

UN: Agriculture is part of the solution

The UN Commission on Sustainable Development has come to an agreement that places agriculture and rural development at the heart of the sustainable development agenda. The final document, as well as a 'Shared Vision' that were produced by the Commission, "can set the scene for change", according to Gerda Verburg, chair of the Commission.

It took the members of the seventeenth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD17) two weeks to come to a "Shared Vision" at the United Nations headquarters in New York, last May. The result is encouraging to small-scale farmers worldwide, and to agriculture in general. As Gerda Verburg, chair and the Netherlands' minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, said: "We have neglected agriculture too much and for too many years." She called for agriculture to be included in the climate change negotiations, saying it is fundamental if goals on how to stop the impact of climate change are to be met. According to Verburg, we need to start thinking differently when it comes to climate change and poverty: "We need to shift away from the idea that agriculture is the problem, to the idea that agriculture is part of the solution."



A 'word cloud', highlighting the words and concepts most frequently appearing in the final document of the 17th meeting of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development.

Other topics discussed at the meeting included the need for an ecosystems approach, advancing the international water agenda in relation to agriculture, and the need for a vigorous response to desertification based on a global drought index.

Farmers at the centre

The outcome of the meeting was to a large extent influenced by the many participants at the Commission meeting (see box). One of them was IFAP, the International Federation of Agricultural Producers. Neil Sorensen represented the IFAP-secretariat in New York. "Before the meeting took off, we were afraid there wasn't going to be an outcome at all," he says. "But it seemed that they really wanted to make a difference. As if a global shift



In his statement at the 17th meeting of the Commission on Sustainable Development, Ajay Vasheek, president of the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP), said he found it reassuring that governments are moving away from highlighting problems to looking at possible solutions and tangible plans.

in thinking is actually taking place." Sorensen considers the meeting successful for farmers. It gives due recognition to the importance of agriculture for sustainable development and food security, and puts farmers at the centre of agricultural policies. The section on Africa gives even more attention to farmers as key actors, according to IFAP. It suggests integrating farmers and local entrepreneurs into agricultural supply chains through affordable credits, access to insurance, participation of farmers' organisations in decision making and access to extension services. "They integrated in the final document all of the priorities for action," says Sorensen. These priorities were created by major groups and delivered to the participating governments last October. They included a need to put knowledge into action, through scaling up successful approaches, and the need to work on "knowledge partnerships," to make such approaches easily accessible to policy makers and practitioners.

Wide range of actions

The Commission calls for a wide range of actions for implementation, including efforts to increase investments in agriculture of developing countries, in particular for small-holder farmers in developing countries. It also called for an increase in the share of government budgets devoted to agriculture. Capacity building, through providing targeted and timely technical assistance to farmers –especially small-scale farmers– is central in the text, as is promotion of equitable access to land and clear and transparent land tenure. The fact that the Commission has stated emphatically the crucial role agriculture should play in climate change negotiations, is expected to be put forward at the upcoming climate change negotiations in the Copenhagen Climate Conference this December.

The Commission on Sustainable Development has shown it is very much in favour of a different approach to addressing problems. But it cannot make actual changes. "That is up to individual governments," as Neil Sorensen says. "They play a decisive role in turning the statement of the Commission into real, tangible, sustainable change." (PR)

The UN Commission on Sustainable Development

The United Nations' Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) consists of 53 members: 13 African states, 11 Asian states, 6 Eastern European states, 10 Latin America and Caribbean states, 13 Western European and other states. Its goals are poverty eradication, food security and sustainable natural resource management. In this 17th session, held from May 4 to May 15 in New York at the United Nations headquarters, priority themes were agriculture, rural development, land, drought, desertification and sustainable development in Africa. Close to a thousand people participated: more than forty ministers, representatives from farmers' organisations, indigenous peoples, trade unions and local communities.