

Food First BACKGROUND

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Women growing food sustainably in Borneo

New Era for Agriculture?

By Marcia Ishii-Eiteman

On April 7, 2008, as the media headlines focused on falling grain reserves, soaring food prices, and food riots, representatives from 61 nations met in Johannesburg, South Africa to adopt a UN report that proposes urgently needed solutions to the global food system's systemic problems. The International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) asked the question: What must we do differently to overcome persistent poverty and hunger, achieve equitable and sustainable development, and sustain productive and resilient farming in the face of environmental crises?

The IAASTD study, sponsored by the UN Environment Programme, Food and Agriculture Organisation, and Development Programme; UNESCO; Global Environment Facility; and the World Bank, represents four years' work by more than 400 experts who examined the intertwined problems of global agriculture, hunger, poverty, power and influence. Their findings sent shockwaves through the conventional agriculture establishment.

Call for an agricultural revolution

"Business as usual is not an option," declared IAASTD Director Robert Watson, echoing the IAASTD's call for a radical transformation of the world's food and farming systems. The final report—endorsed by 58 governments and released worldwide on April 15, 2008—concluded that industrial agriculture has degraded the natural resources upon which human survival depends and now threatens water, energy and climate security. The report warns that continued reliance on simplistic technological fixes—including

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transgenic crops—is not a solution to reducing persistent hunger and could increase environmental problems and poverty. It also critiqued the undue influence of transnational agribusiness on public policy and the unfair global trade policies that have left more than half of the world's population malnourished.

The IAASTD report affirmed that we have options to change direction. By revising policies to strengthen the small-scale farm sector, increasing investments in agroecological farming and adopting an equitable international trading framework, we can establish more socially and ecologically resilient systems while maintaining current levels of productivity and improving profitability for small-scale farmers. The report's authors suggested reconfiguring agricultural research, extension and education to incorporate the vital contributions of local and Indigenous knowledge and innovation, and embrace equitable, participatory decision-making processes.

This is the first independent global assessment that acknowledges that small-scale, low-impact farming contributes crucial ecological and social functions that must be protected, and that nations and peoples have the right to democratically determine their own food and agricultural policies.

Food sovereignty: Answer to the food crisis

Today's global food crisis has been exacerbated by a number of factors: the large-scale conversion of food crops to agrofuel production, price volatility driven by rampant commodity speculation, changing diets, and climate-related production shortfalls. However, as documented by the IAASTD, the deeper roots of today's crisis lie in decades of governmental neglect of the small-farm sector, grossly unfair trade rules and



Farmers lunch in the shade overlooking their lettuce field in Mali.

Photo by Leonor Hurtado

authoring the report and in providing oversight and governance. History shows that governments and transnational corporations, acting on their own, have not been successful in meeting broad societal goals. The IAASTD's success has proven that active civil society participation in intergovernmental processes is critical to meeting the challenges of the 21st century.

The radical shifts proposed by the IAASTD report challenge the status quo. Syngenta walked out of the IAASTD process in its final days, complaining that their synthetic pesticides and transgenic products had not been sufficiently valued. The U.S. and Australian governments were especially stung by criticism of their trade liberalization policies, which were criticized for adverse social and environmental impacts while doing little to alleviate hunger and poverty.

Just three countries—the U.S., Australia and Canada—have refused to endorse the report. Like reports on the climate crisis, the IAASTD's findings are likely to be considered an “inconvenient truth” for the industrial agricultural establishment and the world's dominant economies. The U.S. government, the agrochemical trade association CropLife, and other beneficiaries of the current system continue to argue loudly against change at a time when both environmentally alarming changes and global social unrest caused by grinding poverty pose a significant threat.

Marcia Ishii-Eiteman is a senior scientist at PAN North America and was a lead author on the Global Report of the IAASTD.

ON THE WEB For more information see: www.panna.org/jt/agAssessment

All IAASTD documents are available at www.agassessment.org

Northern governments' practice of dumping food surpluses on countries in the global south at prices far below local cost of production. These policies, together with heavy reliance on environmentally destructive industrial agricultural practices, have destroyed rural farm communities around the world, undermining their ability to produce or buy food and contributing to environmental pollution and water scarcity.

The IAASTD report presents a blueprint to confront today's food crisis. We can begin to reverse structural inequities within and between countries, increase rural communities' access to and control over resources, and pave the way towards local and national food sovereignty by strengthening farmers' organizations, creating more equitable and transparent trade agreements and increasing local participation in policy formation and other decision-making processes. The report concludes that ensuring food security and recognizing food sovereignty requires ending the institutional marginalization of the world's small-scale producers.

An inconvenient truth

The IAASTD was precedent-setting for its bold experiment in shared governance. Civil society groups (along with government and private sector representatives) participated in both

International Agriculture Assessment Regional Reports

North America & Europe

by Molly Anderson with Phana Nakkharach

In North America and Europe (NAE) science and technology have dramatically increased agricultural productivity over the last 50 years. But the IAASTD notes that these gains have enormous environmental costs—loss of biodiversity, soil erosion, and declining water quality and quantity. Although most people in NAE countries do not suffer from starvation, abundant yields have not eradicated hunger and food insecurity. In fact, most farmers, farmworkers and other food-system workers earn below living wages in the increasingly concentrated agricultural markets aided by current agricultural policies.

The NAE report underscores the multifunctional nature of agriculture—namely agriculture’s role in supporting sustainable livelihoods, cultural heritage, and biologically-diverse landscapes and ecosystems that provide not only food, feed and

The NAE report emphasizes three strategies for agriculture’s future.

Recommendation: knowledge systems need to be reshaped so that they are more participatory, democratic and interactive, with decisions based on shared knowledge and research. Example: farmer-to-farmer networks and citizen advisory councils can help ensure that agricultural knowledge and technology are addressing real public concerns.

Recommendation: agricultural policy and governance need to involve more stakeholders in crafting policies that serve the common good. Example: food policy councils in North American cities can help public agencies, businesses and nongovernmental organizations improve public health by increasing access to neighborhood markets stocked with abundant, fresh and locally-grown food.

Recommendation: funding for agricultural knowledge, science and technology needs to be increased and redirected to meet equitable, sustainable development goals: eradicating hunger, improving health and rural livelihoods, decreasing poverty, advancing social equity, and protecting environmental resources while ensuring high yields.

fiber but also essential ecological benefits including pollination, carbon capture and water and nutrient recycling. Agriculture serves multiple functions while coping with climate change, new and emerging diseases, consumer expectations for product quality and safety, changing markets, and demands for agrofuels.

The authors note that the agrifood systems in both North America and Europe have traditionally consumed natural resources and labor from other regions of the world, with first

world institutions and companies exerting a powerful influence on world agriculture. Now people in Europe and North America need to work more cooperatively with people in the global south to share responsibility for supporting agricultural practices that build healthy and sustainable food systems.

Molly Anderson was a coordinating lead author of the IAASTD North America/Europe Report and consults through Food Systems Integrity (www.foodsystems-integrity.com) in Massachusetts. Phana Nakkharach, a PAN North America intern from Thailand, contributed to this report.

Latin America & the Caribbean Regional Report

by Ivette Perfecto

The IAASTD reports that Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) countries have some of the most highly inequitable land distribution systems in the world, despite an abundance of natural resources. For over 60 years, trade liberalization and privatization have contributed to inequalities that have reduced small-scale farmers’ access to natural resources, including land, water, and seeds. Conventional agri-

The LAC report recommendations:

- promote local and traditional knowledge
- strengthen local markets with rural-urban connections between producers and consumers
- increase the bargaining power of small-scale and Indigenous farmers when negotiating access to international markets
- build support for urban agriculture
- promote the participation of women in rural development.
- adopt stricter regulation of pesticides
- conduct critical evaluations of the environmental, socio-cultural and health impacts of new technologies (including agrofuels)
- implement policies and regulations to prevent contamination from genetically modified organisms
- reduce agriculture’s contribution to climate change by supporting agroecological farming, protecting the Amazon rainforest, and promoting carbon sequestration through reforestation.

cultural and trade policies have favored large-scale industrialized farmers over indigenous and agroecological farmers. Today, the LAC region produces three times as much food as it consumes, yet 37% of the population is poor, and 10% remain malnourished.

Subsidized imported food from the global north has undercut local production, driven small-scale farmers from their land and increased rural-to-urban migrations. This growing dependence on imported food threatens the region's food sovereignty. Arable land, clean water, and unmatched biodiversity are being degraded at an accelerated rate, while traditional knowledge and nature-friendly practices are displaced, eroding socio-cultural, agricultural, and genetic diversity.

These urgent challenges require a holistic, multidisciplinary and inclusive response that abandons the failing industrialized agricultural system. Small- and medium-scale farmers, in particular, must be at the center of any sustainable rural development strategy. Increasing state support for sustainable and culturally appropriate technologies is required—including research and extension programs to help farmers make the transition from conventional to agroecological production—with the goal of moving conventional, indigenous and agroecological systems to higher levels of sustainability without compromising productivity.

Ivette Perfecto is a professor in the School of Natural Resources and Environment, University of Michigan, and was a coordinating lead author of the IAASTD Latin America/Caribbean regional report.

Food First joins with PAN in calling for the U.S., Australia, and Canada to fully endorse the IAASTD's bold vision, and we urge all governments and international agencies to work closely with all segments of civil society to adopt more sustainable food and farming practices. The outcome of the Johannesburg meeting represents our best chance to apply the lessons of climate change to agricultural policy—and to take a decisive step towards advancing the productive, healthy and resilient farming on which our future depends.

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