



IFDC's History



The Headquarters' facilities of the International Fertilizer Development Center (IFDC) were built in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, United States of America (USA), on the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) Reservation. In 1987 IFDC established an Africa Division with offices in Lomé, Togo, and an Asia Division in Dhaka, Bangladesh.



Background of IFDC

IFDC was created in October 1974 as a center of excellence with expertise in fertilizers to service the needs of the developing countries. IFDC was first established as a private, nonprofit corporation under the laws of the State of Alabama, U.S.A. Once created as a nonprofit organization IFDC immediately began to qualify for the designation of an “International Organization” with all the privileges and immunities inherent to this designation.

This designation under U.S. law allowed IFDC to receive widespread support, cooperation, and backing of the world community for which it was created. The designation as a public, nonprofit, international organization was granted in March 1977 by Presidential Decree 11977. As a result, IFDC became truly international in composition, financing, and operation. This designation has contributed greatly to its success over the years.



Brief History

IFDC in a sense can be considered as an outgrowth of the TVA’s National Fertilizer Development Center (NFDC). In the early 1960s when Dr. Donald L. McCune joined NFDC, it became evident that the TVA-NFDC’s fertilizer knowledge and facilities were resources that should be contributing to foreign assistance efforts in the developing countries. As a U.S. Federal agency, the most logical way to contribute would be through programs offered through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). With the assistance of a USAID Officer, Dr. Frank Parker (former Assistant Director General of the Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO]), who was well acquainted with the role that fertilizers could and should play in the agriculture of developing countries, TVA-NFDC became increasingly involved in agricultural development in the developing countries. Initially, this involvement was in the form of furnishing information on fertilizers to USAID and its missions but soon became more direct by sending technical assistance missions to the developing countries. During this time NFDC had a relatively small core staff, referred to as the International Fertilizer Development staff, headed by Dr. McCune and dedicated to limited international assistance activities.

In spite of these developments it became increasingly clear that TVA, with its objective of developing technologies for the U.S. fertilizer industry, in particular, and the agricultural sector, in general (as stipulated in its charter and by a congressional act), was very restricted in what it could or would do for developing countries. For example, TVA could not engage in research and development specifically for the developing countries, and TVA-NFDC could perform work through the U.S. Government (USAID or Department of State). Thus, a definite need arose for an international center that would freely address the fertilizer technology needs of the developing countries in the tropics and subtropics.

IFDC was created during a period of crisis. Food shortages of the early 1970s were occurring on a worldwide basis. Energy shortages were becoming commonplace, and prices of agricultural inputs were increasing rapidly. Fertilizers to produce food were also in short supply and prices skyrocketed. All these factors put the developing countries at a distinct disadvantage.

To address this crisis situation, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (UN) organized a World Food Conference, which was held in Rome, Italy, in November 1974. In preparation for the World Food Conference, the United States, in consultation with the late Sir John Crawford of Australia and then Chairman of the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), decided to offer developed world “know-how” in fertilizers and soil fertility toward an international effort in fertilizer research and development for the benefit of the developing world. In April 1974, Dr. Henry Kissinger, then Secretary of State, in an address to the United Nations General Assembly, pledged the availability of U.S. fertilizer technology and strong material support toward “the establishment of an international action on two specific areas of research: improving the effectiveness of chemical fertilizers, especially in tropical agriculture, and new methods to produce fertilizers from non-petroleum resources.”

After Dr. Kissinger’s offer, work began immediately on a proposal to fulfill this pledge. USAID, again at the urging of Sir John Crawford, drew up a plan. The first plan was for an “International Plant Nutrition Institute (IPNI).” IPNI envisioned three program components:

1. Work on chemical fertilizers – to deal with all aspects of fertilizer from raw materials to finished products at the farm gate including marketing, handling, storage, distribution, packaging, quality control, etc., to provide better and more efficient fertilizers at the lowest possible price.
2. Biological nitrogen fixation – to evaluate the potential for and develop, where feasible, ways in which biological nitrogen fixation could contribute to food production thus reducing the amount of chemical N fertilizers that would be needed.
3. The recycling and better utilization of organic wastes – from urban, industrial, and crop residue sources; a broad assignment when one considers the variations in organic wastes that occur worldwide.

The TAC briefly discussed the IPNI proposal, concluded much could be done on chemical fertilizers in a short period of time, and urged USAID to move ahead on the first component. The other two components would be deferred for further study.

To take advantage of the technology available from the United States, the role that TVA could and should play was sought. Although TVA had been active from the mid-1960s in support of USAID programs, the Board of Directors of TVA in 1974 thought TVA could go no further without new legislation. The TVA Board then suggested that the new initiative take on a separate form. TVA did, however, pledge its full cooperation and its fertilizer technology. It further offered a site at its Muscle Shoals location so that close cooperation between the Organization of Agricultural and Chemical Development (OACD) of TVA and the new institution could be ensured.

By July 1975 an agreement had been signed with TVA, whereby TVA would defer to IFDC all work dealing with fertilizers for the developing countries and IFDC would not work on problems dealing with the United States. Information developed by IFDC would be available to United States entities only through TVA. Entities in the other countries of the developed world could be contacted by either or both organizations. TVA would also be the official representative of the United States at all international meetings. IFDC would attend such meetings under its own cognizance.

Although a number of developing-country sites were considered for IFDC, it was obvious that the opportunity to develop a site on TVA property had many advantages. First, it would be close to the OACD of TVA and would facilitate transfer of U.S. technology. Second, TVA had agreed to furnish IFDC at cost the raw materials needed (phosphoric acid, sulfuric acid, nitric acid, urea solution, etc.) for research activities. Thus, IFDC would not have to build its own chemical plants nor have to build storage for these materials. This arrangement produced a sizable saving in both plant cost and manpower.

Also, IFDC was able to contract with TVA for a number of other facilities and services, not the least of which was being able to share the OACD Library (recognized then as the best working library on fertilizers in existence). IFDC had access to TVA's medical facilities and contracted for fire protection, security, grounds maintenance, etc. The possibility of sharing facilities was also very enticing. The two organizations have had excellent working relations and do share facilities. In short, the TVA site possessed most of the ingredients necessary for IFDC to become fully operational in a short period of time and at a modest establishment cost.

Thus, IFDC was established at Muscle Shoals, Alabama, in late 1974. In July 1975 the international staff of TVA was transferred to IFDC to become the nucleus of IFDC. The building program was started at the present site in March 1976. Some facilities were occupied in late 1976, and the total complex was available for occupancy in August 1977.

USAID was the chief sponsor for the establishment of IFDC. The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada also functioned as a cosponsor and, in fact, provided the first financing as a startup grant (CDN \$50,000) in late 1974. (Until 1994 IDRC continued to be a regular contributor to IFDC programs.) Soon thereafter, USAID contributed to the startup (US \$250,000).