

The International Farmers' Dialogue Newsletter

June 2003

There are many significant and well-publicised events around the world: the growing power of the multi-national companies, the scientific advances with Genetically Modified Organisms, droughts and floods. Alongside these, and unknown to many, all the time decisions are being made by individuals and small groups that make a difference for the better. Here are some of the events that the Farmers' Dialogue has been involved in.

Cambodian Farmers' Dialogue

14 international delegates met with Cambodians working in agriculture, including 75 farmers, government ministers, parliamentarians, heads of departments and leaders of non government organisations, to share experiences and learn more about the many issues concerning Cambodian farming.



Conference delegates

This Cambodian Farmers' Dialogue was held in Phnom Penh, February 3-4 2003. The theme of the dialogue was, "What farmers can do to answer poverty and strengthen the economy of Cambodia". Delegates were challenged to seek solutions to the enormous problems facing Khmer farmers by opening their hearts and minds to new ways and introducing them to experiences in other parts of the world.

85% of Cambodia's population of 11.5 million live in the provinces and eke out a living by farming. 45% of the population are under 15 years and 52% are between 15 and 65 years. The average age is about 17.5 years. Approximately 60% of the country's annual budget is aid from external sources in one form or another.

Cambodia has fertile farmland and its farmers grow varieties of rice which are very popular for export. Because of the lack of secure storage on farms, farmers have to sell most of their harvest to grain traders from Thailand and Vietnam who then sell this grain at considerably higher prices and even sell it back into Cambodia.

Dr K. Balasubramanian, Director of JRD Tata Ecotechnology Centre in Chennai, Southern India, gave the keynote address and was able to describe to Cambodian farmers methods of doing things for themselves to improve their land and food production. Cambodian and Indian farmers face similar obstacles but Cambodians suffer because of the lack of infrastructure and land tenure records. One remark that caught peoples' imagination was 'We learnt that we didn't need to wait for government to make a move before we made a start'. He urged Cambodian farmers to visit India to see how the village self-help groups work and the many things they are doing.

Farmers can talk to farmers anywhere around the world and have an instant understanding. Given the right advice and support, Cambodian farmers have the ability to increase food production for their own people and eventually for their

neighbours in Asia. As Dr Balasubramanian observed, 'It is important that farmers should be active partners on research and development activities for sustainable agriculture. Farmers should not be treated as mere end users of new knowledge.' It was encouraging to observe the change of mindset that took place as delegates talked and exchanged ideas.

Food security and distribution in Cambodia is a reality for some, for many others it is only a dream. In Cambodia, as in many other parts of the world, the need is for people with the resources to take on the challenges of economic and sustainable food production and distribution.

People wanting to assist in the rebuilding of Cambodia and the continuing work taken on by Farmers' Dialogue could consider personal or monetary contributions to this enormous task.

P Jefferys, Australia

- A brief five page report is available and a longer one is being prepared, both are available on request.

Cambodian visit to Loire Atlantique.

'What is the future for the Cambodian countryside and the rural community 30 years after the genocide?' This was the theme for the visit of Son Soubert, member of the Cambodian constitutional council, to the west of France from Feb 13-15. The initiative came from the powerful agricultural Co-operative of Ancenis, the CANA, and the Centre for World Citizens at Nantes. The event was featured in *Ensemble*, the magazine of CANA. It also marked the end of a week's visit to the Farmers' Dialogue in Cambodia by two local farming couples, the Emeriaus and the Revéillères, under the auspices of MRA (Initiatives of Change) and the Son Sann Foundation'.

Christoph Couroussé, Public Relations director of the CANA, in collaboration with Jean-Pierre Emeriau and Maurice Revéillères, former President of the Chamber of Agriculture in Maine et Loire, had invited Son Soubert to be guest of honour at two dinners which brought together 260 farmers from the Nantes district. Soubert described both the history of his country, where 85% are still in agriculture, and the farmers' present situation. Farming is in no way comparable to that in western countries, yet as the farmers returning from Cambodia testified, 'Apart from the huge gap in comparative development, farmers all over the world share the same aspirations and their work is their life'. But Son Soubert underlined that with an agriculture which has to be completely self-sufficient, without any Government support, 20 years behind its neighbouring countries and with no organisation, farmers struggle to survive.

Replying to numerous questions Son Soubert spoke of the need for international support, and specially from France, so as to spur the Cambodian government to invest more in the education and training of the young and to give content to the potential for development so important for the country. He mentioned that while some countries financed the building of

roads and bridges, France contented itself with teaching the French language. He then put the question : ‘Could the French farmers through the right sort of partnership play a more visible part in the development of my country?’

Translated from an article by Charles Danguy, France, in the magazine ‘Changer International’

Thailand / Cambodia

Looking back in history, the French were invited to Cambodia in 1863 as a counterbalance to Thailand’s domination. In 1906 the French negotiated with Thailand the return to Cambodia of the Provinces of Battambang and Siem Reap. The latter includes Angkor Wat, the most potent symbol of Khmer culture and past glories. Although the anti-Thai riots in Cambodia at the end of January 2003 are generally held to have been government-organised rather than spontaneous, they reflected feelings which are still current. It is something many Thais are eager to address, and there is a ferment of ideas also on the progress both of farming and democratic government. Klaus Prinz from Chiangmai who took part in the Cambodian Dialogue is already planning an exchange between Thai and Cambodian farmers.

In Chiangmai, Puntipa Pongpiachan (lecturer on Animal Nutrition at the University) took delegates to see a dairy co-operative of 20 farmers, who are running a common collection and marketing scheme. They also mill and manufacture their own feed for the cows. Chairman Prawit

and strengthen the democratic process. This change was brought about by ordinary people who, through their votes, said ‘enough is enough’. In the run up to the elections many voters found encouragement through “The Clean Election Campaign”, launched by friends who are involved in “Initiative of Change” (MRA) and taken up far and wide, including by the religious communities. It challenged voters and candidates to sign a pledge not to give or receive bribes, to expose any action that would rig or distort the election and not to take part in any violence.



Subukia farmer Paul Mukera right & wife Margaret centre

2/ The success of the small farms that came from a mixture of appropriate technology, self reliance and individual initiative, with often minimal dependence on outside inputs of fertiliser and chemicals which all too often suffer from unreliable supplies of questionable quality and high price. The range of initiatives are remarkable: it seemed to Claude and Jim that if you could multiply the spirit they encountered of love of family, teamwork, community awareness and get up and go, you would have the foundation nationally for a thriving agricultural industry.

Reflecting on this, they see a big task ahead, for farmers to organise their marketing so that they are able to survive in a free market where they can get an honourable price for their products. - *Two page report available on request.*

Finance for FD

So far we have felt that the FD should not be involved in financing projects. Funds are mainly needed for travelling expenses so that people can meet and build regional and international links, such as helping Cambodians to visit India. Those who give regularly are an invaluable support, and we hope their number can grow. It would also be timely to think of Trusts and other Funds which might be ready to support some of our initiatives if properly informed of their purpose. Your ideas and contributions are welcome.

Anyone wanting to know more contact www.farmersdialogue.org



Boonpaipol took them to his own farm, where he has 70 Holstein cows with a 5,000 litre average production. But milk is now being over-produced and Puntipa would like to see him start making ice cream. Groups for co-operation are now being actively promoted by the University’s extension service.

The Faculty of Agriculture in Chiangmai University would very much like to organise an International Farmers’ Dialogue at some point, possible in the second half of 2004. There is a growing awareness of the need to couple the advance of technology with higher moral standards in the community.

Pat and Kristin Evans, UK

A Kenyan Experience.

Claude Bourdin (France) and Jim Wigan (UK) have had a two-week visit to small farms in Kenya. There were two particular aspects of life that impressed them:

1/ The elections that brought in a new government in December, a government that is mandated to end corruption