

Terra Preta: Forum on the Food Crisis, Climate Change, Agrofuels and Food Sovereignty

1 - 4 June, 2008, Città dell'Altra Economia, Rome

Day 1 Side Event: "Agricultural Research for Food Sovereignty", facilitated by Michel Pimbert, International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)

Summary

Throughout the world, publicly-funded research shapes the choices that are available to farmers, food workers and consumers, and the environments in which they live and work. There is an increasing need to explore ways of democratising the governance of science and technology, ensuring that it continues to serve the public good rather than narrow economic interests. A series of conversations with farmers, pastoralists, indigenous peoples, policy-makers and representatives of social movements between 2005-2007 led to the formulation of a major multi-country initiative to enable citizens to exercise their democratic imagination to decide on the kind of food and agricultural research they want. This international initiative has now become an action research proposal: *Democratising the Governance of Food Systems. Citizens Rethinking Food and Agricultural Research for the Public Good*¹. Rather than offer ready made solutions this project support a decentralized and bottom up process whereby farmers and other citizens can decide what type of agricultural research is needed for food sovereignty, and also organize to collectively push for change in policies and practice.

The overall objective of this action research is to create safe spaces in which citizens (food providers and consumers) can engage in inclusive deliberations on how to build an agri-food research system that is democratic and accountable to wider society. More specifically, the methodological approach seeks to facilitate the participatory design of alternative, farmer and citizen-led agricultural research. Both non-specialists and individuals with specialist knowledge are encouraged to develop an alternative agri-food research system for the public good.

This participatory process was initiated in 2007 to create safe spaces for small-scale farmers, indigenous peoples, nomadic pastoralists, food workers and other citizens in four regions, with one country acting as host for each region: West Africa (Mali), South Asia (India), West Asia (Iran) and the Andean region in Latin America (Bolivia/Peru). There are plans to further extend these citizen deliberations to other regions, including Europe. In each region, research teams and co-ordinators have been identified.

¹ This research proposal was prepared by the Sustainable Agriculture, Biodiversity and Livelihoods Programme of the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). The following donors have agreed to fund this action research: The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DGIS), the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC), NOVIB-OXFAM and The Christensen Fund.

In November 2007, all regional co-ordinators and team members gathered together in Monte Saraz (Portugal) for a 6-day planning and methodological workshop. This report offers a summary of the discussions and agreements reached by workshop participants at Monte Saraz – see <http://www.iied.org/pubs/pdfs/G02224.pdf> .

The history of the project idea

Michel shared with the Terra Petra participants how the project ideas have developed over the last three years through conversations in fields, villages, conferences and in the heart of donor communities, in both the South and the North. These conversations were with pastoralists, indigenous people, fisher folk, progressive scientists and intellectuals, consumers and farmers (both urban and rural). The common view heard time and time again was “we have no say in what the scientists are doing”, along with concern over the mismatch between agricultural research and the reality of farming systems throughout the world. Small-scale producers and other people talked of a democratic deficit leading to a lack of citizen control over knowledge production, often with harmful consequences for people and the land.

At the same time as these conversations were occurring, there were a number of very significant international and national developments. The concept of ‘food sovereignty’ was becoming a part of the international vocabulary. In Mali it was enshrined within the nation’s overarching agricultural policy. Other countries and coalitions have also been pushing for an alternative paradigm for food and agriculture. Further confirmation that research is a central issue for farmers came in 2006 through an unprecedented citizens’ jury of small farmers in Mali, which explored genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and the future of farming (l’ECID). No fewer than five recommendations from this intensive five-day process called for agricultural research to be reorganised to better serve the needs of small farmers. This deliberative process echoed the outcomes of the Prajateerpu citizens’ jury in India, which also emphasised the importance of strengthening farmer-centred innovation systems.

Also significant has been recent efforts to assess the impact of agricultural research through the IAASTD (International Assessment of Agriculture Science and Technology for Development). The IAASTD was launched as an intergovernmental process guided by a multi-stakeholder bureau, under the co-sponsorship of the Un Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Global Environment Facility (GEF), United Nations Development Program (UNDP), United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), UNESCO, the World Bank and the World Health Organization (WHO). The project is a major global initiative, developed from a consultative process involving 900 participants and 110 countries from all regions of the world. Michel’s response, after discussion with some members of IPC , La Via Campesina, indigenous people’s organizations and others, was not to enter this ‘invited policy space’ which is created from above. Instead, Michel argued for the need to create, from below, a series of independent and parallel ‘popular or citizen spaces’ where people can gain confidence, discover their voice, analyse, mobilise and act. At the very least, these ‘citizen spaces’ can complement the IAASTD because this intergovernmental process has not developed any mechanism for local perspectives to be directly included in discussions and policy recommendations on the future of agricultural research.

The action research proposal that emerged from these conversations thus explicitly aims to strengthen the voices of small-scale producers and other citizens in setting

agendas for scientific and technological research, as well as in framing policies for food and agricultural research. The emphasis is on using:

1) participatory approaches and methods to include diverse actors in deliberative processes and safe spaces. These include citizens' juries, consensus conferences, citizen panels, scenario workshops, deliberative polling, multi-criteria mapping, participatory visioning exercises and other culturally appropriate fora for deliberation and inclusion;

2) a set of carefully-designed safeguards to ensure the quality and validity of the knowledge and actions generated. Such safeguards are needed in collaborative inquiries where the political stakes in the outcome of this way of knowing are high. Safeguards need to be combined in mutually reinforcing ways to ensure that deliberative processes are broadly credible, trustworthy, fair and not captured by any interest group or perspective;

3) linking formal decision-making bodies and processes with spaces in which expert and experiential knowledge are put under public scrutiny, by engaging relevant social actors and coalitions of interest. Michel noted that central to making sure that the voices of small-scale producers and consumers are heard is the need to work with the media from an early stage in such processes.

Whilst the choice of entry points and framing of issues will be made by regional and local actors, Michel anticipates that some of the citizen deliberations and recommendations will focus on: i) the control and allocation of funds for scientific, technical and socio-economic research; ii) non-specialist and citizen involvement in agenda setting for research and in defining *upstream* strategic priorities and policy; iii) ways of knowing and doing research based on extended peer communities and different traditions of knowledge and practice, including the strengthening of autonomous learning and action mediated by horizontal networks of citizens; and iv) governance, oversight and inclusion in the production and validation of knowledge embedded in policies and technologies for food, farming and the environment.

Michel then presented ideas on some issues that might be addressed by citizens invited to re-think food and agricultural research for the public good. His presentation reflected his own analysis and was based on conversations with different actors—including farmers, indigenous peoples, as well as donors and academics.

Many of these actors have spoken of the need for a transformation of knowledge, which goes beyond reductionist science. For example, in such conversations indigenous peoples talked of the failure of conventional social and natural sciences to manage landscapes. The Quechua in Peru spoke of the need to adopt instead a holistic approach which considers the links with what we know about nature and also our culture, spirituality and well-being.

Equally important is the need to transform ways of knowing about the world, reflecting a more participatory ethos and worldview. This approach recognises that technological fixes are not enough. It sees science and knowledge as part of a bottom up, participatory process in which citizens themselves take centre stage.

Instead of being seen as passive beneficiaries of trickle down development or technology transfer, citizens are viewed as knowledgeable and active actors who are centrally involved in both the 'upstream' choice and design of scientific and other innovations, and their 'downstream' implementation, spread and regulation.

Citizens' deliberations on the form and content of food and agricultural research can have many different entry points and focus on a variety of key questions, including:

1. How can we achieve upstream citizen representation and control in decision-making processes in research and development organisations? Today it is difficult to suggest that citizens should set the agenda for public research and so be framing the important questions. If we don't have this upstream representation all we will have is fine-tuning, end of the pipe 'participation'. We must also beware the assumption that if we have a left-wing government and representative democracy, society's needs will be met. Experience shows that more often than not we cannot trust our representatives to do this.

2. How should we transform ways of knowing? How do we do this? Do we democratise existing science and technology research or do we de-institutionalise research for autonomous learning and action?

3. Can we design autonomous farming systems as mimics of natural systems and so reduce dependence upon external farm inputs and the corporate suppliers of those inputs (agroecology vs input substitution approaches)? Reducing the social and ecological footprint of agri-food systems implies a fundamental re-design of these systems on the basis of ecology and the emerging science of dynamic complexity.

4. We must also debunk the myths around people and environment interactions when the problem often is the importing of external land management practices onto markedly different landscapes (e.g. the imposition of land range management practices from the US onto complex, risk-prone semi-arid environments which are the homes of nomadic pastoralists)

5. How can we decolonise economics? Presently there is an emphasis on market-based solutions with no thinking outside this box (to consider more plural forms of economic exchange based upon for example reciprocity, subsistence based markets, barter etc). 'Only the stupid confuses the value with the price'.

6. Can we do without formal social and technical research and instead support more autonomous learning and action by strengthening horizontal networks of citizens? e.g. farmer networks based on a more egalitarian logic of knowledge exchange; socio-cultural networks of Quechuas such as study groups and video collectives.

7. How can we find relevant methodologies for us to use in creating safe spaces for citizens to re-imagine food and agricultural research for the public good? The approach of the citizens' jury may be useful as part of a structured process. Here citizen jurors are selected, as are witnesses (with diverse perspectives) and an oversight panel. The jury listens and cross-examines a diversity of witnesses, who may be herders from Mali, pastoralists from Iran or those from formal backgrounds. All are experts.

Last, Michel emphasised that we must also recognise the wider context of change. Reclaiming knowledge to make 'other worlds possible' must be envisioned in the context of wider social change for two basic reasons. First, knowledge broadly reflects and reinforces specific power relations and worldviews in any society. Deep social change is often needed for the emergence of new knowledge paradigms. Second, whilst clearly vitally important, new knowledge alone will not lead to endogenous development in food and farming. The transformation of knowledge and ways of knowing thus need to be informed by a vision of what kind of society farmers

and other citizens want.

Discussions with Terra Petra participants

A lively discussion followed with several participants asking more information on, - for example -, the current status of the project, work in Africa in relation to the Alliance for a new Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), the possibility of doing this in countries where basic freedoms of expression and the press are not respected, where is the project going and what it hopes to achieve.

Michel explained that following the initial planning workshop in November 2007, all participating regional team members (West Africa, Andean region of Latin America, West Asia and South Asia) have began to lay the ground for the regional citizens deliberations they will be facilitating. In Africa it is now clear that partners want to focus these citizen deliberations on AGRA and alternative scenarios for food and agricultural research.

Next, the project's existence was officially announced to the wider public through the media. IIED and its partners organised some international media work on the same day that the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) was released in London, Washington, Paris and New Delhi. The timing of the IIED press release was deliberately chosen to coincide with the IAASTD report launch and, as such, did succeed in attracting significant media attention. The IIED press release was used as opportunity to congratulate the IAASTD and, - at the same time-, explain how this people centered initiative was designed to complement the IAASTD process by bringing in hitherto excluded citizen perspectives on food and agricultural research. See IIED press release: http://www.iied.org/mediaroom/releases/080414agricultural_science.html

As to where is the project going and what will it achieve in three years time, - Michel said this was an unfolding organic process in each region and internationally. Outcomes will be dependent on history and context, strongly influenced by the agency of local partners and how they shape the citizen deliberations and subsequent political process of influencing policies and practice. The project has three years of funding – with roughly year 1 focussing on the preparations, year 2 focussing on the citizen deliberations, and year 3 devoted to amplifying citizen voices and recommendations on “what agricultural research for food sovereignty”. Year 3 will involve bottom up processes of policy influence targeted at CGIAR, FAO, donor community, national research systems..., as well as coalition building and supporting countervailing power needed to transform food and agricultural research. But Michel said that it is only by ‘walking this path’ that the final outcomes will become clearer, - and that new possibilities for transformation may emerge out of what is an essentially messy and uncertain process of change.

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