Africa's role in world food production was the main theme of the Royal Agricultural Society of the Commonwealth's 25th conference which was held in Zambia in September 2012 and attended by delegates from as far afield as Australia, Canada and Singapore.

The RHASS was represented by Chief Executive Stephen Hutt, who chaired the session "The Global Picture" on World Agriculture Day, Society Secretary Adele Thomson and Next Generation delegates Janelle Anderson and Chris Stockwell, who were sponsored by the Society. Kevin Stewart also attended as a Next Generation delegate under the auspices of a Roy Watherston Memorial Trust Travel Scholarship.

Addressing the theme on the challenges facing world food production was Jeff Waage, Director of the London International Development Centre and a Professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London.

The main challenge was to feed healthily the 9 billion people who will make up the world population in 2050. Globally, food production probably needed to increase by around 70%.

"Most of the elements contributing to food insecurity have their most severe impact amongst poor populations in low income countries, such as many in Africa," he said. Sub-Saharan Africa's position in agricultural development was characterised by the observation that 80% of Africa's agricultural goods were produced by small farms, about 80 million of them across the Continent.

"Agricultural growth in Africa, with its proven impact on poverty reduction, improved nutrition and national economic development, will depend on development of these small farmers," he said.

Jervis Zimba of the Zambian National Farmers Union noted that although agriculture in Zambia had experienced growth, this had lagged behind increases in the population. The Vision 2030 strategy aimed to make Zambia a middle-income nation with an economy based on industry, for which an increase in agricultural productivity was key.

"But this, however, has suffered through lack of investment and extension for smallholder farmers in particular," he said.

In the closing address to the conference, Scottish farming’s senior statesman John Cameron seized on the
anomaly that while food production would have to increase to feed a burgeoning world population, the European Union, as part of its on-going revision of the Common Agricultural Policy, was proposing a "set aside" programme of some 7-8% of the EU's productive area...in other words taking 8% of land out of production.

"How do you explain that to a starving child?" he asked.

"We also still have on-going competition for land use within our industry," he said. "The old argument between forestry and agriculture, for example, needs further thought with much more attention being given to practical integration between the two sectors which is now technically feasible - but perhaps that is too obvious for the politicians!

"We also have to find a balance for world cereal production. Which is more pertinent at this time - the use of cereals for biofuel production or the use of cereals as a basic food for both people and livestock production?"

Touching on the controversial subject of GM production, he noted that while some countries - the UK as well as Zambia - presently banned it, others were using it freely and in others it was subject to scientific approval.

"I think the question really is can we afford not to use GM particularly when it appears that large areas of production could be decimated with the extreme weather patterns we have experienced in recent years - which may well continue in the future - making optimal yields absolutely vital," he told delegates.

Also of concern to Mr Cameron was the sensitive debate between agriculture and the environment - or 'greening proposals' as they were referred to in the EU.

"Obviously, the future of our environment is of critical importance in a global context," he said. "But the vital requirement here is surely that the necessary environmental objectives are achieved in conjunction with 'sustainable agricultural production' and not 'in opposition to it'.

"I know that all of these complex matters are not one sided and there has to be a balance of interest, but I do believe we have to widen the parameters of this debate to take into account the unarguable trend of future world food requirements if we are to minimise child starvation and child malnutrition."

He concluded: "The world has made great improvements in both these respects, but obviously greater efforts will be needed to continue that trend, to cope with the future expanding population. So, perhaps it really is time now that farmers and environmentalists and politicians got together round the same global table, to reach an acceptable and effective conclusion on the future of agricultural production."