



## Good agricultural practices and SARD

### FAO's programmes for sustainable agriculture and rural development are responding to new challenges and targets...

Farmers in Burkina Faso's Bobo Dioulasso region face problems common to rural communities across Africa's Sudan-Sahel zone. Population growth and input-intensive farming practices have led to loss of biodiversity and soil fertility, and declining yields. Conflict between pastoralists and cultivators is increasing, and the region's main cash crop - cotton - is highly vulnerable to changes in world market prices. For most of Bobo Dioulasso's farmers, the goal of sustainable agriculture and rural development (SARD) seems as far off as ever.

Yet a small group of those farmers is making progress towards SARD. With assistance from an FAO project, they have adopted a range of integrated technologies, including mixed legume-cereal cropping systems to conserve soil fertility, cultivation of soybean to diversify sources of income, and production of forage to feed livestock during the dry season. FAO brought national stakeholders together last year to begin consolidating these findings into a set of "good agricultural practices" (GAPs) and to strengthen institutions to implement them.

For FAO, the development of GAPs in Bobo Dioulasso provides a promising example for efforts to achieve sustainable development throughout the Sudan-Sahel zone. It also points the way to proposed refinements in the Organization's approach to SARD. In a report to the Committee on Agriculture, FAO presents a framework for sharpening the focus of its SARD-related activities, calling for greater emphasis on good agricultural practices, sustainable livelihoods, and integrated natural resources management.

**Global consensus.** The 1992 Earth Summit dedicated Chapter 14 of Agenda 21, its comprehensive plan for action for the 21st century, to SARD. As Task Manager for Chapter 14, FAO developed over the following decade a global consensus on a conceptual framework for implementing SARD, and progressively mainstreamed new approaches to key parts of the SARD agenda. The World Summit



on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg in 2002, reaffirmed Chapter 14 as a valid framework for SARD action, and renewed international commitment to achieving its goals.

As originally conceived, SARD had multiple dimensions, including the sustainability of food chains and land and water resources, and the idea of trade interacting with SARD processes to ensure adequate livelihoods and food security. "These issues remain valid," the paper says, "but the environment within which they are now to be addressed has changed." With the adoption of the UN's Millennium Development Goals in 2000, the world is committed to a new vision of economic and social development in a human rights context, centred on eradicating poverty and hunger, promoting human resources development, ensuring environmental sustainability, and establishing a global partnership for development.

Within this framework, the paper says, FAO's SARD-related work must respond to major new challenges: globalization and trade liberalization, the growth and concentration of private agro-industrial enterprises, the commercialization of agriculture, the livestock revolution, urbanization, the information technology revolution, the "restructuring of the institutional architecture" for rural development (i.e. withdrawal of the state, growth of civil society), climate change, health pandemics, conflicts and

complex emergencies, and the burgeoning productivity of science-based innovations. To meet these new challenges, FAO's task force on SARD has proposed three "programme thrusts" to bring greater coherence and focus to the Organization's SARD-related work.

► **Sustainable livelihoods.** First, the report recommends action to mainstream good practices that have emerged from FAO programmes on sustainable livelihoods. Much has been learned, for example, from a series of innovative projects implemented since 1988 in the Lempira Sur region of Honduras. Working with extension staff, local farmers have developed sustainable agroforestry farming systems that have proved both more productive and more drought-resistant than traditional hillside slash-and-burn methods. A broad range of support services provided to farming communities has enabled them to diversify sources of livelihood, develop new enterprises and manage change. The Lempira Sur model is now being applied worldwide through FAO's Livelihood Support Programme (LSP), funded largely by the UK's Department for International Development.

The LSP works with inter-sectoral groups of FAO professional staff, testing team approaches and working on improvements in the implementation of sustainable livelihoods principles at country level. The LSP's pioneering work on livelihoods diversification and enterprise development has been adopted in FAO's broader programme on sustainable livelihoods, and is expected to generate "observable improvements" in the livelihoods of beneficiary populations, and consequent reduction in the prevalence of poverty and hunger, by 2015. Other FAO initiatives to reduce poverty in the fisheries and livestock sectors also offer lessons for wider replication.

► **Sustainable intensification of integrated production systems.** The paper says good agricultural practices (GAPs) are essential to this second major thrust in FAO's SARD work, and an important dimension of the overall SARD framework. GAPs allow producers and the food sector to respond to widespread consumer concerns, in particular about natural resources conservation and the quality and safety of food products at their point of entry into the food

chain. The basic premise of FAO's GAP approach is that practices which protect the environment, ensure the quality and safety of food, and increase productivity should enable farmers to increase income from existing markets and take advantage of new market opportunities.

At the request of member countries, projects, workshops, training and studies on GAPs have been conducted in the Caribbean, Burkina Faso, Colombia, Kenya, Namibia, South Africa and Thailand. The approach entails development of a minimal set of principles that serve as the basis for identifying location-specific practices and development of programmes for local implementation. In Burkina Faso, for example, a multi-stakeholder workshop – involving government policy makers, cotton processors, farmers unions, researchers, extensionists and women's groups - identified constraints and priorities in GAP development, and has set-up successful mechanisms for capacity building and improved policies. FAO's multidisciplinary work on GAPs is already helping production experts to better understand how to incorporate food safety and quality requirements into their technical recommendations, and helping food safety experts to better understand sustainability considerations at farm level.

FAO's approach is non-prescriptive, and would not lead to new international mandatory standards or codes. Instead, local-level GAPs defined by concerned stakeholders would draw inspiration from both existing international regulatory frameworks and from broader principles that promote the voluntary use of good agricultural practices.

► **Integrated natural resources management.** The third thrust would expand FAO's ecosystem approach for conserving land and water resources, protecting biodiversity and managing agricultural heritage systems. One of the Organization's major achievements since the 1992 Earth Summit has been the successful negotiation of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, which entered into force in June 2004. The main aims of the treaty are the conservation and sustainable use of agrobiodiversity and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits derived from its use. FAO has also developed a Global Strategy for the Management of Farm Animal Genetic Resources.