



# “Hot issues” help preserve traditional agricultural systems

Photo: Frank van Schoubroeck

**Researchers and local policy makers acknowledge the values of traditional agricultural systems. But how can these systems be preserved? What kind of support do farmers need to keep developing their systems? Identifying “hot issues” that farmers face in their everyday working lives is a starting point. These can be addressed through governance mechanisms, designed to link politicians with people.**

Frank van Schoubroeck, Luohui Liang and Arend-Jan van Bodegom

The world has hundreds of amazing farming systems in the most unlikely places. On steep mountain sides, rice terraces were carved out and ingenious irrigation systems were developed. In the Sahara, farmers use every drop of water to grow rare species of dates and apricots. Latin American farmers grow over a hundred potato varieties. Each country has areas where generations of farmers used local opportunities to develop complex farming systems. Such systems have always emerged and disappeared, and agricultural landscapes have always adapted to technological and social developments. Yet, international studies show that the development and existence of many traditional systems are now threatened more than ever. Firstly, government policies usually result in subsidies and regulations to realise cheap food production for cities. Soil and biodiversity conservation in older farming systems is poorly acknowledged, let alone paid for. Secondly, over 90% of agricultural research is paid for by companies whose objective is to sell agro-chemicals and seeds to farmers and governments; even public research often supports the same. The result is that farmers face many difficulties in developing a decent living based on traditional systems: farmers' children migrate to the cities, while immigrants often do not get (land) rights to continue developing ingenious farming systems.

**The traditional Gafsa oasis system has three layers of crops: 50-100 year-old palm trees, 5-10 year-old fruit trees, and annual crops.**

## Efforts to conserve agricultural systems

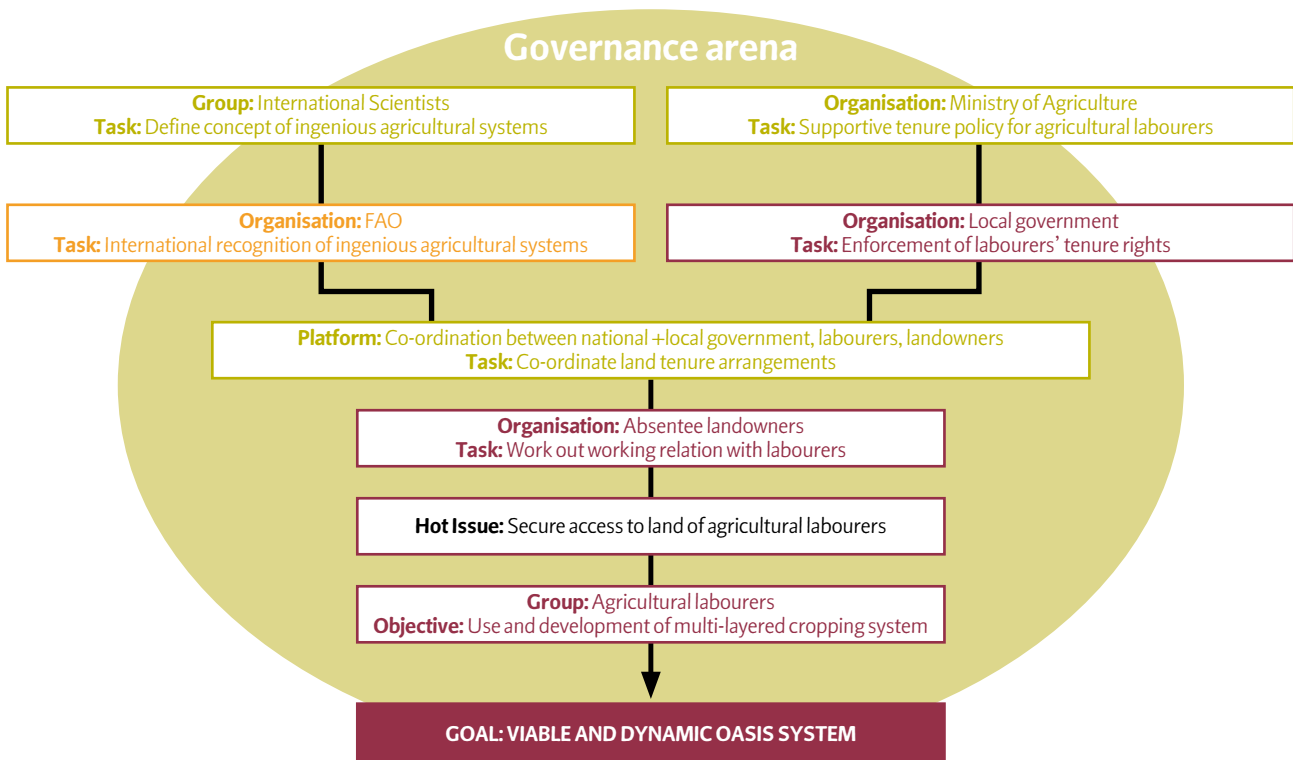
Global organisations that stress the importance of conserving traditional agriculture systems, have been set up. UNESCO has a cultural landscape conservation programme, and the FAO Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems programme identified 200 such systems worldwide. Yet, how do you conserve these agricultural systems? The FAO developed the idea of “dynamically conserving” the systems: they should develop into modernity, so that they will survive well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The authors of this article were involved in planning for the conservation of some traditional agricultural systems. Field experiences showed two important points:

1. On the ground, people were passionate about conserving and developing the system: many organisations started carrying out activities which they thought relevant, and with their own means.
2. There was no planning tool to help organisations co-ordinate such initiatives. Unco-ordinated implementation meant that initiatives did not lead to conserving agricultural heritage. Available tools (such as the Logical Framework) created confusion and stifled enthusiasm.

We concluded that despite the widely shared goal of conserving agricultural systems, there was no way to connect all the different organisations' initiatives so as to streamline development concepts, policies, rights, support services and economic activities.

## “Hot issues” in farming systems

Farmers in the field pointed out some important difficulties or opportunities, that we called “urgent” or “hot issues”. Hot issues attract attention, often conflict, or make people work day and night to realise a potential. There is energy in hot issues, and a chance for success. The context determines local hot issues. For example, in China, farmers started selling salted dried fish, but



This diagram represents a governance mechanism of the hot issue “access to land by agricultural immigrant labourers”. Conditions in red and orange are not or partly fulfilled; conditions in green are well in place. The platform in the middle is to be established.

they could not meet the demand. There were vacant areas which could be used productively (where some people had left the village), but the farmers had little access to this.

### Grouping stakeholders around hot issues

Farmers can rarely solve such issues alone. They need support such as recognition, capacity building, increased rights, or law enforcement. Outsiders cannot tell farmers what to do – but they can provide the conditions for which farmers can develop their system. Outsiders can help to map out the organisations involved in each issue, and the roles they should take up. For example, the farmers in China could sell fish as “traditionally grown and smoked fish” – but alone, they could not implement a system which guaranteed that customers got what the label promised. For that they needed an outside organisation. Stakeholders working on a hot issue together can jointly visit farmers in the field and see the problem with their own eyes. Through workshops, they can then define the stakeholders’ roles and co-ordination mechanisms. Organisations may disagree about many issues, and yet work together to address a hot issue in support of the agricultural system.

For example, as programme planners, we visited the Gafsa oasis, in mid-western Tunisia. There we saw a typical scenario of how a traditional agriculture system can break down (see Box). This programme planners’ visit to the oasis, combined with interviews with farmers and officials, revealed a few hot issues: the water table is going down, agricultural labourers only have one-season contracts, people build illegal houses, urban waste is dumped, the oasis could be a park for the town, oasis products could be marketed better. In the oasis itself, some people pressed us visitors: “Please make sure that illegal building gets stopped!” or “We cannot improve anything if there is not more water”. All this shows that issues are indeed “hot” and that addressing a few of them would help in revitalising the oasis system.

One of the issues in the oasis was that immigrant labourers did not get long-term rights to land. For them, there was little incentive to invest in the palm trees (with a 50-100 year cycle) and in fruit trees (5-10 years). Thus they did not maintain trees, and they planted annual crops. An “awareness raising programme” by the Department of Agriculture was unlikely

### Threats to the Gafsa oasis agricultural system

The Gafsa oasis is a green island in a dry rocky region on the fringe of the Sahara in mid-west Tunisia. Gafsa town developed on the side of a hill, with the 700 ha traditional oasis at the bottom. With the use of water pumps, the oasis has been expanded to 3500 hectares over the last few decades. Because of uncontrolled water pumping, the water table is steadily going down: after 20 centuries of providing refreshment, the naturally fed Roman bath in the old town has been dry for a few years. The oasis does not look fresh. People remember that they used to go for picnics – now urban waste is thrown on the ground, and trees to provide shade have been cut. It is illegal to build houses on agricultural land, but the local government cannot control influential landowners: farmers urged the outside visitors to report this illegal building to the President. Farmer labourers do not maintain the traditional three-layer cropping system (palm trees, fruit trees and annual crops). Most of them have short-term contracts of one or two years, and they do not get the rewards from palm and fruit tree management. Moreover, at the time fruit matures, prices collapse, and they do not avail of storage and packing systems to send fruits to markets. Tunisian urban centres are growing, and Tunisia has access to the EU market – where certified oasis products can be sold at good prices. Some entrepreneurs started open-air restaurants with pleasant shade, where they serve local drinks and food. City dwellers like to go out and have drinks or dinner in these restaurants. The most important opportunity for improving this situation is the sense of urgency felt by the Gafsa population: people feel very sad about the sorry state of their old oasis, and any action to conserve the system gets support from the general public and officials.

to help labourers to maintain the trees. They needed long-term access to land; and landowners were afraid they would lose their land rights. The diagram on the previous page shows a governance mechanism to address the issue. Different organisations carry out tasks that create conditions for others to play their role in the mechanism. Note that such a map is never final. While working on the issue, you will find that some conditions are already in place (so they can be scrapped from the map), or others are needed (so they can be added). The map is a tool to aid in achieving co-operation among organisations for a common goal (in this case: oasis development).

### Use of the GO-frame

In a workshop with various organisations in Gafsa, different stakeholders first aired their frustration with the degradation of the oasis. It took some effort to change the focus to look at hot issues which could be addressed, and to think of their governance mechanisms. After a day or so, stakeholders listed key organisations for the particular issue, and the tasks they needed to carry out to enable other stakeholders to eventually maintain the agricultural system. For some activities no external funds were needed: most organisations had their own mandate and budget. Extra funds would be needed to co-ordinate among organisations. After the workshop, some organisations joined hands to start cleaning rubbish from the oasis and carry out radio programmes for awareness raising.

We found that organisations building a programme around hot issues identified the same goal, but had different objectives than a donor or a national ministry. Outsiders' issues were "poverty reduction", "biodiversity conservation", or "niche market development". They partly overlapped with the locally identified issues, but the starting points to address them were very different.

We called this method of planning the "governance-outcome framework" (or "GO-frame"). It can help to structure multi-stakeholder processes. The tool been used in action research



Photo: Frank van Schoubroeck

**Absent landowners put guardians in their land who maintain annual crops only, replacing the traditional dense vegetation. Compare with photo on page 36, where vegetation is abundant.**

in Cameroon, and in assessing the role of advocacy NGOs in Indonesia, among others. Further experimenting must be done to amend and adapt the method to make sure it indeed helps stakeholders to link policy, the work of government agencies and NGOs, and farmers' practice.

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## Call for articles

### September 2009, Vol 25.3 Women and food sovereignty

Food sovereignty is about the right of producers to define their own food, agriculture, livestock and fisheries systems – as opposed to having them defined by international market forces. For small-scale farmers this means having the right to land and resources, and being able to participate in decision-making about resources in their countries – to ensure that their families and communities have enough food, before their produce enters long-distance trade. Food sovereignty is a relatively new concept, introduced by *La Via Campesina* in 1996. It is a response to the dominant thinking in development that farmers need to be modernised, by stimulating them to enter into commercial globalised trade.

What does food sovereignty mean in the day-to-day lives of small-scale farm families? And more particularly, what does it mean for women – being the main providers of food? We are interested to learn about how they perceive the global changes in agriculture, and how they respond to them.

How do these changes affect their roles as food producers, as mothers and feeders of the family? Do they have the rights of access to land, water, and forest products essential for securing nutritious food? How do women and their families balance between production for the market and for home consumption, between the need for money and the need for food?

At a time when a global economic crisis is unfolding, what is the scope for food self-sufficiency – at household, local and national level? What innovative strategies have farmers and their organisations developed towards gaining food sovereignty? What initiatives are being undertaken to support women and men farmers in achieving this goal? Many farmers are still a long way from true food sovereignty – what are the bigger challenges yet to be addressed?

Dear readers, we look forward to your contributions to this extremely important theme!

*Please submit articles by June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009, to Jorge Chavez-Tafur, editor, at [j.chavez-tafur@ileia.nl](mailto:j.chavez-tafur@ileia.nl)*