HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE CONFERENCE ON
THE MULTIFUNCTIONAL CHARACTER OF
AGRICULTURE AND LAND
MONDAY, 13 SEPTEMBER 1999

Participants at the Conference on the Multifunctional Character of Agriculture and Land (MFCAL) met in Plenary on Monday for a general introduction and to discuss issues raised in the conference documents.

PLENARY
INTRODUCTION: Conference Chair Hans Alders said the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries had organized this conference to help prepare for CSD-8’s consideration of integrated land management and sustainable agriculture in April 2000. He said a successful conference will simplify decision-making on these issues at the CSD, FAO and WTO.

Chair Alders said the objective of the conference is to identify new policy options, practical methods and necessary enabling environments for MFCAL with particular emphasis on raising awareness. The principal tasks of the conference are to review progress toward realizing the Rio Principles and identify the main issues to be addressed in the future. Alders explained that the MFCAL phraseology is agreed language from the WFS and is concerned with the substance of agriculture and related land use, whereas the term “multifunctionality” has been tied to the issue of “non-trade-concerns,” as referred to in the Uruguay Round of GATT, and addresses more specifically the effects on trade. He stressed that the trade-related discussion on multifunctionality is within the WTO’s mandate while this conference will remain within the FAO’s mandate.

Louise Fresco, Director of the FAO Research, Extension and Training Division, outlined the method used in preparing for this conference, which was uniquely inductive, empirical and participatory and involved extensive peer review. She emphasized that the framework presented in the conference documents is analytical and scientific rather than normative and aims to facilitate effective analysis of agriculture’s multiple functions from local to international levels, thus helping identify where trade-offs are necessary and synergies exist. The main documents of the conference are the Issues Paper and the Stock-taking Paper.

Michel Griffon, Director of the Economics Policy and Markets Programme, International Center for Agricultural Research and Development, introduced the Issues Paper, which outlines concepts, issues and policies relevant to MFCAL. He explained that it identifies agriculture as having environmental, economic and social functions as well as a food security role. He stressed that these multiple functions will apply differently in individual cases, but added that the multifunctional approach can be beneficial in all cases. The Issues Paper concludes that the multifunctional character of land is less in evidence when natural resources are more abundant; is more common when there is greater institutional development; and can be revised to reflect these concerns, and did not support a summary of the conference to be incorporated in the FAO’s task force report.

DISCUSSION: Participant from Cuba highlighted the need to implement agricultural policies that address poverty and to provide access to appropriate technology and credit on reasonable terms to developing country farmers. A Guatemalan participant highlighted the value of a participatory approach involving all relevant stakeholders. A representative from the Philippines called for a clear definition of MFCAL and multifunctionality, and urged governments to avoid externalizing the costs associated with implementing MFCAL concepts through trade distortions. A South African delegate said MFCAL could contribute to a framework that could help identify trade-offs and synergies to assist policy making.

A UK representative recommended that the conference’s outcomes give particular emphasis to poverty, sustainable rural livelihoods, and issues of security of tenure, access and rights to land. A speaker from Ecuador emphasized developing countries’ difficulties in achieving sustainable agriculture due to dependence on foreign capital and technologies and indiscriminate subsidies and unfair practices in developed countries. A speaker from Uruguay objected to the suggestion that discussions at this conference be separated from those in other fora, as the concept of multifunctionalism discussed in the WTO and of MFCAL are not different. He called for reforms to move toward free market prices and then to prices that reflect the full costs of production. He said when governmental policies distort international prices, they negatively affect decisions about investment, production methods, international trade and consumption patterns. He advocated recommending policies that are decoupled from production and exports and rejecting export subsidies. He suggested that the conference’s technical documents be revised to reflect these concerns, and did not support a summary report produced by FAO after the conference as the official conference document.
A representative of the International Union of Food and Agricultural Organizations called for recognition of the important role of agricultural food workers in sustainable agriculture, and said MFCA should refer to agricultural workers and their trade unions as a distinct category, in line with agreed language in Chapter 29 of Agenda 21. A speaker from the Popular Coalition to Eradicate Hunger and Poverty called for urgent action to: redress the inequitable distribution of wealth and insufficient participation of the poor; reform macroeconomic policies that adversely affect the poor; and overcome barriers preventing land tenure reform. A representative for Global Forum for Sustainable Nutrition and Food Security called for implementation of policies to favor small farms and sustainable food systems and reduced export subsidies and protectionism in developed countries. A Via Campesina representative stressed the need to examine the negative impacts of the privatization of seeds, grain and water and the use of genetically modified organisms. He emphasized that MFCA should not be an excuse to maintain destructive environmental and agrarian policies and low-cost pricing of agricultural goods.

The representative of Rural Advancement Foundation International suggested that a useful outcome would recognize the causes of diminished multifunctionality and could include recommendations to develop an action plan that integrates all functions. He warned against the diversion of resources into biotechnology at the expense of R&D of more accessible technologies for organic agriculture. He called for a redefinition of the CSD of “terminator technologies,” which deny farmers their rights and destroy local environments and livelihoods.

A Dutch delegate said the conference’s main challenge is to facilitate policy options and practical approaches as well as enable the realization of previously agreed goals and targets. He called for innovative ways to integrate public, private and cooperative initiatives. An FAO representative responded to questions regarding conference documents, stating that the conference summary report would set out the Chair’s conclusions, which will summarize the work of the conference, reflect the views expressed and be clearly identified as an FAO report.

**THINGS TO LOOK FOR TODAY**

**PLENARY:** Participants will meet in Plenary from 9:00-10:00 am in the Expo Foyer to hear presentations of three case studies relevant to MFCA. A possible structure and key elements for the conference outcome will be presented in Plenary at 5:30 pm.

**REGIONAL GROUP MEETINGS:** Participants will meet in five regional groups to discuss case studies, processes and instruments relevant to MFCA from 10:30 am-12:30 pm and from 2:00-5:00 pm.