

A portrait of Jean Marc von der Weid, a man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a blue shirt. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

**“We  
need to  
convince  
civil  
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of the  
urgency  
for a  
radical  
transformation”**

Twenty years after Rio de Janeiro was the stage for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the world's gaze returns to Brazil for the Rio+20 Conference in June this year. The sequel to this first international meeting on sustainable development may well have important implications for the future of family farmers. Jean Marc von der Weid founded and works with AS-PTA, a non-governmental organisation based in Rio, supporting capacity building and institutional policies in favour of family farming and agro-ecology.

Interview: Laura Eggens

**E**ven though Rio+20 holds many promises for changing the world's perspectives on sustainable agriculture, it is important to remain realistic about the limited possibilities of it leading to serious political commitments. Jean Marc von der Weid is a "Rio+20 realist" – he does not expect much from the official meeting, but he is very positive about the political impacts that civil society mobilisation can have on international public opinion, "with positive effects in the medium to long term".

**How are the preparations for Rio+20 going?** Preparations in Brazil are progressing at a snail's pace. The facilitating committee is too large and has strongly conflicting views. One group of organisations gives more importance to lobbying government representatives, and are more receptive to some of the "green economy" proposals. A second group is more focused on organising external demonstrations to denounce the anticipated failure of the official conference. This group is looking to mobilise opinions around the issue of peoples' exclusion from development and the negative impacts of development. A last group rejects the whole framework of the official document that will provide the basis of discussions at Rio+20. These organisations criticise the document's inadequate diagnosis of the causes of the multiple and interrelated ecological crises. They denounce the "green economy" proposition as a lure to make people forget about the promises made at the 1992 conference that were not kept. This group criticises the very concept of development and proposes alternative pathways and policies to change the present situation.

**How did the 1992 conference influence small-scale farming?** I think that conference consecrated the concept of sustainability, even though the definition of the concept is still subject to intense debate, with everyone, from Monsanto to *Via Campesina*, considering they have the right take on it. From a practical point of view, since 1992 there has been a strong expansion of industrial agriculture, with more use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers, as well as the launch of GMOs. The conference did try to address this trend, but most of the decisions taken there to try to control the onslaught of conventional industrial agriculture were eroded at further international negotiations.

**What would be your desired outcome from the Rio+20 conference?** "Desires" in this case are more like dreams. We need a clear "anti Green Revolution" resolution, a condemnation of chemical inputs, and most of all, of GMOs. We need resolutions in favour of agrarian reform. We need resolutions in favour of fair trade

and food sovereignty. Internationally, in relation to sustainable agriculture and food security, there is a paper signed by some 130 organisations called "Time to Act". Its main message is to condemn conventional agricultural development and push for strong support for agro-ecological development, centred on family farmers. The document seeks to push the agriculture issue to the forefront of the Rio+20 debates as the most important single cause of many of the present ecological crises. I have participated in the formulation of this document and in the discussions in Washington last summer to build a consensus around it. Agro-ecological farming has made great progress, and we can now present hard evidence of its successes, and demonstrate its potential as a solution to the evil effects of industrial and corporate agriculture. However, all these advances cannot hide the fact that family farming is being destroyed all over the world, and that public policies at a national and at an international level have been biased to support unsustainable forms of industrial agriculture. This situation is simply a result of a "*rapport de forces*" or "balance of power". Corporate money, plus government power and policies, plus a supportive international framework (CGIAR, WTO, etc.) have been more powerful than small-scale farmers and the environmental and consumers' movements.

**So do we need another Rio conference?** We do need an environmental conference, but not of the kind that is offered by governments and the UN system. Governments and international UN organisations have shown themselves to be unable to implement the dramatic changes in national and international environmental policies that are needed. They have consistently watered down whatever gains were achieved in 1992 in the series of negotiations and conferences that followed that event. I do not believe any amount of lobbying will be enough to bring about the international and national policies needed to promote sustainable agriculture based around family farming and agro-ecology. Civil society organisations in Brazil are divided on these issues, even though my feeling is that most organisations are critical.

**What do you believe will make a difference for small-scale farmers?** I guess we may have more success by denouncing the official meeting as irrelevant and convincing civil society of the urgent need for a radical transformation of the present food and agricultural systems. Of course, I don't believe that civil society by itself can substantially change the *status quo*. We need appropriate national and international policies, and as such we need governments and international institutions to act responsibly. However, I think that a change

