



**HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE CONFERENCE ON
THE MULTIFUNCTIONAL CHARACTER OF
AGRICULTURE AND LAND
TUESDAY, 14 SEPTEMBER 1999**

Participants at the Conference on the Multifunctional Character of Agriculture and Land (MFCAL) met in Plenary on Tuesday morning to hear presentations on three case studies. They then divided into five regional groups to consider the MFCAL concept. The Plenary reconvened in the afternoon to discuss documents introduced by the Chair on procedural issues and proposed conference outcomes.

CASE STUDIES

Des McGarry presented a case study on land management for Australian cotton. He explained that greater understanding of the fragile nature of soils in the cotton-growing areas led to widespread adoption of a cropping system which is less intensive and includes crop rotation in existing beds. This system was part of a "multiple output system" that resulted in increased awareness by farmers of their soil resources, greater crop diversity, increased crop yields, environmental benefits and cost efficiencies. The system was farmer-driven and assisted by scientifically-based research and training. It demonstrated that mechanization is not a panacea and that an understanding of soils and other physical factors is essential.

Tan Gherrat and Luis Alvarez Welchez presented a case study from Lempira Sur, Honduras. They described the area in southwestern Honduras as facing problems caused by unsustainable migratory agriculture and extensive cattle grazing; malnutrition, drought, low productivity and natural resource deterioration were widespread. A demand-driven and participatory strategy was developed to improve productivity and better manage resources by bringing appropriate technology, micro-credit and a system of local financing to the area. A system based on natural regeneration of trees was implemented. As a result of these activities, profits, wages and productivity have increased; the area now has a food supply surplus; forest burning has been brought under control; erosion has decreased; and the local population is less dependent on outside factors and thus more confident in its development prospects.

Zana Sanogo presented the third case study. He described Mali's Extension Programme and how it has responded to diverse conditions and farming practices throughout the country. The Programme has involved extensive partnerships between government, civil society, researchers, educators and farmers and a focus on the integration of women. The overall objectives include poverty reduction, enhanced incomes, and extension of efficiency and support for farmers' organizations. The Programme has addressed crop yields, fertilizer use, environmental protection, training and partnerships employing decentralized approaches.

REGIONAL GROUPS

Following the case study presentations, participants met in five regional groups in morning and afternoon sessions to continue discussion of the MFCAL approach and hear presentations of additional case studies.

AFRICA: This regional group was chaired by J.H. Owusu-Acheampong (Ghana) and Timothy Kirway (Tanzania). The group agreed that MFCAL is only useful if it can contribute to achieving

food security. Many participants said the multifunctional nature of agriculture in Africa is not a new concept, but it can help to identify practical actions to implement SARD. Other important issues identified by the group included: the need for stakeholder involvement in planning and development; better information exchange; free trade; enabling policies; and more investment.

Two case studies were presented, on farmer-scientist research relationships for integrated aquaculture in Malawi and on multiple sustainable land use in the Netherlands. During the subsequent exchange of lessons learned and identification of processes and instruments needed for SARD, participants reiterated the importance of stakeholder involvement, particularly of farmers, "middle men" and NGOs with direct links to grassroots communities, in planning, decision-making and implementation. Participants highlighted the need for platforms for discussion and support at the international level, and expressed hope that this conference would formulate practical recommendations and that international fora could help to translate their recommendations into actions.

ASIA-PACIFIC: This group, co-chaired by Vince McBride (New Zealand) and Nelson P. Hutabarat (Indonesia), explored the question of whether the concept of multifunctionality represents progress beyond the SARD approach. It was observed that the concept is not new, but the policy context, now characterized by globalization, trade liberalization and national policy reform, has changed. The MFCAL concept can thus be useful in generating awareness and catalyzing governmental action and donor interest. Participants stressed the need to focus on practical ways to use the MFCAL concept to develop new policies and instruments to foster sustainable agriculture. The group noted that efforts to achieve food security often result in environmental degradation, and the MFCAL approach could facilitate a transition from the need to resort to such tradeoffs to forging synergies, positive linkages and win-win situations. The need for flexibility in implementing MFCAL was underscored, given countries' differing conditions and levels of development.

Participants heard presentations of two case studies -- a community-based resource management project to enhance farmers' capacities for agrarian reform and poverty alleviation in the Philippines, and a collaborative economic diversification and sustainable forest management project in the Toros Mountains of Turkey. They shared experiences and lessons learned from other projects in the region, and identified a number of processes, instruments and enabling factors to facilitate successful sustainable agriculture projects. These included land tenure security and institution building, including stakeholder mobilization and participation, particularly of women, and creation of farmers' groups and associations. The group discussed the need to ensure the sustainability of projects by, *inter alia*: fostering a sense of ownership by the community; ensuring self-financing once external funding expires; having public and private sector support, international financing and non-trade distorting policies; developing and employing appropriate technology and local knowledge; incorporating health and environmental costs into project cost-benefit analyses; providing support for marketing for and mechanization of small farms; incorporating training, education and extension; and enacting appropriate national policies to support food security, resource conservation and rural development.

EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA: This group, co-chaired by Eli Reistad (Norway) and Raphael Briedenbach (Germany), first examined the utility and potential implications of the MFCAL concept. Although the group did not reach a consensus on the implications of the concept, there was agreement that the term can offer a new perspective to describe the multiple functions of agriculture and land. Discussion centered on a few key issues, including: the need to consider off-farm activity in the contemporary rural economy; the implications of global trade and markets for small farmers; valuation of non-production aspects of agriculture; and how to evaluate and address the costs to farmers and society of other dimensions of rural activity, such as maintenance of landscapes and other amenities.

Two case studies, from Haiti and the US, offered concrete examples of initiatives in rural areas in widely divergent circumstances. In Haiti, local community organizations initiated changes in local practices to regenerate soils and the watershed while introducing additional sources of protein with fish culture. In the US case, a non-profit institution in West Virginia is using education of local youth to maintain cultural traditions and promote sustainable practices. Participants then concentrated discussions on identifying tools to optimize sustainability and measure the viability of the multiple functions of agriculture. They emphasized the importance of building partnerships and organizational capacities in rural areas, maximizing the use of public and private resources, and facilitating access to credit and mechanisms for financial security. The group agreed that the concept of MFCAL must be explored further to determine what additional benefit it adds to the current understanding of SARD.

LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: This regional group's discussions were chaired by Motee Ramsaran (Trinidad and Tobago) and Eduardo Marin (Nicaragua). Some participants said the MFCAL is a statement of the obvious and that it is an inherent element of sustainable agriculture. Many supported the view that the conference background papers are "vague" and that MFCAL should not replace the necessary focus on Agenda 21 implementation. Some linked multifunctionality to criticism of developed country subsidies, unfair terms of trade and dumping, with their implications for sustainable development and the food security of developing country producers. Others proposed that the opportunity for a region-specific debate should not be missed. The discussants highlighted: poverty, agricultural reform and land tenure issues; food security; education and training needs; local authorities' role in land planning; spending on food security versus arms spending; debt; payment to rural communities for ecological services; and the WTO, trade liberalization and discriminatory trade practices.

Two case studies were presented, on an ecological agriculture demonstration county in China and on autonomous development of Indian communities in Mexico. Participants agreed that: multifunctionality is contained in the concept of sustainable agriculture; there should be an examination of the requirements for the application of sustainable agriculture; subsidies impact the environment and international pricing; environmental services are provided by agricultural workers; education, organizations and technical innovations for communities should be supported; and Agenda 21 should be fully implemented.

NEAR EAST: Saad Nassar (Egypt), Chair of the Near East group, introduced key issues relating to the MFCAL concept, including the need to establish what the concept means and how and where it can contribute to sustainable agriculture and land use. Participants did not agree on the value of MFCAL, with some questioning whether it added anything new or useful. There was consensus that the concept requires further clarification. Participants debated whether MFCAL is universally applicable, with some expressing particular interest in whether it can be used in developing policies and programmes for arid and semi-arid regions. The need to achieve food security and target poverty were emphasized. On trade and the environment, participants said environmental considerations should not be used as a form of disguised protectionism by acting as trade barriers that obstruct developing countries' exports.

Participants stressed the need for: access to appropriate technology as well as development and use of local knowledge and traditional systems and practices; investment in relevant research; and development of commercial marketing techniques and systems for farmers in developing countries. Participants also heard and discussed case studies on France's new legislation highlighting the multifunctional character of agriculture and a project in Iran relating to integrated water management and flood utilization.

CONSIDERATION OF CHAIR'S DOCUMENTS

In response to requests for clarification on conference procedure and proposed outcomes, Chair Alders introduced three documents, which: outline the conference process and reporting procedure; propose amendments to the conference's remaining agenda; and set out possible key elements of the forthcoming Chair's report on the conference. He said the final outcome of the conference will be a Chair's report, which will reflect participants' ideas and views. In addition, he noted that FAO will provide an information note to the FAO Council and Conference in November 1999 to brief them on this meeting, with the Chair's report attached as an annex. The FAO will also produce its own technical report by early 2000 for distribution to interested parties. The Dutch Government plans to present the Chair's report in a number of fora, including CSD-8 in April 2000.

On procedural matters, Chair Alders proposed amending the conference agenda for the final two days of the conference in order to respond to several delegates' request for more Plenary time to discuss the Chair's report. He said this report will be made available in time for Thursday's Plenary discussion. Several delegates said the status of the Chair's report on the conference should be made very clear, so that it would not go forward to other fora as a consensus paper if this conference does not adopt it. Delegates then agreed to the Chair's suggestion to amend the remaining agenda so as to increase the time available to discuss the Chair's report.

Chair Alders introduced his third document outlining key elements for his report. He said the document reflected the two views at the conference on MFCAL and did not yet incorporate the regional discussions. An Argentinean participant, supported by an Australian delegate, expressed surprise at the absence of references to "massive" subsidies by developed countries. He said he was not prepared to endorse the vague concept of MFCAL, which brings no clear value-added to Agenda 21. Chair Alders explained that he was attempting to describe the report's structure. He said it would be possible to reference CSD text on implementing the Uruguay Round and on agriculture but did not know if this conference was the proper forum to address upcoming meetings in other fora. A representative from Chile said elements in the Chair's outline did not reflect the various positions. A participant from New Zealand, supported by an Australian, also challenged the accuracy of representations of his views on MFCAL. He said the correct assessment is that no consensus exists on the value of MFCAL and stated that case studies demonstrate that sustainable agriculture is being delivered without MFCAL. The Australian representative questioned the Chair's suggestion that the removal of subsidies is necessarily linked to WTO negotiations. The Chair said he would conduct informal consultations.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR

WEDNESDAY: Participants will spend the day on field excursions visiting interesting project sites in the region.

THURSDAY: Participants will meet in morning, afternoon and evening Plenary sessions in the Expo Foyer to hear a recapitulation of discussions on Tuesday and Wednesday, and to discuss the conference outcomes.

FAO/NL VIRTUAL MAASTRICHT CONFERENCE: A virtual conference is taking place on the WebForum section of the conference web site at <http://www.fao.org/mfcal>. Views, ideas and insights on the daily reports of the conference are welcome. These inputs are being summarized and shared with conference participants in Maastricht. Please direct messages to agr99-Conference@fao.org.