will require large-scale cooperation – to establish methods and standards for certifying the activities of farmers, to improve the technology needed to measure carbon capture, to create efficient and widely accessible exchange mechanisms, and to devise regulatory regimes that will ensure the markets operate fairly and reliably.

Lead: Carolin / David Ingram

The international collaboration we are now seeing in the response to Covid-19 should light the way to solving other difficult problems. This surely applies to the need to provide food security for everyone on the planet, while fighting the war against climate change.

On this World Food Day, it is worth pausing for a moment to consider what each of us can do to contribute to this effort, whether we are farmers or regulators or government leaders with the power to develop better policy and laws, as needed, or industry and NGOs with insight and resources, or private consumers considering our options at the grocery store. We have a rare opportunity to change the world for the better, and we urgently need to seize the moment.

Erik Fyrwald is the CEO of Syngenta Group, based in Switzerland, and a global member of the World Food Program's Farm to Market Initiative.