International Challenge to Transform Our Farming Systems, From the Bottom-Up

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The way the world grows its food will have to change radically to better serve the poor and hungry if the world is to cope with a growing population and climate change while avoiding social breakdown and environmental collapse. Professor Robert Watson Director of IAASTD said those on the margins are ill-served by the present system: "The incentives for science to address the issues that matter to the poor are weak... the poorest developing countries are net losers under most trade liberalization scenarios."
Modern agriculture has brought significant increases in food production; but the benefits have been spread unevenly and have come at an increasingly intolerable price, paid by small-scale farmers, workers, rural communities and the environment.

[Press Release after the final plenary session of the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD). Johannesburg, South Africa, 15th April 2008]

I could barely contain my excitement after reading the 'Executive Summary of the Synthesis Report of the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD)', which was released in mid-April after their final Plenary session in Johannesburg, S. Africa; the Report can be downloaded from the 'Reports' section on their website: http://www.agassessment.org

Most such multi-author, international reports end up so compromised that I am usually primarily motivated to think of better ways they might have used the money, time and expertise; but not this one, although the real test will be the transformation of our food and agricultural systems worldwide.

First a little background and logistics: the Assessment process was initiated by the World Bank, in open partnership with a multistakeholder group, including FAO, GEF, UNDP, UNEP, UNESCO, the World Bank, and the WHO; 30 government representatives, and 22 representatives from civil society, the private sector, and scientific institutions from around the world (including Prabha Mahale from India, representing IFOAM). In 2003 a 55-member Steering Committee met in Ireland and Hungary to design the consultative 'bottom-up' process. The actual process ran from 2005 to 2007 and involved 900 participants (including your editors as 'Reviewers') from 110 countries.

The aim of the Assessment was to answer the question: how can 'Agricultural Knowledge, Science, and Technology (AKST)' be used to reduce hunger and poverty, improve rural livelihoods, and facilitate equitable environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable development; and what policies can enable this to happen?

The outcome so far has been the release of five Regional Reports (including one for 'East and South Asia and the Pacific', our region), an overall 'Global Summary for Decision Makers' and the 'Executive Summary' I referred to above. All of these have a section on 'current conditions, challenges and options for action', and another focusing on the following eight cross-cutting themes: bioenergy, biotechnology, climate change, human health, natural resource management, trade and markets, traditional and local knowledge and community-based innovation, and women in agriculture.

The Reports are intended primarily for use by decision makers in national and local governments, the initiating bodies, and the scientific and participating communities.

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Now for a few of the highlights: recognising that our current 'food crisis' is radically different from that in the 1960s, they have moved way beyond the past, dominant, narrow focus:

- from maximizing farm-level production (with imported inputs), to strategies to enable agriculture to serve multiple, mutually supportive, beneficial functions;

- from naively simple, decontextual, centrally conceived (hierarchical) approaches to forcing change, to recognising that non-hierarchical development models and contextually relevant information, incentives and supports are needed to enable individuals to make responsible, appropriate decisions that can have benefits that extend beyond the individual (such as the maintenance of global ecosystem services); and

- from an over-focus on large, broadly similar farms, to small-scale farms in diverse ecosystems; taking a whole ecosystem, and whole of community, approach that builds on and integrates local resources and knowledge systems.

An explicit aim is to help those who have been served least by past AKST (Green Revolution-type) approaches, i.e., resource-poor farmers, women and ethnic minorities; and they call for discontinuing subsidies that perpetuate practices that result in unsustainability and inequity.

Rather than marginalising (or critiquing) organic approaches, they recognise them as ideal ways to meet these revised aims of a sustainable agriculture.

The Director of IAASTD, Professor Robert Watson (Chief Scientist, World Bank), has stressed that genetically-modified crops are NOT the solution to spiralling food prices or Third World hunger; and that questions remain over their effects on human health and the environment. Similarly, using productive agricultural land to produce biofuels is also likely to exacerbate many of the problems highlighted in the report. To avoid such naïve proposals we urgently need better approaches to policy and management decisions that have a trans-generational perspective and that are multifunctional and caring.

So far 57 of the 64 governments present at the plenary in Johannesburg have approved both the 'Global Summary' and 'Executive Summary' Reports. Perhaps predictably, the USA (home to most of the large biotech companies), Australia and Canada noted the importance of the document, but maintain reservations concerning a few issues within it. The United Kingdom has yet to officially respond.

Now for a challenge from your JOS editors: the real test will be to avoid the usual fate of such hopeful initiatives[1] i.e., rather than rapid adoption and action, strategies of postponement, including further studies, especially to 'more accurately measure the problems' (what I have come to call 'monitoring our extinction research'); taking a problem-solving approach, rather than recognising the need to design/redesign systems that can meet the multifunctional goals discussed in the report, and enable a smooth transition to implementing them; proposing mega-scale responses (that predictably never reach the implementation stage), rather than focusing on locally relevant, do-able initiatives; and failing to include key elements in the process, particularly local communities and knowledge (and, more importantly, wisdom), and the arts (as well as science and technology).

I will be working flat out into the future to enable this to happen, and I encourage you to do what you can to keep this process alive and evolving. This is an important opportunity – it would be a tragedy if it fell through the usual cracks.

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[1] Ten Mistakes, December 2007 < www.stuartbhill.com >