

## **Boosting agro-food research: the role of grant-awarding foundations**

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Science and technology play crucial roles in ensuring the continuing availability of food and water. Funds made available for projects have achieved much, but the demand for finance remains high, not just to manage food and water emergencies in developing countries, but also to develop sustainable agriculture in all countries so as to improve agricultural production ensure food safety and respect the environment.

Problems of food and water availability and quality require co-ordinated approaches that mobilize and exploit the know-how of disparate elements: scientists, economists, policy-makers, and entrepreneurs.

The Italian Foundations, fully aware of the importance of supporting agro-food area projects, have joined forces to support high quality scientific research this area and to encourage collaboration between the disparate forces involved.

Eleven Italian Foundations of originally banking origin have temporarily united to make available more than 23 million euro, to be spent over three years in a project entitled Ager – the first to be promoted by the Foundations in the agro-food area. Other Foundations have expressed an interest in joining the syndicate, so that the funds available may increase by December 2008. Specific areas targeted include apple trees, pear trees, minimally processed vegetables, maize, rice, pig and wine production, and also initiatives to apply the results obtained as widely as possible so as to improve production, favour technological development, and maximise the use of human resources. The Foundations are concerned with the direct development of projects, the financing of projects proposed by others after competitive assessment, and the dissemination of results.

It is hoped that other organisations with resources may be inspired by the example set by the Italian Foundations,, which see themselves as pioneers in the identification and validation of new and effective ways of facing social and economic problems: not as agents for solving these problems (which are on too large a scale), but as pioneers and innovators showing how such problems might be better tackled, while taking a subsidiary role to societal forces acting in the public interest.

The initiative is also a learning experience for the individual Foundations who have to share resources, compare methods, identify priorities and evolve an effective project management and monitoring system. Last but not least Ager is an exercise in applied ethics, making resources available for projects that may suggest solutions to problems that concern the whole of society.