



Mr. Gerard Doornbos
President of the International Federation of Agricultural
Producers (IFAP),
Opening Address
FAO/Netherlands Conference on the Multifunctional Conference on
Agriculture and Land

Mr. Chairman,
Mr. Minister,
Your Excellencies,
Friends and Colleagues,

It is a pleasure for me to address this conference on behalf of the world's farmers. The International Federation of Agricultural Producers represents 85 national farmers' organizations worldwide, more than half of which are in the developing countries. It also enjoys close working relations with many other farmers' organizations that are not yet full members.

The title of this Conference may seem strange to some people. It has certainly provoked some discussion.

- What do we mean by the "Multifunctional character of agriculture and land"?
- Is this a new way of saying sustainable farming?

Farmers see this Conference in Maastricht as being much broader in scope than simply addressing sustainable farming.

Today, societies the world over are seeking a new direction for more favourable and equitable development at the global level. Agriculture, by virtue of its multiple functions, can make a central and unique contribution towards this goal - given the right policy framework.

This Conference provides an opportunity to build on the achievements of the FAO World Food Conference of 1996 - that Conference looked at agriculture as a food producer. It also provides an opportunity to contribute to the deliberations that will take place in the U.N. Commission on Sustainable Development next year - which will look at agriculture in the context of managing natural resources, and building rural communities.

IFAP is therefore pleased to be a partner in this event. We congratulate the Director-General of FAO, and the Minister of Agriculture, Nature Management, and Fisheries of the Government of the Netherlands, for taking the initiative to put the spotlight on the many important contributions that agriculture makes to society.

Five years ago, IFAP published a policy statement entitled "Farmers for a sustainable future - the leadership role of agriculture". In that document, IFAP tried to identify a policy framework which would allow agriculture to contribute to a more sustainable society. We drew attention to three main roles played by agriculture. These are:

1. Continued development of a global food and raw material system, that is both productive and environmentally-sound, to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding world population.
2. Conservation of the rural environment, its natural resource base, landscapes, wildlife habitats, and genetic biodiversity.

3. Ensuring the economic viability and the social and cultural vitality of the rural areas.

About a quarter of the world's population are farmers. They manage the majority of the world's productive land. This is an exceptional force that can be mobilized for development - given the right policy environment.

The main conclusion of the IFAP report on "Farmers for a sustainable future" was that "...only an economically-viable agriculture will be capable of achieving the objectives of environmental sustainability and ensuring a balanced development between rural and urban areas".

We have seen many changes since that report was written, but the conclusion stands today. Agriculture must be considered first and foremost an economic activity. Farmers will work hard to provide the many goods and services that society demands from agriculture. However, in return, farmers should be able to expect to make a reasonable living to support their families.

This point is not emphasized the very strongly in the background documentation for this Conference, so I am pleased to bring it to your attention now - because without it, we will not make the desired progress.

The background documentation, however, does recognize the strong link between "the development of institutional capacity and the potential contribution of multifunctional agriculture and land to sustainable development". IFAP supports this statement. It is in countries where farmers are organized into strong, democratic and responsible organizations that we have seen the most progress in the sustainable development of agriculture.

The 'participatory approach' is the way that works. It mobilizes farmers to become organized and take on responsibility for their own development. Farmers need strong local institutions built upon 'grass-roots' support. But to be effective, these institutions need to be linked into strong provincial, national, and international farmers' organizations. Policy is made at all these levels. The only way for farmers to provide effective input into the policy-making process is therefore to be organized at all levels.

The background documents draw attention to the importance of governments establishing "consultative mechanisms with stakeholders". This is an important point. At this Conference, however, over 85 per cent of the seats have been reserved for governments. At first I thought that I was the only farmer here, but I have just seen a colleague in the auditorium. I trust that the fact that very few farmers have been invited to this conference is not a reflection of what is meant by participation and partnership. Farmers are not subjects for discussion, they are partners in the process. I hope that this point will figure prominently in the conclusions of this Conference.

In the course of this week, I understand that emphasis will be given to developing "technical frameworks" for society to promote sustainability through a multifunctional agriculture. These are important, particularly the building of 'institutional capacity' and 'consultative mechanisms', as I have already mentioned. However, even though this is mainly a technical conference, it will be difficult to ignore the policy context in which agriculture takes place.

Up until the mid-1980s, the multiple contributions that farmers made to society were generally rewarded jointly through price support policies - at least in the industrialized countries. Today, the situation is different.

Governments everywhere are withdrawing support from agriculture. They are liberalizing and privatizing their economies. In an environment of more open global markets, and increased competition, it is a fair question to ask whether market forces can deliver the multiple functions expected by society from agriculture? In my view, in many cases, they cannot. There is no market for public goods, such as landscape, nature conservation, or rural heritage. It is therefore a policy issue for governments. And given the possible trade effects of

policies for developing the multifunctional character of agriculture and land, it is an international policy issue.

I can assure you that farmers are happy to deliver on their multifunctional role, but this is only possible if they are rewarded for doing it. Governments cannot say, for example, that they want to preserve small-scale agriculture, hedges for wildlife, small wooded areas, an attractive landscape etc. without providing both the policy framework and the necessary funds to support it. Liberalized market forces will give exactly the opposite result - larger, more-intensive farms, employing fewer people.

Most farmers are not against liberalization - trade distortions are bad for farmers too. But governments should appreciate that, in many countries, it will only be possible to move to a more liberal farm policy, if policies are developed to reward farmers for multifunctionality. Payments for multifunctional agriculture must not be trade-distorting, and so there is in principle no restriction on their use under international trade rules. Further, these rules allow flexibility for countries to make their own policies according to the preferences of their society. It is therefore simply a question of political will. Do we want multifunctional agriculture or not? If so, society must be prepared to pay for it. Very few things in life come free, and this is not one of them.

IFAP has made policy proposals in different areas of multifunctional agriculture and land, and I would like to share some of the main points for discussion.

Agriculture as a food producer

The primary function of agriculture is, and will continue to be, to produce food and renewable raw materials. This serves two essential objectives, namely food security, and a contribution to national income. In order to achieve these objectives, governments need to provide a stable political, social and economic environment. In particular, IFAP seeks:

1. A farm policy in which farmers can earn a reasonable income for their families and rural communities. This policy should include a multilateral framework of rules and disciplines for agricultural trade which apply equally to each country. Some national governments are using the World Trade Organization agreements as an excuse for no longer assuring their own national farm policies, which we regret.
2. Access to resources on reasonable terms. Farmers need good infrastructure, access to credit, and secure land tenure arrangements. They also need access to good research, education, training, extension and other services. In this regard, IFAP is working on a policy paper entitled "Land issues and property rights". We believe that secure land tenure is a key component of any anti-poverty strategy. The documents for this meeting also emphasize the importance of secure land tenure. Access to resources is a particular problem facing women farmers in many countries. Special attention therefore needs to be devoted to solving this problem.
3. An efficient, competitive input supplies sector and marketing system. The primary production sector is one link in a whole chain from the farm gate to the consumer. The situation of the farmer is therefore greatly affected by the performance of the other sectors upstream and downstream of primary agriculture. Farmers therefore want to be sure that all links in the food chain are efficient and competitive. Farmers need to be able to choose where they buy their inputs, and where they sell their products. Farming should be market-oriented, but so should the other parts of the food chain. Where necessary, competition policy must be strengthened and enforced, including at the international level.

Agriculture and the conservation of natural resources

Another function of agriculture is conserving natural resources. Farmers must carry out their farming activities without depleting the natural resource base. It is essential for the long-term survival of farming as an economic activity. Land conservation programs, like the Australian Landcare initiative, need to be encouraged. Water conservation programs, and programs to conserve genetic resources also need to be promoted. Concerning genetic resources,

heritage rights on plants and animals developed by farmers for generations – especially in the developing countries - should be protected.

When farmers are required to provide environmental services which go beyond normal good farming practices, they should be rewarded for these services. For example, the preservation of wildlife habitats such as wetlands, or the conservation of biodiversity in plant and animal genetic material.

Agriculture and rural communities

The contribution of agriculture to the viability of the rural areas is an essential part of any sustainable agricultural system. Agriculture is at the heart of the rural economy. Rural areas provide society with a different value structure which is the basis for a whole culture and way of life. Deeply-rooted traditions underpin the stability of rural areas and contribute to a rich rural heritage and cultural diversity.

There is a natural complementarity and interdependence between the economies of rural and urban areas. It is therefore essential to reinforce the economic, social and ecological balances between these two areas.

Prime natural resources must be protected from the spread of urbanization. The potential of rural areas to fulfil their multiple functions should not be compromised by the implantation of, for instance, factories that are too environmentally unsound to be accepted in urban areas.

Farmers are often found among the poorest sections of the population. Their income is insufficient for themselves and their families, let alone to invest in sustainable farming methods. The disruptive impact of rural exodus, urban explosion and migration is likely to become even more acute if the economic basis for the development of agriculture and the rural communities is not assured.

The elimination of poverty depends on creating conditions that enable farmers to make the most effective use of their assets in the most productive way. Farming will only be sustainable when farmers have equitable access to land and other resources, and when they receive payments for their products which give them the financial means to take care of their families, and to conserve their land. Given the right market signals, secure land tenure, information, inputs and extension services appropriate to their needs, all farmers - including the poorest - can contribute to the sound development of rural areas.

In closing, I would like to emphasize that agriculture, by virtue of its numerous vocations, is and will remain, essential for the economic, environmental, social, and cultural well-being of societies into the next millenium. Farmers can bring into play all the resources of the rural environment to contribute to a more sustainable pattern of development for the future. However, the building of a more sustainable future will require mobilizing the talents of many people: farmers, governments, agro-industry, researchers, and consumers. We all have our part to play. We all have a responsibility.

I wish this conference every success in its deliberations.

Thank you.