

Whose common future?

In preparation for the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Brazil, the journal "The Ecologist" is compiling a report "Whose Common Future?" It will try to reflect, as far as possible, a grassroots view of a just and sustainable economy. The issues to be addressed in the section on agriculture, entitled "Agricultural Development - In Whose Hands?", are outlined below. You are invited to share your experience, both if you agree or disagree.

Nicholas Hildyard

Over the last 40 years, almost all farms in the industrialised world have abandoned nonchemical or organic agriculture in favour of farming with chemicals and modern machinery. Developing countries have seen their traditional farming patterns transformed. Many farmers have been persuaded to specialise in a few export crops, in order to gain competitive advantage in the world market.

"Development"

The overall effect has been devastating for rural people. Farmers have lost power over their lives and land, as pursuing their livelihood relies increasingly on cash and credit controlled by others. Crops are more vulnerable to pests. The soil is increasingly beset by new problems such as salinisation, erosion and reduced fertility. People have been forced off their land or compelled to adopt environmentally harmful practices by debt burdens or because communal land-use rights are ignored. Malnutrition results from a lack of variety in available food. Intensive monocropping disturbs the ecological balance.

The "green revolution" has failed. While greater yields have been achieved for single crops, when output is measured over time, taking into account the costs of subsidies, fertilisers, pesticides, the loss of other biological resources (e.g. other crops, fodder, fish) and the damage to the ecological balance, the final output is a disastrous "deficit" and drain on the rural economy. Economic growth cannot be sustained as the natural resources are being rapidly depleted. Today, malnutrition, starvation and famine are on the increase. In Africa we are now witnessing famine on a massive scale, with two out of every three countries affected. In many regions malnutrition is no longer a periodic phenomenon; it is constant.

● Do you agree with the above description of "development"?



"Whose Common Future?" Has your area been affected by "official solutions"? On what do sustainable livelihoods really depend? Photo: Wim Klemstra.

- What specific "development" policies have affected your area?
- How has your community been affected? Do you have some specific examples of the effect on one family, one village, or statistics or analysis for the overall region/community?

Official "solutions"

Despite the clear link between current agricultural "development" policies and the growing social and ecological impoverishment, the agencies charged with addressing the world food crisis continue to propose "solutions" that can only intensify the destruction.

Major research or development agencies such as the international research centres, FAO, World Bank and the UN Development Programme continue to advocate agricultural modernisation. Their solution is to extend the area under crops, sacrificing forests or opening up marginal farming areas vulnerable to serious erosion; increasing the use of chemical inputs, hybrid seeds, machinery and irrigation water; reinforcing export-led development strategies; and promoting biotechnology (particularly genetic engineering).

Through these policies, greater numbers of farmers are losing control over their lifestyle, resources, land and income.

- Has your area been affected by "official solutions"? If so, which ones and how? What are your views on these solutions?
- Have you cooperated with or resisted such plans? What was the outcome?
- What regional programmes would you advocate to achieve a just and sustainable agricultural economy?

Sustainable alternatives

Numerous well-proven systems of farming still exist throughout the world which do not require chemical inputs and do not cause erosion, salinisation or other problems associated with modern intensive agriculture. Many combine the insights of modern holistic science with the wisdom of traditional practices. They include permaculture, no-tillage system, organic farming, bio-intensive agriculture, sustainable systems using perennial varieties, and systems of mixed cropping and companion planting. Such systems are economically viable and productive.

- What agricultural alternatives is your group, movement or organisation proposing or engaged in?
- How has your group promoted these alternatives?
- What hinders or prevents you from carrying out your alternatives?
- What assists (or would assist) you to carry out your alternatives?
- On what do sustainable livelihoods of farming communities depend?
- Does the problem of land-use rights affect you? In what ways?
- Have you experienced government land reform? What are your views on this?
- Is your community dependent on the export market? If so, what would you do about this, if anything?
- Are the richer becoming richer and the poorer becoming poorer in your community and, if so, how do you deal with this?
- Is there increasing government influence over agriculture in your area and, if so, how do you deal with this?

Write about your experience to: The Ecologist - Whose Common Future? Attn: Nicholas Hildyard, Station Road, Sturminster Newton, Dorset DT10 1BB, UK. Or at least send your reactions to the above text, as this will also contribute to the report.