

Of Agriculture and Change

Martin Khor

World agriculture badly needs an overhaul, according to a new report issued as food shortages and rising prices cause unrest in many countries. The way food is produced has to change, from reliance on chemicals towards sustainable methods such as organic farming. The small farmers should be helped rather than big farms. And the unfair system of agricultural trade must also be altered.

These proposals are made in a 2,500-page report authored by 400 scientists, finalised and adopted by more than 50 governments and launched in press briefings in many capitals recently.

The report was produced after a three-year process by the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology (IAASTD). The process was launched by governments and co-sponsored by UN agencies (including the FAO, UNDP, UNEP, UNESCO and WHO) and the World Bank.

More than 400 authors were involved in drafting the report, drawing on the evidence and assessments of thousands of experts worldwide. Malaysian environmentalist Lim Li Ching, was one of the lead authors.

Over three years, the IAASTD conducted an assessment on the potential of agricultural knowledge, science and technology for reducing hunger and poverty, improving rural livelihoods, and working towards environmentally, socially and economically sustainable development. It aims to drive the agriculture agenda for the next 50 years.

"Business as usual is not an option," professor Robert Watson, director of the IAASTD and chief scientist of Britain's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said, adding that there had been little regard for natural resources or food security. "Continuing with current trends will split the earth's haves and have-nots further apart."

Watson became famous as the first chair of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The methodology of the IAASTD's work and process is similar to that of the IPCC.

According to Lim, a researcher at the Third World Network based in Kuala Lumpur, the report's message is that "the business-as-usual scenario of industrial farming, which makes intensive use of inputs and energy, and which has marginalised small-scale farmers, is no longer tenable".

She said the IAASTD concluded that the past emphasis on production and yields had brought some benefits, but this was at the expense of the environment and social equity. "Moreover, it recognises that excessive trade liberalisation can have negative effects for food security, poverty alleviation and the environment," she added.

The IAASTD report calls on governments and agencies to redirect investment, funding, research and policy focus towards the needs of small farmers. More stress must be given to protecting natural resources and agro-ecological practices, and tapping farmers' traditional knowledge. Its main policy message is that sustainable agriculture, based on biodiversity, and including agro-ecology and organic farming, is beneficial to poor farmers, and needs to be supported by policy.

The Synthesis Report, agreed to after a week-long meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa, focuses on eight issues-bioenergy, biotechnology, climate change, human health, natural resource management, traditional knowledge, trade and markets, and women in agriculture.

A major aspect was the report's relative scepticism of genetically modified (GM) crops. After looking at the evidence, it is notably muted on the claimed benefits of GM crops, highlighting instead the doubts and uncertainties surrounding them.

"The short answer to whether transgenic crops can feed the world is 'no', we must understand their costs and benefits," said Watson at a briefing.

The report says "assessment of the technology lags behind its development, information is anecdotal and contradictory, and uncertainty about possible benefits and damage is unavoidable". It also criticises the rush to switch land use from food crops to crops for bio-fuels. "The diversion of crops to fuel can raise food prices and reduce our ability to alleviate hunger."

"This report launches a new era for agriculture," said a statement from eight nongovernmental groups, including Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, Third World Network and Practical Action. "This is a sobering account of the failure of industrial farming. It reflects a growing consensus among scientists and governments that the old paradigm of industrial, energy-intensive and toxic agriculture is a concept of the past. And that small-scale farmers and agro-ecological methods provide the way forward to avert the current food crisis."

"The scientific evidence gives unequivocal support to organic agriculture, as a credible solution for the 21st century," said Prabha Mahale of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements.

"This report clearly shows that small-scale farmers and the environment lose out under trade liberalisation. Developing countries must exercise their right to stop the flood of cheap, subsidised products from the North," said TWN's Lim.

"This marks the beginning of a new, of a real Green Revolution. The modern way of farming is bio diverse and labour intensive and works with nature, not against it," said Benny Haerlin of Greenpeace.

"The IAASTD provides the evidence to show that locally-controlled, biologically-based intensification of farming is the only way forward," added Patrick Mulvany of Practical Action.

And, according to Juan Lopez of Friends of the Earth International: "It is heartening to see that the scientists refuted the usual propaganda on genetically engineered crops. They focused on the real problems and saw very little role for GE crops in their solutions." □□

—*Third World Network Features*