The CGIAR and Civil Society:

Forging Collaborative Partnerships with NGOs And Farmers Organizations as a Key Strategy to Advance Sustainable Agriculture In the Developing World*

(* Briefing paper for the CGIAR System Review prepared by the CGIAR NGO Committee.)

The main objectives of the CGIAR agricultural research and development agenda are to reduce poverty and ensure an adequate nutrition and quality of life for rural society in the developing world. This mission involves meeting basic food needs of the rural poor but also expanding output to meet the food needs of a growing urban population, in a manner that is economically viable and which does not degrade the natural resource base.

Expanding agricultural production is a necessary but by no means sufficient condition for setting in motion the rural development process. During the height of the Green Revolution, the development process was, more often than not, thought to consist essentially in identifying and overcoming obstacles to yield maximization: labor constraints, marginal soils, pests and diseases, etc. This model had a powerful grip on the imagination of the early CGIAR pioneers and it has strongly influenced the research agenda until today.

As the 1990s draw to a close, however, it is clear that high rates of agricultural production did not guarantee an end to rural poverty and hunger in the developing world, and that agricultural development was more than just a technical problem to be solve by applying technological inputs such as modern improved varieties. In many cases technologies that apparently were helping the poor, in fact undermined the poor by their very success (e.g. MVs replacing traditional varieties) or due to unexpected health and environmental impacts (i.e. pesticides). Today, development is conceived beyond a mere quantitative expansion of production, and refers to qualitative changes in the spheres of economics, social equity and environmental preservation. Today the imperative is sustainable agriculture, that is the simultaneous advancement of environmental, economic and social goals associated with increased agricultural production.

The concept of sustainability, although controversial and diffuse due to conflicting definitions and interpretations of its meaning, is useful because it captures a set of concerns about agriculture which is conceived in terms of the co-evolution of socioeconomic and natural systems. The wider understanding of the agricultural context requires the study of the relations between agriculture, the global environment and social systems given that agricultural development results from the complex interactions of a multitude of factors. It is through this deeper understanding of the ecology and socioeconomics of agricultural systems that doors can open to new management options more in tune with the needs of the poor and the objectives of a truly sustainable agriculture.

In most academic and development circles there is today general agreement that an integrated strategy to advance a sustainable agriculture should focus on:

a. poverty reduction, b. ecological management of the productive resources located in fragile ecosystems, c. food security and self-reliance, and d. transformation of impoverished rural communities into social actors capable of determining their own development.

Given the complexity of the task to reach the poor with appropriate technologies and to solve hunger and malnutrition problems, it is clear that the CGIAR by itself cannot achieve the above goals without the participation of civil society in economic, political and technical decisions affecting the fate of peasant agriculture in the developing world. Since agricultural activities provide the basis for the livelihoods of most rural poor, poverty alleviation programs must include technological as well as socio-economic and rural development interventions aimed at enhancing food security and income generating activities. In many ways the newly formed Global Research Forum is expected to help in this task, but its operationalization remains a challenge.

Given the urgency of the problems, coalitions that can rapidly foster sustainable agriculture among the resource poor farmers are needed. Members of the civil society include farmer organizations, federations, universities, NGOs, private sector, trade unions. Among those various members of civil society, NGOs and farmers organizations stand out as the most relevant and crucial constituents with whom the CGIAR should urgently forge collaborative links. On the one hand, many NGOs throughout Asia, Africa and Latin America have demonstrated a unique ability to understand the specific and
differentiated nature of small farm production and have promoted successful experiences in
generation and transfer of technology.
NGO agroecological initiatives are blossoming and spreading their influence throughout the globe.
NGOs are organized in national and even cross-national collaborative networks. NGOs engage in both
technical and policy advocacy activities in support of sustainable agriculture. On the other hand, in
many areas, farmers organizations have demonstrated the viability of popular institutions to organize
themselves, to innovate technologically and to become catalysts and active participants of local
development. Farmer organizations are also linked to each other through national and international
networks.

The expectation is that with the active participation of these members of civil society, the CGIAR will
be in a better position to develop and launch a new approach in agricultural development to secure
food self-sufficiency, to preserve the natural resource base, and to ensure social equity and economic
viability. This approach should seek the revitalization of peasant and small family farms and the
reshaping of the entire agricultural policy and food systems in ways that are economically viable to
farmers and consumers. The new research agenda will require institutional realignments and, if it is to
be relevant to the poor, it must be influenced by agroecology with its emphasis on complex farming
systems, labor demanding techniques, and use of organic and local resources. This means that
technological solutions will have to be location specific and much more information intensive rather
than capital intensive. In turn this will imply using more farmer knowledge but also providing support to
farmers to increase their management skills.

At the beginning, the implementation of this integrated approach, will not
be free of controversy as differences in perspectives between multilateral
donors, IARCs and NGOs are quite marked. Generally, non-governmental
organizations criticize international development sponsors for stressing
trade liberalization and biotechnology rather than equitable distribution
and farm-led approaches to sustainable agriculture, as the primary means
for achieving food security. Most NGOs feel that it is necessary to
harmonize the objectives of sustainability with the objectives of
development. Developing countries caught up in trade liberalization have
been slow to move forward in sustainable development. In general, the
policy framework still favors an agriculture that is excluding and that
favors natural resource degradation. The institutional capacity to promote
sustainable agriculture is very weak and there is no mechanism for the
massive diffusion and adoption of alternative technologies. New
partnerships can change this situation.

NGOs have been critical of the CGIAR, as they perceive it as part of the
problems that have perpetuated the above trends. Today, however, many
realize that the renewal and external review are unique opportunities for
the CGIAR to listen to civil society concerns and thus modify its research
agenda and governance system according to societal goals of equity and
democracy. In order to make its agenda more relevant to modern needs, many
NGOs suggest that the CGIAR:
- Broaden its definition of NARS so as include NGOs, national
universities, and not exclusively government NARIs, as legitimate partners
in research policy advocacy.
- Allow more participation of farmers and NGOs in the research process,
- Adopt a people centered process to agricultural development.
- Adopt a wider vision of agriculture, including agroecology.
- Encourage diversity in CGIAR governance and democratic participation of
more southern institutions,
- Define broad research priorities in consultation with NGOs, national
universities,
- Decentralize research programs and develop transparent-horizontal
partnerships with regional, national and local NGOs,
- Encourage policies for development and adoption of alternative
practices,
- Assist in the scaling up of NGO-led or farmer-led local and successful
projects.
On the other hand, NGOs can offer several reliable services in partnership with CGIAR. These include:

- Direct contact and access to rural communities,
- Participatory research and development methodologies,
- Expertise in agroecology and resource-conserving approaches,
- Project impact assessment methodologies,
- Development and application of sustainability indicators,
- Methodologies for community empowerment,
- Local solutions to specific agricultural problems,
- Demonstration of practical viability of agroecological interventions ready to be scaled up,
- Feedback on the relevance of research,
- Networks for technology generation and exchange.

To develop partnerships between NGOs and CGIAR the following conditions should be met:

1. Share a holistic common view of agriculture,
2. Develop mutual confidence and trust,
3. Encourage complementarily in tasks and synergy of expertise,
4. Clearly define roles and avoid redundancy.

The desirability of such partnership can be best realized when the benefits that can emerge from effective partnerships between the CGIAR and NGOs are analyzed:

1. Responsiveness to real farmers' demands and needs;
2. Sharing of human and material resources;
3. Initiate a cross-learning process;
4. Inclusion of farmers in research and governance;
5. Achieve true gender balance;
6. Promote scaling-up of locally successful projects.

As partnerships between the CGIAR, NGOs and farmers organizations develop, critical but necessary discussions on the following topics are likely to emerge:

a. The role of agriculture in economic development of rural areas and the role of peasants in economic growth and the conservation of natural resources,
b. The impact of economic globalization on agricultural sustainability,
c. The importance of agrarian reform programs in relation to issues of equity, poverty and productivity, and especially in relation to trends that favor large scale vs. small scale farms,
d. The importance of incentives and support programs for small farmers to create economic opportunities and access to necessary inputs and resources for increasing the productivity of their land holdings,
e. The role of rural development programs as vehicles to reach better quality of life through the income generating employment, nutrition, health, education and other social benefits,
f. The importance of production for exports vs. production for local and/or bio-regional self reliance,
g. The need to focus the technological effort over favoured lands vs. fragile and marginal environments,
h. The role of international aid and the private sector vs. the public sector as promoters of development.
i. The importance of concentrating efforts on the development of "new" technologies, versus increasing the efficiency of "old" technologies.

One theme that certainly has already marked the debate is the potential of modern biotechnology in the development and structuring of agriculture,
and the various issues relating to equity, access and safety. Many NGOs are concerned that biotechnology replaces outside farming with gene manipulation in the laboratory, leading to a significant displacement of farmers, destruction of local agricultures, and thus depriving thousands of people of their basic means of subsistence. In addition NGOs are concerned about CGIAR’s involvement in the development of transgenic crops. It is expected that herbicide resistant varieties will stimulate rather than substitute for herbicide usage. In addition to its high cost for poor farmers, genes inserted into such crops are capable of rapidly moving to botanically related weeds, thus potentially creating "super weeds." In the case of Bt transgenic crops for insect control, again cost and the potential development of pest resistance makes the technology socio-economically and ecologically unfit for LDC agriculture. Another concern is that modern biotechnology is creating an unprecedented concentration of economic and political power as alliances are formed among chemical, pharmaceutical, and seed industries. For most NGOs, the only beneficiaries so far of the biotechnological revolution seem to be the multinational corporations that advocate free trade and globalization. Through the CGIAR-NGO Committee flags of caution have been raised about uncritical adoption of biotechnology within the CGIAR.

One way to deal with the above points of tension, is to agree on a set of criteria to be followed by the new technologies devised by the CGIAR to assist the rural poor. Most NGOs would support the following criteria:

1. Farmers must participate in the development, evaluation and diffusion of new technologies;
2. Indigenous knowledge, resources and skills must be an integral part of the new arsenal of technologies;
3. New technologies must be economically viable and freely accessible and based on local resources;
4. New technologies must be environmentally sound and socially and culturally sensitive;
5. New technologies must be risk averse and more adapted to the agroecological and socio-economic conditions of small farmers;
6. New technologies must be aimed at enhancing total farm productivity and sustainability and not just enhancement of yields of specific crops.

If such criteria are met, it is clear that most biotechnological options emphasizing transgenic crops, patented and under private control, would be ruled out as an option for the rural poor.

Throughout the developing world, hundreds of local experiences in sustainable agricultural development are being implemented by rural communities and/or NGOs. These experiences demonstrate the feasibility to stabilize yields, regenerate and preserve soils and maintain biodiversity, all based on agroecological technologies and locally available resources. There is growing consensus in the global agricultural community about the need to scale-up successful community based farming experiences. For this to happen however, it is crucial to first identify specific field oriented projects, which can serve as case studies for systematization, so as to derive the principles and factors that led to a meaningful level of impact. It is estimated that no less than 50% of the knowledge and information base necessary to shed light on how to implement sustainable agriculture is embedded in the experiences themselves, and that therefore extracting it through a systematization process is an urgent task. Such a process will demonstrate that by summation of industrial energies can generate an added value greater than that possible clarify by the individual action of each institution. Further, by acting in synergy, the initiative will reach a significant scale so as to generate a meaningful impact on the income, food security, and environmental integrity of thousands of peasant farm families in the region. It will be critical for
new national policies to support these initiatives. Only in this way can they be scaled up and disseminated in order to preserve natural resources, improve agricultural production, enhance economic profits and satisfy human and social needs at wider levels. In this sense, an alliance of NGOs and farmers organizations with the CGIAR, especially if such partnership can prominently position itself within the global research system, can become a key force to advance agrarian policies that support the transition toward sustainability and self-reliance. One of the most significant contributions expected from CGIAR research, is that it may lead the way in reforming or re-orienting institutions and agrarian policies and to provide a series of analytical tools to account for natural resources in the evaluation of the true costs of agricultural productivity.

It is clear that to implement a strategy of sustainable agricultural development in the developing world, a key requirement is to solve the principal social problem of the region: poverty. A viable sustainable development approach must attack the structural factors that cause poverty, among them the forces and economic policies that perpetuate it. More importantly though, it will require the concerted of farmers, NGOs, scientists and local governments to engage in joint efforts to oppose and/or to overcome negative forces and policies that perpetuate poverty, and to search collaboratively for ways to promote the empowerment of local farming communities and to engage the active participation of farmers in defining the process of technical change and the economic and social investment in rural areas.

**************************************************

Miguel A. Altieri, Ph.D.
University of California, Berkeley
ESPM-Division of Insect Biology
201 Wellman-3112
Berkeley, CA 94720-3112
Phone: 510-642-9802 FAX: 510-642-7428
Location: 215 Mulford, Berkeley campus
http://nature.berkeley.edu/~agroeco3