Empowering public participation in informed decision-making: Summary report of the ABDC-10 parallel session[1]

The purpose of this cross cutting session was to explore communication strategies that exercise a bottom up, demand driven approach to implementation of biotechnology in agriculture. Four presentations were given in the opening session followed by a directed discussion with an audience of up to 22 people that continued into a second afternoon session. Keith Wheeler opened with the context of IUCN/CEC interest and activities including a brief mention of CEPA (Communication, Education and Public Awareness) methods and the challenge of effectively empowering stakeholders. John Francis talked about Social Networks and a broader conceptualization of the discussion about biotech solutions, arguing that everyone on the planet is an actor in agricultural production. This included a call for attention to communication at a grass roots level, including a greater range of participants and the use of emergent technologies to improve fundraising and information exchange. Sarah Stokes Alexander discussed how to enable dialogues among people with disparate outlooks and objectives, including recognizing where people are in their interests and capacity, encouraging listening and story telling, identifying common ground, and recognizing shared principles with a commitment to flexibility in solutions. Joe Russo presented a web-based tool designed by ZedX for accumulating data and presenting it through user selected filters combined with real time GIS information of value across a range of participants from local to international, grower to policy maker. This includes the potential for real time input of data from cell phones in the field with predictive, tailored information of value in the field, in the markets, in Congress, and across a diverse web of actors. Marcos Algara Siller provided an example of this tool in action with a detailed description of the Scope program, supported by the Mexican Secretaria de Agricultura and others where pest management data, such as the distribution of locusts, is mapped and provides real time data to affected areas, here shown in the Yucatan and in other parts of southern Mexico.

Following these presentations, questions posed to the audience included:

How can we bridge the divides between research, policy, farmers, and the public?
How do we engage at all levels?
What tools and methods exist for groups to engage more with stakeholders?
What kinds of communication strategies are needed?
What are the relevant gaps and obstacles?

Salient conclusions included:

[1] This is the summary report of the double parallel session organized by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Commission on Education and Communication (IUCN-CEC) on the second day of the FAO international technical conference on Agricultural Biotechnologies in Developing Countries (ABDC-10) that took place in Guadalajara, Mexico on 1-4 March 2010 (http://www.fao.org/biotech/abdc/parallel/en). Keith Wheeler was the facilitator and the Rapporteur summary was presented by John Francis.

1. For full engagement, especially including farmers in developing countries, researchers and policy makers must hear and respond to the demands and needs at the local level.
2. Solutions do not come as “one size fits all” and one must be aware of differing capacities and circumstances that lead to understanding and effective implementation with sensitivity about carefully selected and trusted messengers.
3. Regional centres/approaches might better serve to streamline communication tailored to the audience.
4. Starting early in schools with an understanding of agricultural systems and science can increase the likelihood of creating and adopting effective solutions
5. Use of new communications technologies should be embraced as soon as possible in those regions where practical.
6. FAO and other international bodies need to financially invest in communications as key to engaging and empowering stakeholders and improving biotech implementation.
7. FAO should play a role in supporting a global effort to enhance communications about biotechnologies through better coordination with communication and knowledge management specialists at regional and national levels.