

Benny Haerlin, August 2003

Brief report on the final session of the Steering Committee for an

Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development

"How can we reduce hunger and poverty, improve rural livelihoods, and facilitate equitable, environmentally, socially and economically sustainable development through the generation, access to, and use of agricultural knowledge, science and technology?"

Summary

On August 3rd in Budapest a Steering Committee composed of a probably unprecedented range of different stakeholders from Industry, UN-Agencies, national governments, farmers-, consumers and NGO representatives has agreed on a proposal to conduct an intergovernmental 2,5 year long assessment on the history and the future of agricultural knowledge. After six months of negotiations, 2 international and 10 regional consultations the proposal was adopted unanimously.

This proposal will now be sent to the heads of the World Bank (who initiated this exercise in Johannesburg) and the UN agencies (FAO, UNEP, WHO, UNDP, UNESCO). Whether the Assessment will be conducted depends on the support it gets from the agencies, national governments and private donors. A budget of 15 Mio US \$ will be needed over the 2,5 years.

The proposal suggests to conduct this Assessment, starting at community and regional but also on the global level, in a similar way the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) compiles its regular assessments. It would include hundreds of authors and co-authors whose findings would be peer reviewed, but also stakeholder reviewed and finally compiled into a final document, which would be approved by the participating governments. It aims to provide an authoritative framework for future investments in agricultural research and development with an emphasis on the needs of the poor rural population in developing countries.

A secretariat, which would be hosted, but not managed, by the World Bank in co-sponsorship with the FAO, would facilitate the Assessment itself as well as substantial communication efforts around the issue throughout the whole period of the Assessment. Robert Watson (World Bank chief scientist and former head of the IPCC, as well as a previous effort on the Ozone layer and an ongoing "Millennium Ecosystem Assessment") has lead the initiative so far and is the candidate to head this secretariat. Two co-chairs would preside and a Bureau of 30 governments and 30 representatives of other stakeholders (producers, industry, Agencies, NGOs) would oversee the process.

The Assessment will focus on the issue of agricultural knowledge, science and technology, but take into account the general conditions (trade, land rights, gender, political situation etc.) of their development. While it was initially proposed in the context of the dispute about the use of GMOs it is now proposed to look at all available knowledge (including so called traditional knowledge), science and production methods.

The proposal comes at a time when major international donors are reconsidering their approach to agricultural development strategies and investments, namely the World Bank itself, which is the biggest funder and also runs the CGIAR system of International Research Centres, for which it sees a strong need of reform. Under these circumstances its impacts should not be underestimated. However much will depend on how the process will be executed and who will actively participate.

What are the unique features of the proposed Assessment?

1. Scale

A global Assessment, which seriously intends to include all stakeholders and takes a distinct bottom up approach, which will start in individual communities and also intends to bring back the results of their Assessment to these communities for review of their relevance. Regarding this community based part of the assessment much will depend on the future initiative and creativity of the participants.

2. Intergovernmental process

Open to all governments participation in the process and ultimately approved by consensus of all participating governments. While this implies cumbersome procedures and will require UN type of wording of the final document (not its individual reports) this approach promises an authoritative consensus regarding the relevance, best practices and priorities of agricultural development.

3. Stakeholder Bureau

A Bureau comprised of 30 representatives of stakeholder groups (largest group will be producers from the South) working together over a longer period of time will first and foremost identify large areas of common ground to be jointly exploited for immediate and short term improvement and dissemination of basic technologies.

4. Ongoing Communication

The proposal entails a substantial budget for communication during the ongoing process (not just to present results at the end), which will be handled by the Secretariat of the Assessment. It should be used particularly to overcome communication and information barriers between the different stakeholders (e.g. go beyond the usual internet and brochure production) and can also serve as the basis for extended networking and co-operation on the issue.

5. Historic lessons

The Assessment is supposed to entail an account of successes and failures in the use of agricultural knowledge, science and technology over the past 50 years and to analyse the critical factors of implementation and adaption.

6. Long term view

The Assessment will take a short, medium and long term perspective from 2010 to 2050 in order to describe "plausible future scenarios" of agricultural development. This is especially promising with respect to the assessment of natural resource development and environmental protection (climate, toxicity, water, soil, biodiversity).

7. Peer review and stakeholder review

A large number of authors and experts of all realms will be invited to contribute to both the global and the regional assessments. Obviously much will depend on the selection of the co-ordinating lead-authors. The drafts of their contributions will not only be submitted to scientific peers for review, but also to all other stakeholders in a transparent manner. While peers will review the factual correctness, stakeholders will also feed back on the practical and general relevance of the Assessments different parts.

Next steps

Over the next 6-9 months the Assessment will hopefully be established by the appropriate UN proceedings and decisions. Support for the proposal from governments and agencies will be decisive.

We suggest to actively support participation and financial contributions to the needed 15 Mio \$ nationally and internationally through appropriate channels and to use the coming months to further develop the network of NGOs involved in the process with a special emphasis on finding experts of all realms who can contribute and could also serve as lead authors in certain fields. Also finding appropriate co-chairs (1 north 1 south) and suggesting a person for the secretariat (there was an agreement that at least 1 of the six should take particular care of the grassroots communication) should be prepared in due time. We should also continue the dialogue with the other Steering Committee members.

Once the Assessment is established members of the Bureau will be "self selected" including NGO representatives. An intensive phase of designing the process (especially the community based part) and the chapters of the Assessment, finding the authors and getting the right lead-authors would follow, which may require substantial work input as well as co-operation between NGOs to this end.

None of the beneficial features mentioned above will come for free and by themselves - we now have a forum to push for a real bottom up assessment and broad stakeholder involvement, but it will only work with continued and concerted pressure and input especially from the NGO side. But we would expect substantial support for such an approach within many national and international participants.

Eventually the Bureau and the Plenary will adopt the workplan, followed by a period of rather quiet work, which may include local highlights and activities in the community assessment context. Intensive work will be required again towards the end of the process, when reviewing and finally adopting the report.

Depending on the speed of the process the Assessment may kick off spring/summer 2004. It then would be finished in the end of 2006.

The proposal will be finally published on August 18th at

www.agassessment.org

A list of participants, minutes of the regional consultations and previous meetings can be found there as well.