

Respect through farming

Editorial

“Before we started home gardening, these hands were put forward to receive vegetables from others, but now, they are put forward to offer some.” This is just one of the many quotes you will find in this issue of the *LEISA Magazine* about the potential of sustainable agriculture for “social inclusion”: how growing crops or keeping animals can help people to become more valuable and respected members of society.

What is social exclusion?

What makes you feel excluded, or left out, in your family, village or country? Gomes De Almeida *et al.* (p. 6) found that not being able to make your own living and being cut off from government or NGO services makes people feel that they have little hope to improve their lives. There are two fundamental causes. First, people may be physically disabled (e.g. blindness, or living with the effects of polio) or have mental health issues. Second, nearly everywhere in the world there are particular categories of people who get sidelined by society. There are structural inequalities that are determined by class, caste, gender and ethnicity. Immigrants have a lower status than original inhabitants, mountain people are given less attention than those who live in the plains. The effects of being sidelined often lead to other problems, like alcohol or drug addiction.

How can agricultural programmes support excluded or marginalised people to play a role in society? This is the question we asked ourselves and our readers. It is a difficult question as it is clear that social exclusion takes many different shapes. It may affect individual people and their families (as in the case of disabled people) or it may be structurally embedded in the entire society, as in the case of women’s positions.

Strategies for social inclusion will therefore be vastly different. In all situations, however, there are practical needs and interests to be addressed, as well as long-term concerns about structural improvement and removing the causes of exclusion. Many of the cases presented in this issue of the *LEISA Magazine* focus on the practical needs. However, by addressing them, we often see that something valuable gets unleashed: people who have been sidelined for so long are finding (or getting back) their strength and dignity. Such an empowerment process, once started, cannot be stopped any more. In due course the empowered people, be they a women’s Farmer Field School or a group of blind students, start addressing the more structural long term aspects of their position. Social inclusion is a collective process: it involves not only the individual disabled person but also his/her family and community. It requires that marginalised people get organised – whether in informal groups or in more formalised structures. Only when taking up the challenges collectively, can exclusion be overcome.

Disabled people grow crops and take part

We received some articles showing how social workers support mentally and physically challenged people to better their lives through farming. Van Dijk (p. 26) describes how a network of care farms in Europe helps physically disabled or mentally ill people to focus on their capabilities rather than on their problems. In Africa and Asia, schools or institutions for disabled people often have a horticulture or livestock component. These can supplement subsidies for schooling. On p. 28 and 29, Ngalim and Nkonde respectively show how troubled youths and visually impaired people successfully

grow crops in a formalised programme. For both groups such schooling can result in a return to society as a smallholder farmer. Other people, however, cannot become independent farmers and will need care the rest of their lives. In some parts of Africa, the number of orphans is growing so fast that only local communities can help them. Yet these communities also need support to raise the extra income this needs. Raising small livestock, like chickens, is an option, as Mukwaya demonstrates (p. 25). Agriculture thus can be a bridge between excluded people and society as a whole, on the condition that you closely study their limitations and capabilities, and help them develop the latter.

Insiders and outsiders

From the outside it may seem that traditional rural communities are close-knit entities wherein everybody has a role to play, and where the sick and weak are looked after; however this is often not the case. Rural life can be tough and survival strategies harsh. There are strict norms about what is right and wrong, clean and dirty, sane and insane. People can be blamed for witchcraft, households can be branded as “poisoned” or “dirty”, and roles are fixed rigorously across male/female lines. Traditional social bonds also mean that social punishment for doing things differently can be harsh.

The most common form of discrimination is that experienced by women. Several articles here describe how men eat first and women get what is left over. Older men marry young women who then become young widows, who often have no legal access to land. Women’s movement may be restricted, or women are not allowed to discuss their problems in public, and access to (health and) extension services is problematic. How can agricultural programmes help in addressing this? Feijen (p. 12) describes how, in a traditional region in Egypt, Farmer Field Schools focused on discussing pest management, a safe starter. With time, however, women facilitators successfully got young women participants to discuss issues such as citizenship rights and reproductive health. This was quite an achievement in the given context.

Poverty reduction

Several authors point out the opportunity of low-capital, labour-intensive livestock raising (chickens, goats, pigs) that poor people can take up with some support in the form of training, access to micro-credit and marketing channels. For example, Suwal *et al.* (p. 34) describe an initiative to upgrade homestead gardens, so that people can offer vegetables to their neighbours, instead of always being on the receiving end. Khanal (p. 30) shows how an agroforestry programme in Nepal successfully targeted women and poor groups. Such activities are options for local governance to contribute to poverty reduction, provided that distribution of such resources is done according to fair rules.

At the same time we should not be naïve in thinking that local governments can just pick up good practices and multiply them. The agroforestry example from Nepal showed that a project with good economic, social and ecological outcomes in a sizable project proved difficult to scale up. We would like to hear of more hands-on experiences with scaling up such good practices: what expertise do we need to make expansion a success?

External support for empowerment

While “social inclusion” has the connotation of external initiatives actively targeting particular groups (and is therefore top-down), “empowerment” is more about farmers forming groups and claiming their rights (and is therefore bottom-up,



In rural Nepal, people may not only be poor, but also belong to a low caste group. Home gardens offer them food, a greater sense of dignity and respect from others.

or through own initiatives). Policies might put farmers into poverty: liberalisation policies have had devastating effects on the poorest farmers. Syukur and Ngadiyono from Indonesia talk about farmers organising themselves to prevent the navy –a powerful force– from taking their land. They built a network and got help from the university and lawyers to claim their rights. Such examples show that farmers' groups, with some focused support from external actors, can achieve many goals. Volume 23.1 of the *LEISA Magazine* (March 2007) concluded that external specialised support can help farmers' organisations to overcome specific problems.

Markets for marginalised farmers

It is widely believed that free trade can help small farmers to get returns for their hard work. Production and marketing groups provide farmers with access to markets that they never could access alone. Yet, markets are places of competition between strong companies and small farmers. They tend to exclude those who cannot produce the right products of the right quality, in the right quantities and at the right time.

A new development is the emergence of large scale corporate agriculture. In some regions these agribusiness firms take control over local water resources, market channels and credit facilities. They force farmers to restructure their production. Both in developing and developed countries, they overtake free markets and create dependency. Smallholder farmers have a natural suspicion of such dependency and often manage their farm to reduce dependence on loan givers or landlords. Marketing can also help reduce such dependence (providing more income channels). Local market chains are manageable by farmers, as Abbey and Albert (p. 20) and Kirwan (p. 22) show.

The same observation is made in several articles in the *LEISA Magazine* 24.1 (March 2008), which focused on the question of how markets could become fairer and more accessible to small-scale producers.

Adjusting for social inclusion

All the articles in this issue came from practitioners who make an explicit effort to understand the potential strengths of marginalised people whose lives they aim to enrich. In care farming, the opportunity for disabled people to do routine work is emphasised while recognising the healing effect of caring for plants and animals. NGOs in Nepal found a niche opportunity for women in poor households to engage in homestead gardening. In Egypt, a step-by-step expansion of the curriculum made discussing women's issues possible. All articles show how careful and detailed analysis influenced almost every step of project implementation.

This micro-aspect of social inclusion is difficult to multiply. Each marginalised group needs a different type of support to engage in agriculture and gain (self-) respect as farmers. Explicit efforts, good listening skills and a true belief in the power of the marginalised are crucial. Creativity is required to overcome obstacles, whether physical or social. Social inclusion, lastly, is not an act of charity. All people have the right to live in dignity, and agriculture can provide many marginalised and disabled people food, income and a respectful life.