

IDRC in Syria

Over the past three decades, IDRC has provided occasional support for Syrian research efforts. Much of this support has revolved around agriculture and its use of water. Only one third of Syria's landmass of fertile plains, mountains, and desert is cultivated. Yet agriculture is the country's largest economic sector and provides a livelihood for one third of its population. This focus on agriculture was strengthened in 1977 with the establishment of the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), with support from IDRC and the Ford Foundation. ICARDA is based in the city of Aleppo.

IDRC is currently supporting a global research initiative on plant breeding methods that rely on the participation of small farmers, which involves ICARDA and research partners from China, the Philippines, and Senegal. ICARDA is evaluating the costs and benefits of institutionalizing participatory plant breeding systems in Syria and Jordan, so as to support the case for scaling up these systems nationally. This builds on years of IDRC-supported research in Syria and other countries in the region. ICARDA will also help to study the constraints related to the official release of plant varieties, seed certification, and intellectual property rights when new varieties are developed using participatory methods. The Syrian General

Commission for Scientific and Agricultural Research (GCSAR) is collaborating in this component.

Syria is also part of two IDRC program activities: Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D) in the Middle East and WaDI*mena*, a water demand management initiative.

IDRC included Syria in its ICT4D programming after conducting an exploratory 2005 study on the needs and practical use of ICTs in the Middle East. The study covered Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza, and Yemen. Experts identified needs and priorities at a workshop held in Damascus, Syria, in June of the same year. The ICT4D program will involve training, competitive small grants for applied research, and the sharing of information and experience. It aims to build capacity for applied research and promote knowledge on the use of ICTs for human, social, and economic development.

WaDI*mena* is a five-year initiative that aims to enhance water-use efficiency, equity, and sustainability in the Middle East. IDRC funds and coordinates the initiative, which the Canadian International Development Agency and the International Fund for Agricultural Development also fund. WaDI*mena* endeavours to facilitate the adoption and implementation of water demand management strategies and tools in the region. Syrian water demand management experts are engaging in exchanges with others in

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WaDI *Imena*, benefiting from capacity-building activities to raise their ability to address the political, environmental, social, and equity issues related to their work.

Much of the Syrian research IDRC supported in the 1990s and in recent years relates to water. Issues have included irrigation, water demand management, and watershed development and conservation such as the research on the Akkar watershed located in southern Syria, which forms part of the country's border with Lebanon. In the mid-1990s, researchers at Lebanon's National Council for Scientific Research and Syria's General Organization of Remote Sensing analyzed the water quality in the Akkar watershed, using remote sensing technology. They discovered that while the watershed possesses enough water to meet future needs, it has high levels of bacterial and organic pollution. The researchers mounted a campaign to raise public awareness of water quality issues in the region.

Also in the 1990s, IDRC supported research on the effects of irrigation with brackish (saline) water in northern Syria. Water shortages have made crop irrigation with brackish water a regular practice in arid and semi-arid areas. This can lead to salt build-up within the soil, and lower crop yields. Researchers with

ICARDA, the University of Aleppo, and the Department of Agricultural and Biosystems Engineering at McGill University examined the impacts of irrigation and crop management practices with the use of saline water in north-eastern Syria. Their efforts helped to bring the need for research on farming under saline conditions to the forefront.

Results from earlier IDRC-supported research include an agricultural information system, which the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform established in the 1980s to enable an exchange of knowledge between Syria and other Arab countries.

Since 1977, IDRC has supported 18 research activities in Syria worth approximately CA\$3 million. Some of this research has been regional in scope.

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