

Practice and policy

Editorial

All over the world, many different initiatives towards more sustainable agricultural systems, a better use of local resources and better management of the environment are being implemented. These experiences build on local people's own knowledge and skills, their values, resources, culture and institutions and lead to the empowerment of male and female farmers and their communities. They show that sustainable agriculture can be developed successfully.

However, evidence also shows that most of the successful initiatives are rather small in size, and that their impact is relatively modest. Sustainable agriculture production practices that have proven their value, as well as successful strategies for its promotion, are generally site specific and have to be adapted to be suitable in new areas. Therefore, the majority of these practices and strategies remain localized.

An analysis of these successful experiences confirms that some special conditions are always necessary for such an initiative to thrive. These include motivated leaders or initiators of action, and sufficient resources. In most cases special institutional arrangements or rules and regulations are also necessary to enable the change. This is referred to as the policy environment: a set of laws or regulations which favour a particular action taking place or being replicated. As mentioned by Gomero (p. 16), successful development projects at a local level are very important, but they are not sufficient to generate wider changes towards a sustainable rural development. A regulatory policy framework proves to be essential in most cases for wide-scale action and for scaling up successful cases.

The importance of policies

Policies, whether they are laws, rules or regulations, are always present at all levels in society. Referred to as the "organized and established form of government or administration" or "the course of action adopted or proposed by a government, party, institution, or organization", policies can promote certain practices with the help of incentives, or they can discourage people from a certain action by penalising it through fines or heavier taxes. As part of different contexts and at many different levels (local, provincial or national governments, within private companies or NGOs, at a national or international level) policies shape how organizations, communities or societies function.

At national level, policies are statements of a governmental goal and are often supported by incentives or sanctions which will help achieve this goal. In agriculture, they attempt to regulate either the supply side – the quantity and quality of agricultural produce –, or the demand side, manipulating market prices and influencing the purchasing behaviour of consumers. The first type of policies includes the regulations through which agricultural inputs are made available, and often subsidized, to a larger number of producers. From the demand side there are often various regulations which ensure that agricultural products, and especially food products, are available to consumers at affordable prices. Policies are not only at work at local or national level, but also internationally. An example is the subsidies to farmers within the European Union and the tariffs placed on imported goods to protect the internal market.

In recent decades, countries in both the North and the South have been shifting from predominantly rural to predominantly

urban societies. Cities provide social and economic opportunities and are an attractive magnet to individuals in every country. But rapid urbanization has also caused inequitable power relations. As a result, governments are often more responsive to the needs of urban consumers, ensuring that enough, preferably cheap food and other agricultural products are available in the cities. At the same time, the production of agricultural produce for export is an important source of national income. The objective of many governments is therefore primarily to increase agricultural production, and policy measures in the agricultural sector have been geared towards raising agricultural production with support of external inputs. In this way an excessive use of external inputs has been encouraged, based on the persistent idea that a higher use of external inputs will lead to higher outputs.

But the picture is even more complicated, as "agriculture" refers to more than just producers and consumers. Many other stakeholders are involved: agribusinesses, traders, researchers, input suppliers, food processors, among others. In addition, agriculture is not only about production: it also has a major impact on the management of natural resources, on biodiversity, food security, ecosystem services and the different ways of supporting people living in the rural areas. This means that there always are a large number of actors involved, with many different interests. Any given policy will influence most of them, in different ways. And most times there is not only one, but many different, overlapping and sometimes conflicting rules and regulations.

Although the policy environment at large supports conventional agriculture, positive change is possible. For example, organic agriculture has expanded considerably during the last decade and has managed to capture an increasing market for its produce (see Ugás, p. 20) in spite of a non-supportive policy environment. But without policies that have the explicit aim of supporting sustainable agriculture, the existing policy environment as well as the specific interests of many different actors, can easily jeopardize further development of the sustainable agriculture initiatives currently taking place (Walaga *et al.*, p. 9). The development of supportive policies is therefore a crucial action that governments can take to support the work of institutions, organizations, and individuals, thereby creating an enabling environment. Similar efforts can be tried at other levels, aiming at policies which enable the use of locally available resources, and local skills and knowledge (Wolmer *et al.*, p. 22).

Policy development

Laws or regulations are updated often to accommodate or regulate our constantly changing societies. Policies are therefore far from static. Considering the number of actors and interests involved, it is therefore crucial to look at whose opinion is taken into account in the policy development process. Is this restricted to the authorities and decision-makers, or are other stakeholders considered? Regarding agriculture, it has been assumed that a strong link exists between research and policy. This link has been viewed as a linear process, whereby a set of research findings shifts from the "research field" over to the "policy field". However, a conference of the African Science Academy Development Initiative recently showed that in Africa, as apparently in many other parts of the world, agricultural research institutes have hardly any influence on national policymaking. If renowned research institutes, whose work is generally funded by government resources, have very little

influence on policy formulation, then what about poor rural communities? The policy gap between the powerful and marginalized does not just involve the lack of channels for dialogue. Even when such channels exist, communication may fail due to fundamental differences in perception, expression and power between groups. It is therefore necessary to find ways to establish dialogues and alliances between policy makers and farming communities so that these make their voice heard, and provide inputs for policy formulation.

In contrast, many different interest groups are actively engaged in following-up on new policy initiatives that might affect them and in trying to influence policy-makers at all levels. These groups often use the services of professional lobbyists with a special talent for seizing particular policy moments or windows of opportunity as they arise, and for getting policy messages on to the agenda of decision-makers. The increasing influence of transnational corporations in the agricultural sector is very visible everywhere. In a similar way, though on the opposite side, action groups such as Greenpeace or the Pesticide Action Network are active trying to influence international policies, and many other international NGOs have influential advocacy and campaigns departments. Results achieved by these groups are substantial, and complement the work of many individuals and organizations at grassroots levels.

Influencing policy

The development of policies is generally a lengthy process, but the development of mechanisms to enforce the regulations can be even more difficult. Several articles in this issue provide examples of the processes followed to come to agreements at a community level, especially in relation to changing land use practices (Hasnat, p. 14; Ajayi *et al.*, p. 18; Agustiyanto, p. 31). They all show how the emerging challenges for sustainable agricultural production are not just technical, but lie in the complex area of policy-making and successful implementation.

A very high percentage of the rural population is involved in the daily management of natural resources. Such intimate interaction creates awareness of the technical, social and political obstacles to good management. It is therefore important that these people have the opportunity to contribute to the definition of policies and institutions that govern their use of natural resources. Tools for influencing policies have been developed and successfully utilized by rural communities, as is shown in the articles which make up this issue of the LEISA Magazine. Vermeulen *et al.* (p. 6) present two of the many cases which form the basis for IIED's new publication 'Power tools: handbook to tools and resources for policy influence in natural resource management.' (see Sources, p. 33). One such potentially powerful tool for creating awareness about a situation that requires proper regulation, is through convening

stakeholders for joint discussions and proper analysis of the existing situation (Buján, p. 25). The experiences show that it is essential to consider the needs and aspirations of all involved and to discuss with all stakeholders in order to reach an agreement. Another tool is direct advocacy. For advocacy to be efficient, it is important to study and properly document the background and conditions of a given problem, good knowledge of the context and the problem as well as clearness about the changes that are required is the basis for an effective advocacy campaign (Gomero, p. 16).

An influential tool for changing mindsets, and thus enabling policy change in the direction of sustainable agriculture, is by exposing policy-makers to the real conditions of small-holder farmers and to successful LEISA technologies. The organization of demonstrations on the street in order to inform influential people about certain issues can be complemented with *in situ* demonstrations, where decision-makers can see how change can come about. Positive results come through exposure visits to farmers' fields (Wolmer *et al.*, p. 22) and to agricultural fairs (Walaga, p. 9), or through drama presentations which tell persuasive stories (Silva *et al.*, p. 12). This is related to another important tool: the proper documentation of the context, the problem and of what is being done towards a solution, in order to effectively present a case. Documentation is also strongly related to the use of the media, as useful partners in the dissemination of information, and therefore in campaigns and advocacy processes.

Future challenges

The need to act in favour of better policies has received increasing attention in recent years. All over the world, there is a growing recognition that context-specific field work is not enough in order to achieve massive changes in the way agriculture is practised. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that this is not an easy process. Because of the large number of actors involved, and because of the specific interest of each of the actors, influencing agricultural policies is particularly complicated.

The articles in this issue show that campaigning, advocacy work and lobbying can and must be directed at different levels, and not only at national governments. Just as important as having new and better national laws and regulations, it is essential to work towards better training and education institutions, towards better organizational structures at the local level, or towards international regulations with which countries have to comply. In any case, or whatever the level chosen, it is essential to reflect local needs and interests, for which we need to fully understand the problems which farmers face, and the possibilities for solutions which they may consider. ■

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