

"We can talk about



Rio+20 has sparked international attention to sustainable agricultural development, but this has been a point of attention for many people for years. An agricultural sociologist, Ann Waters-Bayer was for a long time involved in the production of the *ILEIA Newsletter* and the *LEISA Magazine*. She is now part of PROLINNOVA, a "Global Partnership Programme" under the umbrella of the Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR) that aims to promote local innovation processes in ecologically oriented agriculture.

Interview: Laura Eggens and Marta Dabrowska

A lot has changed in the international development arena in the past 30 years. This will be visible at Rio+20 as well. "I imagine that in Rio there are going to be numerous farmer organisations and civil society organisations to voice their own demands," says Ann Waters-Bayer. "Since 1984, we have been trying to build a bridge between policy and practice, but back in 1984, most farmer organisations were not as strong as they are today."

What helped bring about the larger role these organisations have?

I believe ILEIA and similar organisations played a role in that. They always tried to make the voices of smallholders heard – including pastoralists or landless farmers. I think we managed to bring more confidence to a number of organisations, who saw that they could make themselves heard outside their countries through these international means. Then they started sharing their experiences much more inside their own countries as well. Organisations that published in the *LEISA* magazines in the past now have their own publications. And there were more organisations like ILEIA doing this, focusing on

smallholders and ecologically oriented agriculture, and trying to put information together and make it readable. This was before you could find everything on the web.

What triggered the interest in exchanging information?

Probably the "Limits to growth" report that came out a few years earlier, and which warned about the direction the world would go if we would continue in the same way, especially regarding the use of natural resources. I think that this sparked off things in people's heads. Some of these people had experience with farmers that practised an alternative type of agriculture than what was being proposed as "the future" as part of the Green Revolution. The limits-to-growth thinking struck a bell with a lot of people, who started to look at local knowledge and its potential. The UN conference in Rio in 1992 gave some strength and confirmation to what these people were doing, but this wasn't a big turning point.

Many of the same warnings are coming out now. Is there a difference?

In the last couple of years we've seen much more attention being given to

a paradigm shift"

ecologically oriented agriculture and to the “green aspects” of the world economy. I think that the food crisis, environmental damage, political uprisings, inequalities, the immense wastage of food in the North, and the climate change discussions, all contributed to this growing interest. Some ways of agriculture are damaging and other ways are less damaging, and are possibly more resilient. There has been much more evidence coming up on how productive ecologically-oriented agriculture is. And in the last two or three years, many people have started to question whether the high-external-input intensification of agriculture is the way to go. I think that the IAASTD report played a big role as well, because the influential people involved in that assessment really made a point of making the results widely known. For a lot of NGOs, here was a multi-stakeholder process that had come to conclusions that they had made years before. It gave a lot of impetus to the policy-lobbying work and brought people in organisations other than NGOs to think about the direction in which agriculture is going.

Do you think that the internet changed on how people share knowledge? In the beginning, when we were trying to put together something for a newsletter, we were working only within our network, looking for field-level information that was not in the double-refereed journals. Now a lot of local knowledge on best practices is just put on the web. Of course, you still have to judge the validity of the information that you find. A lot of high-level policymakers will not go around the internet to find local experiences; they need some kind of selection and valuation. I think that institutions like ILEIA or its partners can do that by collecting, validating and analysing experiences, and drawing out the key policy issues and findings, and making them known.

Also at a local level? I think that influencing policy at a local level should be done by local people. There can be a role in building capacities and participatory research to enable practitioners and local experts to gather the evidence that they need, but also in getting supportive evidence

from other sources. And then putting this together, and thinking through strategies of how to bring this to policymakers at a local level. A documentation process can help local organisations do their own lobbying by providing evidence.

What is the role of PROLINNOVA in this process? PROLINNOVA is trying mainly to influence agricultural extension and research organisations. The network wants to raise awareness on the capacities that farmers have to develop their own technologies, systems and institutions, which they have been doing for ages. Research and extension activities can build on those existing initiatives. We would like to link much more with smallholder agriculture movements. All too often, statements about agriculture talk about the type of agriculture that should be promoted, but not about *how* it should be promoted. At the same time, I am amazed at how much more verbal attention is given to local innovation and supporting local initiatives, at least on paper. Even though the support for transfer-of-technology approaches did not disappear overnight, some documents do recognise the importance of local initiatives. This is a different approach.

Do you have any hope that Rio+20, or the changing attitudes, will lead to changes in policies? I don't like to put all of my cards on one event, but I think that an event like Rio+20 can make a big contribution. It allows various movements to come together. You can always use Rio+20 to get your message across, not only to people that are involved in the actual event, but also around the world. Supposedly, a lot of financial support will be made available now. But we have to make sure that the right message is heard. People should also see what has been happening for decades on the margins. International organisations, like FAO, the World Bank or the bilateral and multilateral donors, are now supporting more ecologically-oriented agricultural programmes, so we can talk about a paradigm shift in these organisations. But there is a very large group of smallholder farmers and supporting organisations that have been thinking like this for decades!