

25 years ileia

Family farming (re)discovered

In 1984, Ileia started as a small initiative to build knowledge about agriculture that primarily depends on local resources, as an alternative approach to Green Revolution agriculture. This was the start of a global knowledge network on sustainable small-scale agriculture. Let us look at how perspectives on agriculture have changed over the years and how this has influenced ileia.

Crafting a concept In the early 1980s, the Green Revolution began to be recognized to have made many farmers more vulnerable, with inadequate social safety nets and exploiting the natural environment. ileia was among the first to identify this crisis, and crafted the term LEISA: Low External Input

Sustainable Agriculture. This new concept was informed by the conviction that Green Revolution approaches were clearly not appropriate for many small farmers worldwide, particularly for those in culturally and biologically diverse but ecologically fragile dryland areas. ileia saw the need for a farmer-centered and knowledge-intensive approach to agricultural development. The hypothesis was that there must be a wealth of knowledge ‘out there’, but it would remain local and scattered unless a forum could be created that would encourage people to articulate this tacit knowledge and share it with others working in similar conditions elsewhere. Local agricultural knowledge would have blended with ‘external’ knowledge about suitable technologies and approaches.

A growing network and a growing movement

Over the years, ileia's network expanded, and so did the number of subscribers to LEISA magazine. From 1997 onwards, ileia started to 'regionalise' its magazine. Successively a Latin American edition (in Spanish), an Indian edition, a West African edition (in French), an Indonesian edition, a Brazilian edition, a Chinese and an East African edition were established by partners of ileia in the concerned regions. Together they are now reaching more than a quarter million readers.

Gradually the 'movement' for sustainable agriculture around us has also grown both in size and diversity, taking on board diverse names, concepts, ideologies and practical approaches. Over the years, ileia has continued to provide a forum for knowledge sharing to all those searching for alternative solutions in agriculture, in a non dogmatic and inclusive manner, bridging between 'scientific' and 'local', 'alternative' and 'mainstream' approaches. ileia realised that farming is about more than agricultural practices and the level and type of inputs. It is also about families, friends and local communities. It is about managing the environment, natural hazards and risk. It is about culture. Farming is a way of life. The concept of family farming better reflects these diverse dimensions.

Changing scenarios In the mean time, the global agricultural scenario changed significantly. Drastic

changes took place all over the world, as a consequence of the globalizing economy and in response to the need to feed a fast growing population (from 3,5 billion in 1980 to almost 6 billion in 2010). Large-scale specialised agriculture became the model for agricultural development, small-scale diversified agriculture became considered as a thing of the past. On the national and international policy agendas, agriculture has been conspicuously absent for almost two decades, until it came back with a vengeance. In 2008 the World Development Report 'Agriculture for Development' (by the World Bank) appeared, followed by the IAASTD report 'Agriculture at a Crossroads' in 2009. The global food crisis, followed by the economic crisis further helped to make the world realize that neglect



of small-scale agriculture is a grave and dangerous mistake.

Discovering a blind spot

After the publication of these two studies, many organisations and governments have reached the conclusion that large-scale, industrialised, agriculture may not be the only development path and that small-scale farmers do matter. There are one billion people in the world who farm less than two hectares of land and another 1.5 billion people who depend on agriculture and natural resources for their livelihoods, including agricultural labourers, herders and fisher people. Their number is increasing. The IAASTD study highlights negative consequences of the neglect of small-scale farmers by policy and research for the environment, biodiversity, sustainability, traditional knowledge and local communities. While agro-ecology and small-scale sustainable farming may currently be marginalised, the report recognises that these may become a crucial solution for agriculture in the future.

Wrong policies Despite the new interest in small-scale farmers, Coen Reijntjes, former editor of the LEISA magazine says that there is one problem: ‘There has been a lack of political will to implement policies that can really change the situation for family farming. While the IAASTD conclusions were far-reaching, politicians did not pick up any clear recommendations. In fact, the IAASTD report concludes between the lines that the global economic system needs radical reform and that is rather challenging’. The World Development Report is less critical about the global economic system: it claims that improvements in local and regional markets should permit the survival of the fittest. Small-scale farmers who cannot make the jump to markets and competitive farming would be better off migrating elsewhere and give up farming. But is more competition enough to improve rural life?

Options for action Reijntjes, who analysed the IAASTD report and the World Development Report for 2008 last year, compared its conclusions with content of the magazines of the AgriCultures Network. He concluded that in the past 25 years, the LEISA magazine has dealt with many of the issues raised in these reports, notably the IAASTD report. The magazines have shown numerous examples of how low use of external inputs and the diversification of crops and livestock can be highly effective in dealing with



changing circumstances and natural and market-induced risk. The local experiences reflected in the magazine thus provide 'options for action' and can inspire policy makers.

Let's move But turning options into action that might change the world, involves much more. Coen Reijntjes continues: "The conclusions of the reports need to be introduced into debates and used to influence public opinion. The AgriCultures Network can provide a platform for this." That is indeed what ileia plans to do in the coming years: provide a platform for discussion and inform farmers, policymakers, movements and institutions like Via Campesina, FoodFirst, IIED and WorldWatch about family farming. For ileia, criticising mainstream approaches is not enough; we must go on showing viable alternatives and build bridges with mainstream institutions.

References:

Farming Matters,
The story of a magazine, Coen Reijntjes, 2009

Small farmer, big thing: sustainable small-holder agriculture coming to scale,
Coen Reijntjes, 2009

Regional movements

Movements and networks that work on lobbying and influencing public opinion do not only operate at the global level. Our partners see their own regional networks as an entrypoint for getting attention for small-scale farming. The PELUM network (www.pelum.net) is active in Kenya, in Brazil there are a number of such organisations: Articulação do Semiárido Brasileiro (www.asabrasil.org.br) and the scientific national organisation in Agroecology: www.aba-agroecologia.org.br

Our Chinese partner CBIK sees potential in the Partnerships for Community Development (www.pcd.org.hk/eng/index.html) and the Pesticide Eco-Alternatives Center. The Millet Network of India works with partners from all over India. It works towards food sovereignty in dry-land areas by promoting millets, primarily through networking and advocacy. All these organisations are working on promoting small-scale farming, within the context of specific agricultural, climatic, political or economic circumstances.