

THEME OVERVIEW

Building



There is a growing recognition of the role small-scale farmers play when it comes to food production and food security. How can this be built on? Rather than asking “how to scale up”, we should ask ourselves how to support the permanent innovation process that is small-scale farming. | Text Jorge Chavez-Tafur

on success

Imagine the year 2011 as the International Year of Family Farming: a few years ago this would have been a utopian idea, but these days the possibility is being seriously discussed at high levels in FAO and the United Nations.

It is illustrative of the way family farming has found its place in the world, as we have seen over the 25 years that LEISA Magazine – now Farming Matters – has been published. The first issue of the magazine referred to some new and alternative projects working on sustainable agriculture – then a new concept. Today, our magazine has evolved into a set of eight different editions, published throughout the world, reaching tens of thousands of subscribers. And they report not on just a few projects, but on the work of millions of people. After 25 years, there is a growing recognition of the role small-scale farmers play in terms of food production, but also in terms of ecosystem services and rural development. How can we build on the results achieved so far and achieve much more?

What is scaling up? Scaling up refers to the process of reaching larger numbers of people. In 2001, we defined it as: “Scaling up leads to

Types of scaling up

There are various types of scaling up. An expansion in size, budget or geographic coverage, frequently described as **scaling out**, is part of a **quantitative** process. A **functional** process is where an organisation increases the scope of its activities or adds sectoral activities to existing programmes. In contrast, **organisational scaling up** refers to the process of strengthening an organisation’s internal capacities, allowing them to take new responsibilities. **Political scaling up** refers to an increase in influence on policy makers, or of advocating for policy changes. ■



more quality benefits to more people, over a wider geographic area more quickly, more equitably and more lastingly” (LEISA Magazine 17.3). This condensed definition covers several ideas and serves as a good starting point. We are not only talking about reaching more people, but also referring to sustainable benefits: benefits which continue over time. The link with sustainable agriculture was made clear by Jules Pretty, who wrote, in *Facilitating Sustainable Agriculture*, a publication from 1998: “Sustainability ought to mean more than just agricultural activities that are environmentally neutral or positive: it implies the capacity for activities to spread beyond a project, in both space and time”.

The World Bank’s report on sustaining the successes of rural development (*Scaling up for Increased Impact of Development Practice*, 2003) defined scaling up

both as a means – referring to the replication, spread or adaptation of techniques, ideas, approaches and concepts – and as an end: increased impact. This difference helps us sharpen our view: in the last twenty-five years, not only are more people working with small-scale farmers or sustainable agriculture projects, but we also see more impact and more people who have benefited from knowledge about small-scale family farming. But what do we expect to see or achieve? The World Bank pointed to the importance of having a common or agreed reference point, such as the Millennium Development Goals, because, as the report states, “Desired outcomes and impacts can be quite different from one place to another”, while “different stakeholders have different perspectives on what they consider success”.

What do we want to scale up?

Before considering how to scale up, it is important that we first clearly identify what it is that we intend to scale up or sustain in time. This could be an idea, an initiative or a specific technique that takes us in the right direction. Many articles published in previous issues of this magazine have shown how farming techniques, like zero tillage or cover crops, have been taken up by farmers, and then have been copied, adopted and adapted by many more. The replication of some of these ideas often had the active support of an organisation, but many of them have scaled up as a result of their intrinsic advantages – and in spite of all sorts of barriers. The System of Rice Intensification (SRI) is a clear example (see page 22).

Apart from looking at ideas, initiatives or techniques, we can also look at projects. Thousands of them are currently being implemented by public or private organisations all over the world. All of them, by definition, are relatively small and are only supposed to last for a relatively short period of time. But they expect to have a wide and long-lasting impact. The major criticism these projects receive is that, in spite of the positive results they achieve, they are drops in the ocean, small islands of success. The benefits of these projects reach only a limited number of villages or farmers. This only strengthens the case for scaling up, and shows the need for specific measures. A clear definition of roles, for example, together with adequate preparation and training of those who are to carry out specific tasks, can ensure that certain activities continue once a project finishes.

Continuously in motion

Steve Sherwood, when asked what he considers to be most important when looking at how to scale up, says the thing to keep in mind is that the practice of small-scale farming is continuously in motion. Any attempt at increasing the impact of sustainable agriculture,



“This is how we did it.” Photo: Jorge Chavez-Tafur

or at sustaining the positive results, needs to take this continuous motion as its point of departure. “When it comes to growth and diversification of an activity, essential social processes are involved”, says Sherwood. “Growth hinges on social interaction, emerging relationships, networks, co-option, collusion and co-operation.” All of this leads to a continuous learning and innovation process.

It is therefore not surprising to see the importance given to supporting the sharing of ideas, such as communication networks and the exchange of information between farmers, extension agents, policy makers and other practitioners. As the earlier mentioned World Bank report states: “The ways in which information and learning are managed are critical to scaling up efforts”. The 2008 World Resources report, *Roots of Resilience*, puts it equally clearly: “Scaling up will not occur without good communication of success stories”. This is what ILEIA has been trying to do for the past 25 years; not just publish articles, but also identify ideas, promote material for discussion and analysis, and facilitate the “social interaction” mentioned above. The fact that we have been able to play this role for the past 25 years makes us feel very proud – and determined to keep on fulfilling it.

More than money All too often, the possibilities for broader and lasting results are linked to resources. Projects can only continue if they have sufficient funds; ideas can be replicated and



Sharing ideas is one of the cornerstones of a Farmer Field School. Photo: Jorge Chavez-Tafur

processes set in motion if the necessary resources are available. But this is not the only thing. The System of Rice Intensification, for example, was not adopted by thousands of farmers because they were paid to do so, but because of its intrinsic qualities. SRI is very relevant to thousands of farmers: it is well suited to their conditions and at the same time leads to higher yields. These positive factors become even

One of many “champions”

Although many people fit in this category, few do so as well as Narayana Reddy. Starting as a Green Revolution farmer (and even earning the “best farmer” award for his high yields), he later switched to organic farming after noticing the serious environmental and economic problems he was contributing to. For more than three decades now, he has been running a small-scale organic farm in Doddaballapur, in the southern Indian state of Karnataka. His work is a permanent demonstration that small-scale farming is feasible and viable, in economic, social and ecological terms. But apart from farming, and from regularly receiving hundreds of visitors, Mr Reddy travels extensively throughout the state, meeting “at least one thousand farmers per month” and advocating for family farming and small-scale agriculture. A regular contributor to LEISA India, he was also appointed to the Karnataka State Organic Farming Mission of the state government, set up in August 2008 to formulate a programme and operational guidelines for the promotion of organic farming. Directly and indirectly, he is clearly the person behind much of the thinking and practice seen in southern India.



Many ideas have scaled up as a result of their intrinsic advantages, and in spite of all sorts of barriers. The System of Rice Intensification (SRI) is a clear example

clearer when we compare SRI to many “modern agriculture” packages, which only have positive results if implemented under specific conditions (topography, climate) or have the correct inputs (fertilizers and pesticides).

But the internal characteristics of an idea, technique or principle must be carefully nourished and guided. The widespread adoption of the Farmer Field School approach owes much to its innovative character – especially when compared to the traditional “transfer of technology” approaches to extension. But in LEISA Magazine 17.1, Eric Holt-Gimenez looked at the *Movimiento Campesino a Campesino*, the farmer-led sustainable agriculture movement in Latin America, and asked: “If it works so well, why

hasn't it spread more?” His analysis points to elements like insufficient preparation or training, an inability to influence decision makers, and unfavourable settings because of certain economic interests (like agrochemical companies). Equally relevant are the unfavourable institutional or policy contexts to which Parviz Koohafkan also makes reference (see page 12).

Ingredients and ideas So what can we do to scale up all the good ideas, projects and processes? We can for instance try motivating others, and get them interested in following our example. This role is best played by “champions”, people who convince neighbours, friends and colleagues by setting an example. They advocate directly and actively for a cause and get their message effectively heard, resulting in massive dissemination and greater impacts (see: One of many “champions”). Equally important are things like having a clear definition of roles, an emphasis on capacity building, the availability of money as seed capital, strong local organisations, and ownership of the process. As the 2008 World Resources report states: “Capacity building is pointless without a real devolution of resource authority to local stakeholders”.

All these are internal factors. More difficult to tackle, but equally important, are the external factors. These range from land rights (as perhaps the most important condition a farmer requires before deciding to go for long term investments) to outside factors like petrol

Quality issues

The worldwide dissemination of the Farmer Field School approach can easily be presented as successful in terms of scaling up. As a participatory approach where farmers get together, discuss and analyse problems and potential solutions, Farmer Field Schools proved appealing to both trainers and trainees. Their adoption in many countries has also been a direct consequence of the support of organisations like FAO and the decisive attitude of some policy makers at different levels. But Steve Sherwood, one of the main driving forces behind this approach for many years, points to a systematic erosion of the Farmer Field School methodology, referring to many training programmes which are in fact not more than a traditional training approach. Having many more Farmer Field Schools does not necessarily increase impact. “Scaling up efforts therefore need to pay attention to the professional and organisational conditions that determine who is in the driver's seat of development”. This means that trainings need to focus on the interest and motivation of farmers, and keep the desired outcome and impact in sight. ■



“See the change we've seen.” Photo: Edith van Walsum



Local “champions” like Narayana Reddy get a broad audience. Photo: Jorge Chavez-Tafur

prices, which might lead to increased production of bio-fuel crops, for example. Also crucial is the presence of a supporting organisation (committed to long time support) and the existence of market mechanisms that motivate farmers to produce and earn more. These factors determine the enabling environment for scaling up. Naturally, governments play a very important role. Whether it is through subsidies or taxation, or simply through the approval of norms and regulations, policy makers have the power to shape this environment.

Even negative circumstances can play an enabling role, and lead to unexpected developments, says Norman Uphoff, SRI expert from Cornell University: “You could say that the financial and environmental crisis has come twenty years too late. Only recently big institutions have started to take SRI benefits seriously, because now we have to find a solution to water scarcity, expensive input costs and price spikes for rice and other food crops. This crisis is the perfect enabling environment for a technique like SRI.” This brings us back to the question we started with. How can we build on the increased recognition that small-scale family farming currently enjoys? How

can we achieve more innovations and improvements in farming life? The challenges lie in strengthening farmers’ organisations, replicating successful experiences and influencing governmental policies and actions. Naturally, there is not one solution, nor one universal approach – apart from recognising that we need to help create the conditions for scaling up and for sustaining the gains. Especially if we look at our own role, we agree with Sherwood, who says that “if we accept that development operates in a complex world, we need to ask a more precise question than ‘how to scale up’. We should ask ourselves how to continually support and manage the endless process of knowledge generation, facilitation and networking involved in what is essentially a spontaneous activity of socio-technical change.”

Helping to identify constraints and opportunities, promoting the exchange of information, documenting and generating knowledge, this is precisely what we as ILEIA plan to continue doing. ■

**Jorge Chavez-Tafur. ILEIA. P.O. Box 2067,
3800 CB Amersfoort, the Netherlands.
E-mail j.chavez-tafur@ileia.nl**