

# FAO moves into sustainable agriculture

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Farmers transplanting rice on an ecological farm in India. Photo: Erik van der Werf.

**F**rom 15 to 19 April 1991, the FAO and the Netherlands Ministry of Agriculture held a Conference on Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development in Den Bosch, the Netherlands. It was preceded by a seminar on LEISA, in which NGOs formulated an input into the FAO Conference. With the 'Den Bosch-declaration', it looks like the FAO will move into sustainable agriculture. But... 'the proof of the pudding is the eating'. Two NGO-participants report.

The Conference sees as the major challenge for agriculture in the coming decades "to feed the growing number of people from a natural resource base which is already seriously threatened by unsustainable farming practices". To meet this challenge a number of fundamental changes are required which include "the active involvement of rural people in the research and development of integrated farm management systems maintaining the essential biological processes; decentralization and enhancing the local communities' management capacity; improving land-use rights, investments in enhancing and conserving natural resources, adjustment of macro-economic and agricultural policies; encouraging demand and promoting production of indigenous crops and animals that can be produced and processed sustainably and of practices that safeguard human health and environmental quality".

## Agenda for action

"The transition towards sustainable agriculture will require new investments and re-allocation of existing financial resources. In this transition phase, the overall production and income of some producers may initially reduce. Therefore parallel action and outside support will be required.

National action will include: accelerating the development of rural organizations with participation of women, small farmers and the landless; human resource development; community based resource management; providing services for the optimum use of on-farm inputs and the minimization of the use of external inputs; enhancing production of renewable energy sources. Diversification of agriculture should be promoted e.g. by promoting traditional food crops, intercropping, agroforestry and aquaculture.

Sustainable agriculture requires redirecting research towards indigenous technologies and towards biological



processes developing a diversity of farming systems in which the efficiency of use of external inputs is maximized and their use and environmental impact is minimized. The need was expressed to develop criteria, indicators and methods for assessing farming methods and it was recommended to inventory and study diverse forms of agriculture, including LEISA and organic farming. International cooperation and action is required for funding, data collection, setting codes of conduct and standards, review of rules for international trade and "debt-for-sustainable-agriculture" swaps." The declaration can be requested from the FAO (Via delle Terme di Caracalla, 00100 Rome, Italy).

## Important step forward

The conclusions and recommendations of the Conference are an important step forward. The atmosphere during the conference was open and the positions and experiences of NGOs were taken seriously. However, the proof of the pudding is the eating: it is not the rhetorics or semantic upgrading of existing programmes that count. In order to implement the recommendations a major change will be required not only in documents and plans but in the minds, attitudes and activities of people. Adjustments of many ongoing FAO project activities in the field still need to be made, and their implementation needs to be planned carefully.

The conclusions acknowledge the importance of participation of the poor rural population. Yet, in the phrases such as "to strengthen the capacities for agricultural research, technology transfer and adoption by the farmers" a top-down approach is suggested, and nowhere recognition is given to the farm-

ers' own experimental activities. This may lead to strengthening the conventional research and extension approaches, which are in fact part of the problem. Therefore an elaboration of the research and extension approach to be followed is highly necessary for which the experiences in Participatory Technology Development can provide an important basis.

In the proposals for action the possibilities of an approach that aims at regenerating and enhancing the natural resources are hardly mentioned and not elaborated in concrete proposals for action. The tensions between the need for short-term food production and long-term (natural) resource availability can only be overcome by such a regenerative and resource enhancing approach.

The conference gave little attention to the North-South relations and to national pricing policies for farm inputs, farm products and consumer goods. Although the need for macro-economic adjustments has been mentioned, concrete proposals for these adjustments have not been made. The conclusions make reference to the International Code of Conduct on the distribution and use of pesticides. However, no mention has been made of the implementation of this code of conduct nor of the possibilities to establish control mechanisms. Codes of conduct related to issues as trade, fertilizers, biodiversity and farmers' rights with respect to indigenous knowledge and local innovations have not been mentioned.

In conclusion, FAO appears to make an important step towards sustainable agriculture. We look forward to its implementation and to the formulation of next steps as there is still a long way to go.