



Hans Herren is president of the Millennium Institute, an international NGO providing tools and methods worldwide that facilitate decision making for sustainable development. The driving force in all his activities and professional choices is the concern for a more sustainable world where there is a future for everybody.

Interview: Mireille Vermeulen

Next to his work at the Millennium Institute, Mr Herren is co-chair of the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD). The publication of “Agriculture at a Crossroads” in 2008 sought to bring about real change in policies for agriculture and development. Fifty-nine countries have endorsed the report and many other states and organisations have noted the importance of the assessment. The report pictures possible scenarios, looks clearly at policy and institutional issues, and provides decision makers with a range of options for action. It has a great potential – but things have been quiet in the past two years.

What happened with the IAASTD report?

My big disappointment was that after the report was finished and the plenary in Johannesburg in 2008 was over, there was no money left for a good PR and media launch, not even to promote it among international bodies, governments, research institutes and donor organisations. I am trying to promote IAASTD through my own activities and those of my foundation (www.biovision.ch). Fortunately, some of the report’s authors and supporters have also taken up promoting the report and see the need for a next step. Yet at the same time the International Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services is being seen as an alternative to IAASTD, something with which I don’t agree. It has taken us a long time to get agriculture recognised as the key issue in international development. With the IAASTD we managed to put it back on the agenda; now we need to do even more.

What is the status of agriculture on the international agenda at this moment?

Agriculture is still at a crossroads, very little has happened at any government level. Even countries which have endorsed the agreement are doing nothing. In England, for instance, Parliament endorsed the report, but it has done little to implement its findings. Instead it commissioned a new report, which came out with basically similar conclusions, but suggesting that GMOs may be needed to cope with food security issues in the future. In the IAASTD report we specifically wrote that genetic engineering has not yet solved any problem in agriculture and food security, that research is needed on its health and ecological impacts, and that this should not be at the expense of research, extension and the implementation of sustainable and organic farming.

Why is it so difficult to change anything here?

Governments are under pressure from the U.S., Canada and Australia, who did not endorse the agreement because of their views on trade and GM crops. These three countries are major donors and they have a large influence on the development agenda. Another reason is the pressure from the private sector and some large private foundations. Companies like Monsanto, Syngenta and Bayer raise the sceptre of unemployment and hunger to get support for their GM technologies. But there is also a general problem that people do not understand: the potential of sustainable agriculture to solve food security problems. Many policy makers have been led to believe that sustainable or ecological agriculture will not be productive enough to nourish the world. But experiences from the field, published in peer-reviewed journals, show increases in production by a factor of two and more after a transition to sustainable, ecological or organic agriculture.

Should politics not play a more important role then?

I have become more and more convinced that we cannot count on politicians or politics to make the decisions that will bring about the needed changes in consumption patterns and the way we do agriculture. There are too many lobbies out there, and politicians always put the need to be re-elected ahead of the common good. They don’t dare to take unpopular decisions today that would make the world a better place tomorrow. Against my earlier thinking, some private sector companies and people may be the best option for leading change. We need to find out who these people are and what companies they lead, and then work with them. It is a big job to inform them about the findings of the IAASTD report, so this is why it is important that the IAASTD process continues. We also need to include a much broader range of stakeholders and work with groups of people who can see the broad range of problems and help to solve them. The way forward with IAASTD may be to set up a permanent panel like the IPCC, to inform the public, politicians and the private sector about policies for food security and sovereignty.

Where should we start?

We keep on measuring CO₂ levels and these are going up, no matter what we do. Even if we would stop driving cars today, this will continue, and the consequences will be quite dramatic. But we keep on talking, referring to new reports, organising new meetings, and the CO₂ levels keep on rising. Sustainable agricultural practices could absorb a third or more of the CO₂, instead of being a source

of emissions. One way to change that is to reward sustainable farmers for the positive externalities they create, rather than charging them with extra labelling costs. Globally, some 800 million dollars every day is spent on direct and indirect subsidies for farmers in developed countries. These subsidies promote cheap food and enormous waste (up 60 % from production to consumption) along the value chain. It is time to sell food at the true cost that includes the externalities and, where necessary, assist the poorer segments of the population with something like food stamps. This would make industrial food more expensive and sustainably produced food cheaper.

Don't we just need more food for a growing world population?

The fact is that we have to change our lifestyles, and that's tough news. We keep driving on in our SUVs, we keep on over-consuming cheap meat, and every year we listen to the experts say that economy and technology will fix these problems. This is the general mindset. But will it? I don't think so, and many others agree. We have reached the ecological limits and need now to reconsider the way we produce and consume food and other products. When it comes to food production we know exactly what to do: transform 1.5 billion hectares into agro-ecological farming and increase the rate of change with factor 37, and then it can all be sustainable by 2050. Today we produce 4,600 calories per person per day. That's already enough to feed the highest estimates of 12 billion people predicted to be on this planet then.

But is that really possible?

The potential is enormous. We can produce more rice with less water, using the System of Rice Intensification (SRI). We can use methods like push-and-pull, intercropping maize with repellent plants which "pull" the insects. We need to put life into the soil again, and have at least five or six different crops in rotation. It's also about having animals back on the farm and using the manure well. These agronomic options are in line with our requirements and needs for food security. It's not a bleak picture. We all want a better, healthier and more rewarding life. But the Gates Foundation, for example, is still pushing for a Green Revolution with more fertilizers, more hybrid seeds and more dependency, while ignoring local solutions that have shown great impact.

What's the role of youth in this?

We need to take them on board in our search for a better future, for they are the producers and

consumers of tomorrow. It's their world that is at stake and they are concerned. Youth have to be involved and empowered so they can really do something. The IAASTD report is based on information collected in 2006-2008 and was published in 2008. It is already getting old. So we want to publish new material and we need a new assessment in a couple of years. This time we need to try to involve the next generation of policy makers. We could have a competition at universities to find the best solutions and to choose the best reports. You have to be a bit more creative to attract young people, but they are interested as we are talking about their future. In the last assessment procedure, I also tried to convince the IAASTD Director to involve film schools on every continent by asking them to produce a short film about crucial sustainability issues at a local level. That would have provided wonderful PR material, but it didn't work out for lack of funds. In the next phase of the IAASTD we really have to make better use of the media, in particular the new social media such as Facebook and Twitter. As we prepare to take the IAASTD process to the Rio+20 meeting and assure that sustainable agriculture will be high on the agenda, the importance of youth participation cannot be over-emphasised.



Photo: ICiPE

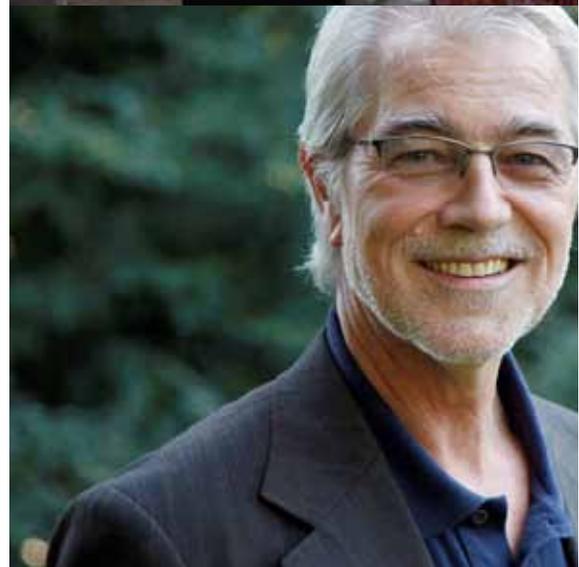


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