

Asian Agriculture and the New Millennium-III

(Continued from yesterday)

Technological Empowerment of Small Farmers

As new frontiers of science are being probed, novelty should not sap continuing commitment to less glamorous, sometimes contentious but essential programmes like agrarian reform and vesting real participatory control of natural resources, including Common Property Resources, in local communities; sustainable production and post-production systems that are less energy and chemical-intensive and more employment-enhancing; and sharply focused empowerment programmes for small-producers and women in agriculture.

Again, increased sensitivity in strategic sectors, such as the breathtaking advances of molecular biology and tissue and cell culture must ensure that the grim paradox of progress amidst stagnation is not replicated in the "new frontier". Technological imperialism is not merely a warmed-over slogan. It could distort essential work for food-security into the 21st century. Developing countries in the region need partnership in designing survival-kits" for food-security with hitherto ignored traditional staples and tubers. Recent advances in bio-processing, bio-refineries, application of protoplasm fusion and tissue-culture techniques could promise to defuse the emerging dichotomy between the new and old technologies.

The bottomline, however, is that farmers must have the sense of ownership of technology rather than dependency. "Technological empowerment" rather than "simple transfer of technology" is the name of the game.

Distinctive Knowledge of Women

A corollary argument relates to the distinctive knowledge of women. As Rochleau puts it, "half or more indigenous ecological science has been obscured by the prevailing invisibility of women, their work, their interests and especially their knowledge". (Gender, Ecology and the Science of Survival: Stories and Lessons from Kenya by DE Rochleau in Agriculture and Human Values, 1991) Women in many parts of the world, particularly in Asia and Africa have continued to play and still play a key role in preserving diversity, and in subsistence food-production. Kayapo women in Brazilian Amazon, for example, not only breed new crop varieties but preserve representative samples in the hillside genebanks.

Although there is no such thing as a set of gendered universal knowledge systems, the challenge for the scientists is to accept that "men and women farmers are germplasm consultants and research curators and to develop field methodologies and management strategies that support farmers in these roles." (Changing the Boundaries: Women Centered Perspectives on Population and Development by J Jiggins, 1994). As Dr. Swaminathan points out, "Traditional systems of farming depended on in situ conservation of genetic variability, mostly by women" (Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security in India, towards a Sustainable Society, ed. by M L Dewan, 1995).

Unfortunately, there is an exploitative asymmetry between the indigenous groups and the more powerful groups acquiring their information and knowledge. If women lack the opportunity and the means to develop their capacities and obtain control of the decisions regarding their knowledge, innovations and practices, there is a danger that women's ecological knowledge will be "packaged as a product to be collected, owned, and sold in the market place of ideas of the scientific community without them being compensated in any way." (D.E. Rochleau, 1991)

Community Conservation of Plant Genetic Resources

If women and men farmers are accepted as germplasm collectors and rightful owners of their own experiments and seed collection, there is a strong case why the control of biodiversity in general and

plant genetic diversity in particular should be brought to the local communities. Broadening the circle of social control of how genetic resources are managed and utilized is central to tomorrow's food security.

There is a case for appropriate and effective support to be given to community-level plant genetic resources conservation. Such in-situ conservation helps ensure that resources are managed in living conditions in the different ecosystems and socio-cultural conditions of the farmer custodians. Contextualized in the local ecosystem, community conservation facilitates continuous adaptation to changes, to both biotic and abiotic stresses, and most importantly, to farmer selection. The creator, custodian and end user of PGR is one. It was the farmers of past and present generations who provided the PGR diversity that we have today. Conservation of PGR cannot be divorced from its utilization, and therefore, cannot be divorced from its end users — the farmers.

For the best use to be made of Plant Genetic Resources farmers must control their own biomaterials and have access to a wide a gene pool as possible. They must be able to incorporate knowledge and information about their material when it is available elsewhere. Farmers' rights, in relation to the accessions conserved in national and international gene banks, need to be ensured. It is unfortunate that while the convention on Biological Diversity focuses primarily on naturally occurring species, status of collection prior to the convention vis-a-vis intellectual property rights still remain in limbo.

Unfortunately, collective knowledge of the producers is excluded from the definitions of intellectual property rights. The enclosure of "intellectual commons" of the peasantry must be done away with. Sustainable enhancement of biodiversity for food security will require the formation of a new covenant under which farmers and scientists; non-government and people's organizations, governments and international institutions, can work together for the well-being of humanity. Such lofty words cannot mask the fundamental power imbalances among the actors. Hence, the necessity of ensuring mutual respect and mutual benefit. The traditional/modern or common/private dichotomy usually shortchanges the powerless at the market place of the latter.

Water-Management
Water "rolling from mountain springs with soft inland innumur", cannot be taken for granted any longer. In the rainfed areas farmers need better ways to harvest every drop of rainwater.

Consequently, operational improvements will have to focus more on increased water use of efficiency and better on-farm water management, two vital sustainable components for irrigated areas; while cost recovery for irrigation systems should also be reviewed and developed. In general, better management of natural resources in irrigated regions, and improved irrigation performance, will require more integration between irrigation management and natural resources planning, particularly regarding links between lowland and upland water catchment areas. Integrated water management must be extended outwards from areas with ground water problems, while forest and soil conservation efforts in adjacent low-potential areas must ensure sufficient water supplies for high-potential areas.

Adequate drainage is indispensable for controlling the water table to minimize waterlogging, reduce salt concentrations and prevent salinization in irrigated areas. Effective drainage should therefore be installed in existing command areas and future irrigation projects should only be initiated if provision for appropriate drainage is included at the design stage. Additionally, the wise and integrated use of surface and ground water should be the aim wherever feasible.

Judicious management of salt affected soils involves a package of practices including proper land levelling and preparation, application of amendments such as gypsum, leaching and drainage, improved agronomic and water management practices, and the selection of tolerant crops and varieties. However, the need exists for the development of cheaper and location specific techniques for both the reclamation of salt affected areas and the prevention of further salinization. (F.J. Dent 1996)

What is required is demonstration and not exhortation; location-specific practice as against generalized theoretical observation and an overall participatory mode.

Technology for Ecological Agriculture

Technology on the shelf ought to be re-examined in the light of Earth Summit criteria: enhancement of biological productivity per unit of land, water, and time, on an ecologically sustainable basis while providing access by small-scale producers. In other words, food

should ideally originate from environmentally benign technologies that conserve and enhance the natural resources base of crops, animal husbandry, forestry, inland and marine fisheries.

Integrated Pest Management can increase yields and empower farmer peer-groups to make their own decision about micro agro-ecology of their farms, while reducing external dependence on soil and human health endangering costly chemical pesticides. In a similar vein, emphasis on integrated soil and plant nutrient management can achieve sustainability while maintaining productivity increase through greater use of legumes in cropping systems, organic recycling, green manuring, and use of biofertilizer with judicious supplement of minerals.

Looking Ahead

Decades ahead could see within Asia two models of development come into sharper focus. One may be seen in countries like Malaysia. Expanding industrial or services sector would provide increasing off-farm income opportunities. Agriculture will be reinforced by an expanding network of industries.

The other is in South Asia including continental India. The countries therein cannot, at the moment, offer viable alternatives to their massive rural populations. The jury is still out as to whether an alternative is emerging in India, since the government there embarked on broad-based liberalization programme. Meanwhile, pressure on already small land-holdings will build up further as the numbers of marginal and landless farmers climb.

These shifting patterns of change radically reshape the way policy-makers in Delhi and Manila and their partners in progress perceive and grapple with problems of sustainable agricultural growth, rural employment and food and nutritional security.

In their search for policies to usher them into the new millennium new and international policy-makers, and Asian farmers alike must cobble together the criteria of ecological sustainability, economic efficiency, social equity and popular participation into a coherent framework.

Resources-based rather than Commodity-based Agricultural Research Development

Agricultural research and development in Asia, in the previous decades, gave a major thrust to optimize the factors of production of market commodities and maximize profit at the farm level. In the process there have been negligible attempts to perceive small farmers, particularly in areas that are not well-endowed, as those who try to minimize risk for food security reasons. Also areas with relatively less resources-endowment have been neglected along with their critically important crops like millet, pulses or sweet potatoes. Resource-based development in contrast could lead to the optimization of the use of specific resource-endowments of high-rainfall tropical systems, coastal systems and mountain systems, for example, in a sustainable manner for the livelihood security of the people who subsist on them. The rationale is obvious. The aim of the small-farm households who constitute the bulk of the rural resource-poor is not as much of maximizing returns from specific activity or commodity, but maximizing income and employment in a sustainable manner from the total resources, both bio-physical and human, to which they have access, through product-conversion and thereby value-addition. Every effort should be made to optimize this strength of diversity of sources of production, employment and income, through integrated use and management of resources. An integrated approach involving crop diversification (cereals and legumes) and livestock farming, agro-forestry and aquaculture (including rice and fish culture) will be helpful in enhancing rural employment and income and in protecting the resource health.

Supportive Research Paradigm

Reorientation in research planning and programming is

called for in the light of resource-use pattern emerging from different ecosystems and socio-cultural milieu of the small farm households.

First, due to the smallness of the size of farms, and the multiple uses to which resources are put, in order to generate income and employment, the technology required is that for the production system (product-mix) as a whole, and not for specific products and activities. The objective function is that of maximizing the biomass and value addition, rather than maximizing the output of specific commodities or activities. Even though the present commodity-oriented research will have to continue to secure quantum jumps in the output of individual commodities per unit of resource, research has to move in developing technologies to optimize income and employment under a product-mix regime for a given set of resources. Further, as the development strategy is to be attuned to specific commodity/activity focused needs to be restructured in the participatory farming system mode in the context of ensuring livelihood security of resource-poor farmers. They need a basket of opportunities and choices to utilize the limited resources they have access to. Such empowerment is a continuum involving identification of technologies appropriate to specific agro-ecology of a farm and resource-endowment of the farmer, adaptation to both the bio-physical and socio-cultural conditions.

Participatory research and training is a basic requirement for resource-based and people-focused development. New patterns of research organization, with scientists and farm families becoming partners in the development and dissemination of new technologies are to be evolved and the existing systems reoriented.

This is important for coalescing local knowledge with frontier technologies. Traditional technologies are environment-specific, less risky, eco-friendly and sustainable under low levels of production with respect to time and resource-use. Technology packages to be developed for different resource endowments should be a blend of traditional and frontier technologies.

which integrate the ecological and social strengths of the former with the production potential, cost-effectiveness and consumer appeal for the latter.

thereby mutually reinforcing the livelihood security of the rural families with the ecological security of the rural areas.

Frontier technologies which are suitable candidates for such blending include biotechnology, space technology, informatics, micro-electronics and management. Some of these technologies lend themselves to the extent possible, market purchased chemical inputs with farm grown biological inputs. Such a shift in the nature of the inputs used is brought about through integrated farming incorporating animal husbandry, farm forestry and agroforestry. This second element of the IIFS strategy provides scope for organic recycling. A third element of the strategy is value-addition to every part of the plant and animal biomass through the establishment of bio-refineries. On-farm and off-farm employment then can be linked in a symbiotic manner. In the case of farm women, who are invariably overworked because of their multiple roles in a household, IIFS aims to reduce the number of hours of work and add economic value to each hour of their work.

IIFS leads to resource-based, agriculture development planning. It involves soil health care incorporating various symbiotic and non-symbiotic nitrogen fixation. IIFS farmers will maintain a Soil Health Card to monitor the impact of farming systems on the physical, chemical and micro-biological components of soil fertility.

It emphasizes on water harvesting and participatory management by the user communities. Crop and pest management practices such as Integrated Nutrient Supply and Integrated Pest Management will be adopted and their precise composition, chosen on the basis of the farming system and the agro-ecological and soil conditions in the area.

Beside the energy efficient systems of land, water, and pest management, every effort will be made to harness biogas, biomass, solar and wind energies to the maximum extent possible.

IIFS will produce and process value-added products from every part of the plant or animal. Post harvest technology assumes particular importance in the case of perishable commodities. IIFS will be based on both land-saving agriculture and grain-saving animal husbandry. Dryland farming, the reservoir of untapped production potential, will receive due attention. Soil conditions, water, agroclimatic feature, farmers' food security and market opportunities will determine the choice of crops.

Conclusion

If a man takes no thought of what is distant". Confucius

wrote once, "he will find sorrow near at hand."

Discerning the future, however, is a difficult task. There are too many unpredictables.

Yet, if the past reveals some glimpses of the future, Asian policy-makers and practitioners cannot rest on the laurels of the preceding three decades. Food surplus can dissipate overnight from a failed monsoon or a protracted drought. The year 1995 saw the steepest rise in the price of rice, corn and wheat than any other time since the 1970's. Self-sufficient Indonesia and the Philippines were dunned with exceptionally high import-bills. And most recently, the sceptre of the dust bowl of the thirties hung over the drought-stricken farmers in Kansas and Oklahoma, Texas and Colorado. Besides, shipping lanes to food warehouses in North America and Europe are long and vulnerable. Globally, stocks in granaries dwindled in 1995-96 to around 14 per cent of the trend-use much below the 18 per cent food security benchmark. Food stocks in Asia peaked to 133 million tonnes in 1992-93. For 1995, however, it is 8% less than the peak. Besides, a diminished resource-base must carry increasing loads from population growth.

Disparities between minuscule elites and the impoverished masses persist. They carry the potential for conflict.

In the decades ahead, the key to sustainable agriculture will revolve around the small farmers, their families and the increasing number of women-headed households. As the Human Development Report of 1996 notes: "An agricultural development strategy centered on small farmers rather than large simultaneously increases the social efficiency of resource use in agriculture and improves social equity through employment creation and the more equitable distribution that the small farms generate."

The question, however, is tension-filled because small-scale producers are increasingly aware that agricultural benefits, so far, have largely been creamed off by rural power-holders or articulate urban constituents. Existing social structures often block them off from participating in decisions on resource allocations.

As a consequence, their productive potentials have not been fully tapped. Nor would they strive to conserve the life-support systems that form the base for food for the future. As enclosures of "Common Property Resources" and their own knowledge-system go ahead in tandem, they have little stake in a system that locks them and their children into stultifying redistribution of poverty.

Annex I : Bio Village

ment

per unit from the re-

sources

(both biophysical and

human) by producing commodities to which the resources (both biophysical and human) by producing commodities to which the resources are capable of and have a market; and not solely to maximize the output of specific commodities and products such as paddy, sugarcane, milk, etc. per unit of resource for the productivity often irrespective whether the resources or not. Concurrently the design for resource management systems includes the productive use of unutilised/underutilised common proper resources.

Facilitating production

through support services and access to infrastructure; and

Fostering group action to bring about cost-effectiveness in the use of infrastructure and support services, to facilitate easy access to institutional credit, to ensure sustainable management and access to usufruct rights of the common property resources, and to promote the environment which facilitates total human development.

Mitigation of persisting rural poverty is addressed through technological empowerment and accessing the usufruct of the common property resources exclusively to the resource-poor.

Technological empowerment is an integrated process consisting of six steps: viz.

Identification of environment friendly, economically viable, socially acceptable technologies and interventions:

Adapting them to not only

to the biophysical conditions,

but also to the specific socio-economic conditions especially

tailoring the scale of operation to resource access and management skills; internalisation through training and skill impartation;

Translating technology

into production and employ-

ment generation activities by

accessing to capital;

Facilitating production

through support services and

access to infrastructure; and

Developing common

property resources concur-

rently ensuring that the re-

source poor are accessed to the

usufructs;

Promoting facilitating

institutions and infrastructure

in support of resource develop-

ment;

Improving the quality of

rural life by ensuring environ-

mental sanitation, drinking

water, primary health and

basic education;

Promoting income and

employment generating activi-

ties of the resource poor based

on locally available resources.

Establishing biocenters to test, adapt and demonstrate technologies and interventions, to provide information and some basic support services, and to serve as a focal point for group action for the participants;

Promoting group action

for all interventions full in-

volvement

of the participants at all

levels of planning and imple-

mentation;

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