Great strides have been made in transforming the lives and the livelihoods of tens of millions of people in the developing world over the past three decades. Yet for close to two-thirds of these countries’ populations—among whom are the vast majority of the world’s poor—agriculture is still the main source of income, just as farming is their chief occupation.

This part of the Report concentrates on the policies and programs needed to sustain and in many instances to accelerate agricultural development, and on agriculture’s contribution to ameliorating the problems of poverty. In the 1970s, a growing concern in the world community with problems of poverty coincided with massive evidence from the Green Revolution in Asia and elsewhere that rapid growth of production and productivity in agriculture was possible. The result was a variety of new programs in agricultural development, many addressed to the problems of the small farmer, supported by a large increase in capital and technical assistance from aid donors. This Report draws on the rapidly accumulating body of experience from these recent efforts and the lessons that are emerging from it.

Lessons from the more distant past are also relevant. While the role of agriculture in development has been debated for hundreds of years, the evidence, both historical and contemporary, is remarkably consistent. In Europe, Japan, and the United States, for example, a dynamic agriculture accompanied—and in some instances led—the process of industrialization and growth. The evidence, discussed in the next chapter, is equally convincing that this is still the case among contemporary developing economies.

History provides other pointers relevant to current problems. The key to agriculture’s growth among the present industrial economies was the farmer himself, who sparked a stream of cost-reducing innovations and also financed and carried out the investment in land improvement needed to exploit new technology. The evidence from a wide range of developing countries shows that farmers behave no differently today. The key factors are still the opportunity and the incentive to improve the land and with it the farmer’s livelihood.

In two respects, though, conditions today are fundamentally different. First, the rapid growth of population and the concomitant need to expand food production far surpass the historical experience. In the developing world of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, agricultural growth was much slower than the rates achieved by developing countries in the past thirty years. Second, farmers have access to an agricultural science that is a much greater source of innovation and a better catalyst of productivity growth than ever before. But this is true much more for some groups of farmers than for others.

Agricultural development in the recent past is characterized by an extraordinary diversity both within and between countries. Many still largely traditional farming systems that were sustainable with a low density of population are becoming increasingly strained by, and vulnerable to, the pressure of rising population. Spectacular environmental damage exemplifies the consequences of this pressure as land-hungry cultivators push into the tropical forests, up the hillsides, and across drought-prone, semi-arid savannah. Thus a growing prosperity among some groups is contrasted with deepening poverty among others less fortunate.

Winning the race between a growing population and the food supplies needed to match it is a still formidable challenge in many low-income countries. So, too, is the task of alleviating poverty in these largely rural societies. Technology and sensible policy are the means of successfully transforming agriculture for the benefit of the economy and of the people who live and work in agriculture—and who will eventually leave it.