

IAASTD

Global and regional assessment of the knowledge available and required to reduce poverty and hunger through sustainable agriculture, 2004 - 2007

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Further details at www.zs-l.de/iaastd and www.agassessment.org

Introduction

On September 3rd, after two years of preparatory meetings and regional consultations and five days of intensive negotiations of governments, UN agencies, international institutions and civil society at the UNEP headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya, an intergovernmental plenary of 50 states gave the go ahead to this "International Agricultural Assessment of Science and Technology for Development" (IAASTD).

How can we reduce hunger and poverty, improve rural livelihoods, and facilitate equitable, environmentally, socially and economically sustainable development through the generation, access to, and use of agricultural knowledge, science and technology?

This is the carefully worded paramount question of a unique fact finding exercise, to be conducted by hundreds of scientists and practical experts around the world and to include local communities and global institutions, governments, academia, companies and civil society. When the participating governments will finally adopt the answers this question two and a half years from now, thousands of pages and reports will have been reviewed and disputed in five regional assessments and one global assessment process. Each of them will be composed of a historical analysis (lessons learned), a set of plausible futures (driving factors 2004 – 2050) and an in depth analysis of the key social, economic and environmental issues of rural and agricultural development and their impacts. The results are to form an authoritative compendium of responses to some of the most burning questions of survival on this planet.

The IAASTD will be modelled on previous international intergovernmental assessments such as the *International Panel on Climate Change*, IPCC, the *Ozone Assessment Panels* and the *Millennium Development Goals*: Hundreds of experts will compile and review in different chapters the available knowledge and present it in a final report to be adopted by all governments after two rounds of public and scientific review.

However, for the first time in UN history, the process will be organised and overseen by a Bureau with equal representation from governments (30 countries with regional representation), civil society (22 from NGOs, producers, consumers and the private sector) and international institutions (8) to ensure full participation and ownership of all stakeholders. Special emphasis is placed on the inclusion of practical and traditional knowledge in addition to the conventional stock of scientific evidence and literature. Also, while focussing on knowledge, science and technology, the assessment will take into account the relevant socio-economic and political contextual and enabling conditions. Yet the IAASTD, will explicitly avoid direct interference with ongoing work in international treaties such as the *WTO*, the *Biosafety Protocol* and the *Codex Alimentarius* in order to guarantee an open process, not determined and restricted by the interests of the parties in these other fora.

The process is designed to be “bottom up” and “demand driven” in designing the right questions and identifying the real problems as they appear at the level of rural communities and national institutions instead of starting from the perspective of available technologies and scientific interests. It is also intended to be open to public input and to provide the compiled information in a publicly useful and comprehensible form and thus to contribute to capacity building of all participants and users of the assessment.

While the report will not be “policy prescriptive” it will try to clearly spell out the alternatives and their respective consequences and thus be “policy instructive”. Adopted by the governments and endorsed by the five UN Agencies (FAO, UNDP, UNEP, UNESCO, WHO) as well as the World Bank and the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) it will be an authoritative guidance and reference for their future agricultural, development and science and technology investments and policies, also setting benchmarks for national governments, the private sector and NGOs.

What can be expected?

1) A global Encyclopedia of agricultural solutions

The assessment, which will not conduct own primary research, can be expected to put together an exhaustive summary and aggregation of reports, scientific literature and practical knowledge on the state of knowledge and information available on agricultural development and its environmental, medical, social, cultural, and economic conditions. Made accessible to the public in an appropriate way and quality checked by two subsequent rounds of review, this compendium in itself will be a most valuable asset and reference for all stakeholders.

This stock of information will be complemented by the results of intensive discussions of experts on its relevance. It will also comprise a wealth of practical case studies and their review. How to raise to the challenge of including the diverse and essential knowledge in this sector, which is not documented in scientific or even written form, has been identified as a major task.

However, the accessibility of this encyclopaedia of agricultural knowledge and solutions will require additional co-operation with the media as the Assessment Budget itself only earmarks half a million US\$ for public communication so far.

2) Minima moralia

The IAASTD will be an unprecedented joint effort of virtually all stakeholders to identify common ground on desirable and achievable goals of sustainable agriculture, development of rural livelihoods and environmental protection. Without minimal basic agreements on resource management and agricultural sustainability goals it appears inconceivable to effectively address the big global challenges of climate change, loss of biodiversity, soil and water, hunger and poverty. This entails undisputable realities regarding global environmental and demographic conditions as well as basic human rights on food and self determination. The IAASTD could provide common language similar to the kinds the Rio Summit produced regarding the environment, sustainability and precaution. Food Sovereignty could be one of the common denominators.

3) A sufficiently fair battleground

The general setting of the process provides a good chance for NGOs, local communities, producer organisations and other stakeholders to make substantial contributions regarding the initial questions, the input of knowledge to be taken into account and the relevance of this information.

General political statements such as “GMOs are no solution to hunger in the world” or “WTO should stay out of agriculture” (or vice versa) can certainly not be expected. But there is broad room for ensuring that the perspective of the assessment will fully include those who are in need of better and

appropriate know-how and technology rather than just of companies and scientists looking for problems that could be solved with the technologies they can offer. A thorough discussion about what has actually worked and what has not worked over the past decades and a subsequent list of the most prevalent and urgent problems to be solved can be achieved. A hard and sufficiently fair competition between sustainable, adapted technologies and solutions with those technological approaches presented by industries and scientists looking for maximum input and market access seems feasible. There will be no need to resolve conflicts through minimum consensus as the report is open to present conflicting views, provided they are warranted by evidence and reason.

4) A benchmark for future investments in rural development and sustainable agriculture

The assessment has been initiated by the World Bank (2002) based on the institutions increasing recognition that a healthy agricultural sector is the indispensable prerequisite of what the Bank perceives as healthy economic growth and, that the vast majority of the poor and hungry live in rural areas and need to change their fate where they live instead of migrating to the deteriorating megacities of their regions. It is also the result of frustration shared by most so called donor countries and institutions on the meagre results of development aid over the past decades. Also, both developed and developing countries governments and agencies appear to be increasingly concerned about the impacts of the radical shift from public to private control of agricultural research and development, including the impact of intellectual property rights.

There appears to be a common sense that “new mechanisms” and partnerships are needed. The World Bank seems especially keen to draw some guidance on the future of the CGIAR system of International Agricultural research institutions, which it administers and funds at around US\$ 400 mio per annum. CGIARs, the instigators of the "Green Revolution" of the Sixties and Seventies, have come under heavy critique of NGOs, inter alia regarding their interactions with industry and their approach to patents, their use of GMOs and their distance from the farmers they pretend to serve.

This general feeling of uncertainty in many administrations and governments forms the basis of the IAASTDs potential impact. It is hard to imagine that the respective activities of the 5 UN agencies, the World Bank / IMF and GEF would not reflect the core messages of the Assessment. It is equally hard to imagine that especially countries relying on external support from these agencies and OECD countries could ignore the advice of the IAASTD.

5) A challenge of Knowledge, Science and Technology

A publicly accessible Assessment of the impacts of Science and Technology on Agriculture and Development, controlled by an intergovernmental plenary and conducted by a multi-stakeholder Bureau, is probably the strongest possible challenge to claims that S&T could improve the situation of the poor and hungry. Where is the proof, what is the evidence, what has been delivered to whom? Vested interests and ignorance, corruption and incompetence, prejudices and hubris should be afraid of such an exercise. Farmers, scientists, NGOs, extension specialists and civil servants with a genuine interest in moving things forward should be able to grasp the chances such a process provides.

Risks involved

There are no chances without risks. The many risks involved in the IAASTD may be broadly summarised as follows:

Lack of participation and usefulness

Probably the highest risk of all. The assessment will only be able to serve its goals and to make a difference, if all stakeholders and all available knowledge really contribute to the process. Given the many exercises in this field, which ended up as thick but unused volumes on the shelves of some

international experts and executives suspicion is abundant both in the NGO and expert community and the relevant government and corporate departments. It has been hard until now to convince some key players of the value of this exercise. The outreach of the preparatory process has been substantial, yet not comprehensive. It will be up to the very next steps and the credibility of the upcoming design exercise whether the IAASTD gains the momentum and trust necessary to fulfil its mission. And it will depend upon the commitment of thousands of stakeholders around the world whether good use will and can be made of it.

Lack of resources

The present budget of US\$ 10,7 Million, which are to be committed to a blind trust fund administered by the Secretariat and the Bureau of the IAASTD, covers costs of travel, meetings, translation, administration and public communication at a minimal level. It is agreed that additional funds should predominantly be devoted to increasing the outreach to local communities and regional partners. While communication within the scientific, the UN and intergovernmental, corporate and also some global NGO communities in English via the internet is well established and cost-efficient, going beyond these closed circuits of transnational communication and making sure the voices from communities and farmers, of traditional knowledge and experience are properly heard and understood will cost more resources than presently available. They are available only in local language, they may not fit the habits of scientific assessments and they are not used to express themselves to this level of global exchange. Equally returning the aggregated knowledge and assessment to these communities will require much more skills and resources and diverse means of communication than presenting a scientific and political report to a limited number of global decision makers.

Of course the IAASTD will not be able to reverse the global divide between the haves and have-nots of information and communication technology. But whether and to what extent it will pave ways to overcoming this inequality, which is at the core of many problems to be addressed in this context, will determine its success.

Abuse

The multi-stakeholder assembly meeting in Nairobi was of course packed and driven by the highly contradictory and competing agendas of the players in the room: Industry, governments, scientists and NGOs each have their own strategies how to make use of this exercise. Whoever participates in the IAASTD on the pretension of convincing or overwhelming the other stakeholders of the absolute truth of the own, particular perspective and truth will be - hopefully - disappointed in the end. Disagreements will prevail and the IAASTD will not overcome the strong and cruel antagonisms forming the basis of hunger, poverty and desolation on this planet. It may contribute to some better understanding and could be especially effective in improving conditions and identifying "islands of agreement" in areas where lack of action and advancement is not so much the direct result of dominance and intention but rather of neglect, misunderstanding and ignorance.

However, there is suspicion on all sides that the process could be abused to legitimise practices and goals of the "other side", could discredit present beliefs and strategies. Issues such as genetic engineering, patents, the value of market expansion, legitimate access to land and other resources, national versus international control are all highly contentious. They will all be battlegrounds regarding the evidence, its accepted relevance and last not least the language used (i.e. the underlying values) to express the findings.

To what extent the resulting assessment will be prone to abuse by any of the participating sides will largely depend on the levels of participation and available resources as well as the willingness of all players not to sacrifice the success of the venture for cheap gains of dominance. It will also depend on fair and intelligent ways to state diverging and contradicting views within the assessment.

What is needed for success?

The next steps in the process will be:

1) Securing the budget

While around US \$ 7 Mio appear sufficiently secure from the GEF, World Bank and a few committed donor countries the remainder of the baseline budget of US\$ 10,7 million still need to be committed from governments, foundations and civil society. Beyond the baseline budget another 2-3 Mio will be needed to make the local and regional impacts sufficiently significant.

2) Identification of two chairpersons

The majority of the members of the Bureau to oversee the process have been identified and this Bureau has been charged with finding and electing two chairpersons, who will preside over this Bureau and who will play an enormous role in representing the IAASTD to the public and the various stakeholders. A subcommittee of the Bureau is now preparing a shortlist of candidates. **Submissions should be made as soon as possible. The final decision is to be taken in February 2005.**

3) Identification of experts for the design teams

The next step of the assessment will be the convention of so called design teams to agree on the key questions and thus the outline of the global as well as the five regional assessments. As the questions determine answers, this is probably the most critical phase of the exercise.

Around 800 suggestions have been submitted so far to this end. However, at least from the NGO perspective critical "heavy weights" are still missing. A subcommittee of the Bureau has been established to select a shortlist for the 85 members of the global design team. The shortlists of the regional teams (45 members each) will be prepared by the Bureau members of the respective regions. The final selection is to be made by the Bureau (via email, not a special meeting) by the end of the year. **Nomination of design team members will still be possible until October 2004.**

4) Establishment of one international and five regional secretariats

The international secretariat presently exists of two persons at the World Bank in Washington (Robert Watson and his assistant Beverly McIntyre) and one person at the UNEP headquarter in Nairobi. Additional staff is expected from other UN agencies such as UNESCO, FAO and UNDP.

There is a relatively large sum allocated in the budget to this secretariat, reflecting partially the commitment of the World Bank and UN agencies to contribute in-kind rather in cash to the blind trust fund. The international secretariat will be open to service and staff additions in other locations than Washington and Nairobi. Further in-kind contributions will have to be approved and checked by the Bureau.

In addition comparatively marginal sums have been allocated to the establishment of regional secretariats, which are to co-ordinate the regional assessments. However, the quality, connectivity and character of the regional institutions will play a decisive role regarding the openness and inclusiveness of the process and also its immediate contribution to capacity-building in these regions.

In both cases substantial in-kind contributions of staff and facilities are expected from governments and agencies, but might also come from civil society organisations.

Suggestions and offers of appropriate institutions regarding the regional secretariats should be made immediately to the regional representatives in the Bureau.

5) Creation of a global communication process

So far the preparatory process for IAASTD had no significant publicity and also the decisions taken in Nairobi have not been communicated to the bigger communities involved in rural development and sustainable agriculture. Given the uncertainties surrounding the venture so far none of the participants engaged in any substantial media outreach or promotion efforts within their own community.

Now that it is clear the Assessment will take place and its outlines are sufficiently clear a lot will depend on whether the participating stakeholders will take up ownership and start a communication process within their respective communities to ensure the necessary quality and quantity of

participation. As with all political processes of this kind the level of interest of the broader public and media will eventually be the driving force of building sufficient momentum and interest also within the various levels from governments to NGOs. Joint efforts of the unlikely partners in this process may yield better results, especially at the offset. At the end of the day of course the success will depend upon the simple question: What difference can the IAASTD really make to the poor and hungry and will the efforts really result in improved rural development and livelihoods? There is hope, to be created and fulfilled.

References

Report of the First Plenary Meeting of the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), 30 August – 3 September 2004, Nairobi, Kenya, including a list of participants and all decisions taken
www.zs-l.de/iaastd/nairobi_minutes.html

An Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development, The Final Report of the Steering Committee for the Consultative Process on Agricultural Science and Technology, 12 August 2003 (in English, Chinese, Arabic, French, Russian, Spanish)
<http://www.agassessment.org/reports/index.html>

Draft Questions for Global Assessment Component of the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development, open for review, intended to guide the upcoming design meetings
www.zs-l.de/iaastd/draft_questions.html

Further details:

www.agassessment.org (official web-site)

www.zs-l.de/iaastd (provisional NGO web-forum on the IAASTD)

www.farmingsolutions.org (joint web-site of some of the NGOs on sustainable solutions)