

International Farmers' Dialogue - Asia Plateau, Maharashtra, India Nov 05.

Asia Plateau hosted 45 participants from Africa, Asia, Europe, Pacific and India for an International Farmers' Dialogue. Issues which affect farmers from developing and developed nations in this age of globalisation were discussed with a view to suggesting some solutions. Delegates described a wide range of existing initiatives: tree planting in Kenya; a business-training programme that has reached 45,000 farmers in Uganda; an application of transparency that is reducing corruption in Nigeria; providing quality plants and training to farmers in Zimbabwe; water harvesting in India; investigating the medicinal properties of different fruit and vegetables; fruit processing, and studying a range of the issues contributing to climate change. It was sobering to hear our Indian hosts' concern about the widening gap between the middle class and the rural poor, which could become a source of civil unrest unless dealt with. If we follow the road of free trade it is vital that wealth reaches the poorest of the poor. Farmers in the west feel these pressures of change but for many of the world's poorest farmers it is a question of survival itself.



Shailendra Mahato, a farmer in Jharkhand in the Northeast of India, who initiated the Dialogue, stated his strongly-held conviction that more investment needs to be put into agriculture. Emphasising that the purpose of this Dialogue was for farmers to find solutions to problems and concerns by working together, he came to the Farmers' Dialogue with 13 colleagues from his area where they are involved in important agricultural developments.

RD Mathur, a trustee of the conference centre, welcomed the delegates and gave an overview of the challenges facing farmers in India. He outlined the fast-paced changes taking place in the agriculture sector and sought agility and adaptability in finding solutions. He talked of India as a land of 600 million farmers with more than a billion mouths to feed. A sustainable growth of GDP 6.5% has been achieved in an open democratic society. However this has come at a price, with an undue emphasis on urban and industrial growth resulting in an ever widening urban/rural divide. This Dialogue, he said, could bring the necessary synergy between consumers, governments and farmers.



Jim Wigan, one of the Farmers' Dialogue co-coordinators, outlined some of the issues that need addressing world-wide. By 2050 there will be between nine and ten billion people to feed, oil production will be about half what it is today and the climate very different. If we get the balance right agriculture will become a source of food for everyone, a valuable source of renewable energy, a vital element in sustaining the world's countryside, stabilising climate change, a major source of employment, a road out of poverty and a source of deep satisfaction for all those who work on the land. If we have the will to act, dialogue will lead to understanding each other's problems and finding the way ahead.

A flavour of some of the subjects discussed and action being taken:

Martin Simtenda from Tanzania lectures at the Buhuri Livestock Institute, which has played an important role in the development of the dairy industry in his part of the country. Since 1984 nearly 9000 farmers have been trained: 6200 are women and 2780 men. The farmers start with one in-calf heifer. Under good management, one cow changes the life of a farmer. Because of the manure' crop production has changed and farmers can now produce higher yields. The average milk production per cow per day for the farmers who have taken part in the training is 10-15 litres while those who have not it is only 5-6 litres. Dairy development has transformed life of the rural people. Farmers have better houses, they send their children to school, get high yields of food and cash crops. There is now a dairy co-operative union for more efficient marketing of their milk. To help solve the problem of low milk price because of high production during the rainy season they are starting a milk-processing project. Farmers will be trained in small scale milk processing to make ghee and yoghurt, which is then sold at a good price.



George Kamau lives on the lower slopes of Mount Kenya and is a retired forest extension officer. Known locally as Miti Mingi (Many Trees), he is widely respected because of his continuing work for farmers. He is also a member of a milk collection group. These two activities have transformed his local area from poverty to being rated sixth most productive in the country. Due to the climatic changes caused by deforestation the government has encouraged and supported NGOs working within the environmental conservation areas. They train forest extension workers who work with farmers, making them aware of the dangers if the environment is not taken care of. They train them and community self-help groups on how to start and manage their own tree nurseries and sell these trees to others. Farmers are educated on how and where to plant various types of trees on their farms to increase the forest cover, using the agro forestry methods. George commented, "The secret of our success is through local people taking ownership of the forest. The Government has set a rule by which a felling permit can be issued to anyone in need of using tree products from their farm. This is used as a control measure. By these and other ways the Kenyan forest cover is recovering and farming is improving."



Dr Gregory Okagbare from Nigeria lectures in Animal Science at the Delta State University. His ideas have affected government policy: "The level of corruption among government, community leaders and contractors is high in Nigeria. Money meant for welfare programmes is diverted to private pockets and does not reach the target audience. This has resulted in poor execution of government contracts and a crisis among rural communities. I discussed this corruption with some of my friends in government. It was suggested that for programmes to be properly executed in communities, competent contractors should be chosen from their communities. Government or agencies should brief communities on the nature of the contract, the scope and specifications and the name of the contractor. The communities should be involved in supervision and give feedback to the

commissioners or agencies before final payments are made. This I did and our State government has taken the advice and this is helping to solve the problem in Delta State.

"My visit to India and participation in the International Farmers' Dialogue has been very challenging. I have seen rural transformation, increased income of rural families and joy among the people in villages visited. I have decided that as a University teacher I should not concern myself only with basic research in laboratories and research farms but to visit farmers in my neighbourhood, to offer advice and help solve their problems within the limit of my resources."



Jamil Ssebalu started a private business school in Kampala Uganda 12 years ago. Today it has space for 315 students and since its conception has helped train over 45,000 farmers in business management. He and his wife Jamila have four children and a working day that goes from six in the morning to seven at night. Jamil spoke of Africa's rich variety of natural resources. "Nearly 70% of Africans are farmers. Uganda has coffee, tea, cassava, maize, banana, cobalt, vanilla. The question is can these resources be used to feed the people? Yes and no. Currently Africa is receiving much food aid, but is not the long term answer. Africans have not been trained to use the resources they have. Today there is war in many countries, it is hard to grow food on your land when there is fighting going on!

people can get skills and add value to their own products it would be better for everyone than food aid. The prosperity of the agricultural sector is critical for all-round improvement in Africa. Overproduction of goods that are not required leads to a glut in the market. Restrictive trade barriers prevent us trading even with neighbouring countries like Kenya."

His wife Jamila added, "In Kampala we found there was a tendency for husbands not to eat meals at home. They would eat in the hotels and would not buy meat, fish or anything good for the family. Conflicts started and marriages broke up. My friends and I looked into this issue and found the men were complaining of poorly cooked food at home. They said that if they brought meat home it would be spoilt and that is why they went to the hotels. We started teaching housewives good cooking skills and this has solved many family problems. More men now eat at home and bring food for the family. We are planning to look for a larger plot of land for the college so we can we can expand and have cookery as a subject."





Tapiwa Ruhode is from Zimbabwe, where the exchange rate to the US dollar has dramatically fallen in the last year and prices quoted for a product are only guaranteed overnight due to inflation. Food production has fallen to catastrophic levels but the work Tapiwa and his colleagues are doing offers hope. He spoke about his work - empowering small-holder farmers by using improved disease-free sweet potato planting material. "We (Agri Biotech) provided clean planting material for NGOs who purchase them for the farmers. In addition to this we visit farms and teach them how to use the material. We spend time listening to the farmer's problems and finding appropriate solutions. When the sweet potatoes reach maturity we visit the farms and conduct training sessions in processing and utilisation. We use the utensils in the village to prepare several products including fried chips, flour, scones, jam, juices etc. The program has provided nutritious food for the farmers in their villages. Sweet potato tubers are sold in rural areas and in urban centres. A large proportion of the farmers we serve can now afford crop production inputs, send their children to school and improve infrastructure on their farms."

Kim Than from Cambodia works for CEDAC (Center for Study and Development in Agriculture) "Cambodia is still recovering from the terror of the Pol Pot regime and a 'major amount of the nation's income is in the form of overseas aid. CEDAC started work in Cambodia in 1997. Having assessed the needs of the country our organisation decided to work for ecological agriculture and food security. We soon realised that farmers were hungry for information and want to invest for the future but didn't know how. We told them about the system of rice growing that reduced the amount of seed used by 90% and raised the yield from the traditional 1.5 tons per acre to as much as 4.5 tons, and reduces the amount of water required for irrigation. We are making efforts to ensure that by 2010 all rice farmers in the lowlands of Cambodia will have had the opportunity to adopt this system, and are helping farmers develop the infrastructure to market their crops efficiently. We want to help farmers empower themselves. It is not what we do for farmers that is important, it is what we help them to do for themselves!"



Alan Porteous, a climatologist from the National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research Ltd New Zealand, spends much of his time helping farmers understand the likely effects of climate variability and change. His presentation illustrated that we are in uncharted territory. Through sampling air pockets in ice samples going back 500 thousand years it is known that levels of gases and chemicals in the atmosphere now are higher than at any time over this period. The world is changing in ways that are different to the past; the factors involved being nitrogen fixation, biodiversity, loss of rain forest, human population levels and the ozone layer, all of which are interrelated. He outlined the earth's energy budget, the natural carbon cycle and human influence on the planet since 1750 AD. His conclusion is global change is not new and can occur at any time. Human behaviour is destabilizing finely-balanced features and a certain rise in temperature could put our survival in question, the future is hard to predict. A major need is to overcome short-term political thinking.

Claude-Alain Gebhard (Switzerland) and Maurice Réveillère (France), both farmers, gave some insights on the situation of the European farmers who are going through a deep crisis: being accused of receiving too much in subsidies but getting prices for their production which are too low to enable them to survive, being accused of polluting the land and water sources, even though they follow ever stricter and costly environmental and administrative regulations, not being recognised for their management of the countryside and of the quality of the food while being put under financial pressure by food supermarkets and consumers. Where can the European farmer find hope for the future in farming?



Summing up, Phil Jefferys from Australia spoke of his conviction to encourage farmers to renew their calling to feed the world, to build farmer to farmer links, to encourage the consumption of locally grown food, to face up to reality of the situation the world is in, and to restore a long-term perspective to the thinking of our leaders. Farming is the world's biggest industry where over three quarters of the world's 1.2 billion poorest people are small farmers. Why is there such poverty in an industry that the world relies on? Farmers worldwide are not receiving an adequate price for their produce. The current Doha trade talks are looking at removing tariffs and subsidies. This will more than likely result in higher production, making an already devastating problem worse. More production simply means lower price for the producer. "The disease we face in farming today is not farm subsidies but low prices for our produce. Subsidies are a medicine being used to treat the disease. To defeat the disease more radical treatment is required: policies are needed to improve prices around the world, establish adequate food reserves and balance production levels to meet world requirements with surplus land diverted to production of energy."



After the Dialogue three days of farm visits took us on a coach journey of over 800 kilometres. We saw a colourful picture of rural India: busy, bustling villages and towns, many ox carts and tractors taking sugar cane to factories, a rapidly developing motorway system and, most importantly for us, a first-hand view of farming. Our imagination was caught by the changes that we saw taking place to two villages. The first, Kapasi village, had been adopted by Dr M Pol, a medical doctor. The village is developing rapidly: for example, most houses now have modern toilets; but the biggest advance was on the land where water-harvesting methods enabled widespread irrigation. The system involves contours on the slopes to prevent rain running away and a series of check dams down each stream. These dams hold up the water enabling it to seep back into the ground to restore water tables.

On the second day we visited Rahuri Agricultural University in Maharashtra, which has the policy of including farmers in decisions about where research should be directed. They work on the principle that seeing is better than hearing. We saw crop trials involving herbs, medicinal plants and fruit trees. The livestock department was an example of the importance of consistent long-term government commitment and investment. In the 1960s when a dairy cattle-breeding programme started they looked at 26 Indian breeds. Of the 5 suitable for milk they selected the Gir, a cow that produced 1500 litres of high fat milk and reached maturity at 18 months. Their breeding programme crossed Gir with Holstein, and after 40 years this has resulted in an animal that produces 4500 litres of high fat milk and milks for seven lactations, even in some cases produced 6000 litres - and has good disease resistance.



Dr Mashalkar, who had taken part in the Dialogue in Panchgani, is officer in charge of post-harvest technology for value-added products and marketing at Rahuri University. He talked about India being the second largest producer of vegetables in the world and first in some fruit. The crops he showed us had many health properties and had great potential on both Indian and world markets. Another area with considerable potential he said is processing fruit and vegetables, the fruit being able to be made into a nutritious drink with comparatively little investment, often making use of surplus production that otherwise could not be sold. In the last 7-8 years they have developed 7-8 brands of fruit juice from one processing unit with a capacity to deliver 5000 bottles per day. The whole visit to the university orchards and trial plots demonstrated how processing added value to all these crops.

Our final village visit was memorable.

Padmashri Anna Hajare is a man who fought in the Indo-Pakistan war in 1965. All the other men in his unit were killed. After reading a book by Swami Vivekananda, he came to believe God had saved him for a purpose.

We met him at Ralgaon Siddhi, a village with a population of 2500. When he came to the village 30 years ago they had to import 85% of their food grains, with a family income of Rs 225 per month. Many had to go outside the village to find work breaking stones to get an income. There was much drunkenness and problems with illicit liquor, 40 distilleries and a shortage of drinking water. Black marketeers, corrupt village leaders and politicians who feared loss of influence confronted him. He received anonymous letters threatening his life.

He believed water harvesting was the key to turning things round in the village. He started with continuous contour trenching randomly located over the steeper parts of the undulating ground. The results are tangible. Milk yield has gone up. They export fruit and vegetables to the Middle East and 250 truckloads of onions to other Indian cities. There are 1750 hectares of land now under irrigated crops. Two crops are grown annually and family income has risen to Rs 2250. There is now a labour shortage and he has the full support of the villagers. Dr. Hajare believes that if you want to change the economic status of the country you have to change the economic status of the countryside.



Shailendra Mahato and his colleagues are planning a Farmers' Dialogue in his village near Jharkhand on February 18th & 19th, Titled "ULGULAN -2" (Complete Revolution), they expect about 500 farmers on the first day. It will be opened by Prabhat Kumar, a former Governor of Jharkand. The African delegates are considering having an African Farmers' Dialogue in Tanzania during November 2006. A thought has also been expressed to tackle the theme of teamwork between farmers in a possible next International Farmers' Dialogue.

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