

The key to agricultural transformation

Recent decades have seen an increasing recognition of the role that education plays in rural development. Some rural communities now have new buildings, new curricula, and new educational options, such as Farmer Field Schools. Yet, in many countries, the education system still falls short of what is needed, especially in terms of agriculture and meeting the needs and concerns of rural dwellers. With agriculture showing diminishing yields and many rural areas experiencing pervasive poverty and degradation, youngsters all over the world opt to move to the cities. What answers does education provide? It rarely addresses emerging challenges, such as degraded resources or climate change, nor does it make a real contribution to helping rural people have a better understanding of how to improve their livelihoods. Changes are needed so that education effectively contributes to transformation towards a more sustainable and just agriculture.

Loes Witteveen and Jorge Chavez-Tafur

The importance of education for development is almost universally accepted. Education is not only a human right, but also a tool for development. But it is obvious that this tool is not always delivering results in rural areas. Although more students are reached now than in the past, the resources available are still limited. A much larger problem, however, is the way in which countries' education systems meet rural needs, especially when these are rapidly changing. This raises the question of whether education should respond to today's needs or focus on preparing students for the future. In industrialised countries, very few school children will become farmers, or will make a living in rural areas. Similar, though less extreme, patterns can be discerned in many developing countries where many school leavers find the pull of the city irresistible. They see a direct link between farming and poverty and view the city as a greener pasture. Inadvertently or not, education



Working together: students and farmers in northern Ghana. Photo: Joseph Amikuzuno

programmes in rural areas encourage the youth to leave for the cities.

Yet agriculture will continue to be a fundamental economic activity, and farming will continue to shape the lives of hundreds of millions of people around the world. Even abandoned villages will remain part of the cultural heritage and deeply rooted identities of large populations. However rapidly urbanisation proceeds, rural émigrés and those who continue to live in the countryside will continue to relive their stories and songs that portray afternoons in the shadow of a mango tree and the ritual celebrations for a good harvest. But how can these nostalgic memories be aligned with the realities of inherited poverty, land grabbing and stagnant traditions? Millions of students going to school today (together with millions who still don't have the opportunity) will follow in the footsteps of their parents and grandparents and become growers or herders. They, like their parents now, will be responsible for providing 50% of the world's food. How to prepare them for this responsibility?

We should start by identifying the type of agriculture we want as a (global) society. The choice is essentially between pursuing a globalised industrial agriculture, or an alternative pathway that recognises the multifunctionality and diversity of family farming and the contribution that it can make to addressing challenges such as hunger and malnutrition, loss of biodiversity and climate change. If we follow the latter path, teaching methodologies such as Farmer Field Schools are very useful: they focus on strengthening farmers' capacities to analyse their agro-ecosystems. This empowers them to make their own judgements and take decisions that work for them, rather than depending on others telling them what to do. These efforts support the continuous development of an efficient and sustainable production system.

Skills and values But just as development is not limited to economic growth, agriculture is not only about yields and outputs. Agriculture is not just a technical activity requiring technical skills, but also a key force that shapes societies, cultures and landscapes. Even urban environments are shaped by farming and agriculture: as consumers we all benefit from the services provided by farmers.

If education is to contribute to the transformation of rural areas, it needs to be more than just *for agriculture*, limited to teaching farmers how to farm. As the different articles in this issue show, educational programmes *about agriculture*, targeted at a wider group than just farmers, are also important. While formal and non-formal education should train farmers to develop specific skills for the sustainable production and marketing of their products, it also needs to be about values and interests, and about transforming perceptions and attitudes – in

rural areas and in the cities, among farmers and consumers. In spite of the key role played by farmers, farming is often seen as an activity carried out by those who cannot do anything else; a last option that can easily be abandoned as soon as other opportunities arise.

Unfortunately, most education programmes encourage these views, leading to the feelings of “disjointedness” mentioned by Meenakshi Singh (p. 14) and seen in rural areas all over the world. Education needs to counter this, to help develop feelings of self-esteem, appreciation and pride among farming communities and give them the recognition they deserve. The key role farmers play today, and which they will continue playing, needs to be acknowledged.

These changes need to be supported by changes in those responsible for education and extension programmes, and also by changes in those in charge of a country's policies and programmes. For example, teacher training programmes that encourage teachers to reach out to young women, ethnic minorities or pastoralists, and to develop new perspectives on family farming with them, play a valuable role in encouraging diversity and opening up hitherto unrecognised potential. The best examples are seen in approaches where the curricula are built on local knowledge and experience, on what students know and want to know, and on the challenges they face. Landini and Bianqui (p. 34) show the importance of not only changing the perspective of extension agents, but also of involving them in this process, building on their immediate needs and concerns and enhancing their professional identities.

Reconnecting with family farming All too often education in rural areas serves to disconnect and estrange rural people from their own culture and environment, and increases the gap between rural and urban settings. Yet education can actively support young rural people in their search for identity and future opportunities. Education needs to be better connected to rural realities and the enormous potential that family farming, based on agro-ecology, has in addressing the pressing challenges facing the world today. The initiatives highlighted in this issue, even if small in scale, are all building towards this. It's time to come up with the energy, inspiration and dedication to make education a genuine force for innovation in agriculture.

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