

Blogging from the food security conference

It's down 2 earth

The global 'It's Down 2 Earth' conference on agriculture, food security and climate change was held in The Hague, the Netherlands, from 31 October to 5 November 2010. *The Broker* hosted an online discussion blog where participants agreed that agriculture and food security must be placed at the heart of sustainable development and poverty eradication efforts.

The world is facing a huge challenge. How are we going to feed nine billion people in 2050, in the wake of climate change, economic and financial crises, and the relentless competition for natural resources? This challenge seems even further away keeping in mind that we are unlikely to meet the Millennium Development Goal of halving the number of people living in extreme poverty and hunger by 2015.

The contributions to *The Broker's* conference blog confirm these fears. 'Our global hut is leaking badly,' writes Yemi Akinbamijo, head of the Agriculture and Food Security Division of the African Union Commission. 'And fixing the roof or mopping the floor is not the sole responsibility of those sleeping in the wet patch. With the given scenario confronting humanity, this is the time for a concerted effort to fix the hole in the roof!'

Africa is the only continent failing to produce enough food to meet its growing population's consumption needs. Climate change is also threatening this continent more than any other. Rising temperatures and changing rainfall patterns will have a devastating impact on the livelihoods of its population, 80% of whom – some 500 million people south of the Sahara – depend on farming to support and feed their families. Two notions in particular stood out in the online discussion blog. First, to fix the roof, we should focus on the smallholder farmer, and second, we need to approach food security and climate change in a holistic manner.

Synergy

Agricultural science, including research on livelihoods and food security, has existed in isolation from climate research in recent decades. There were strong calls at the conference to reverse this trend. Agricultural policy should be at the heart of the international climate change agenda. Similarly,

climate, biodiversity and natural resource policies should be incorporated into the food security and agricultural agendas. The notion that agriculture can play a key role in solving the interrelated problems of food security and climate change is becoming widely accepted in international debates.

Scientists and practitioners may no longer need persuading when it comes to using a holistic approach to these challenges, but policy makers unfortunately do. 'Too often policy makers are confronted with a false choice between feeding their population and protecting the environment, without realizing there are ways to do both,' says Elwyn Grainger-Jones from the International Fund for Agricultural Development.

'Climate-smart and food-secure agricultural policies and production systems certainly need to be coordinated with climate policies,' says Hans Opschoor, professor of sustainable development economics at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. This will prevent solutions in one domain (say, biofuels) from having undesirable trade-offs in others (for example, crowding out food production). He is therefore disappointed that the conference background papers scarcely mentioned the crucial issue of policy coherence.

The agricultural community has only recently become active, according to Wendy Mann of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, in the discussions and negotiations of international climate change policies that can profoundly impact the sector. Mechanisms that encourage more dialogue between policy makers are sorely needed. A number of ideas on how to create or enhance these mechanisms were raised during the conference. They included focusing on value chains by using systems-based rather than commodity- or sector-based approaches, as Yemi Akinbamijo proposes.

Triple win?

No one can escape the effects of climate change. To quote Akinbamijo's metaphor, we have two options:

- Keep mopping the floor and soon, trusting on human



Alamy / Andrew McConnell

ingenuity, it should be possible to sleep with one eye [shut] and mop the floor with the other eye open (adaptation).

- Rise to the occasion, fix the hole in the roof, or take a more radical step and replace the roof outright (mitigation)

No matter which option is chosen, it is imperative, as Grainger-Jones says, that small-scale producers are central to the discussion and are viewed as viable business people, not victims of insecurity.

There are about 500 million smallholder farms worldwide feeding almost one-third of humanity. Andrew Steer, special envoy for climate change at the World Bank, believes that there is a potential 'triple win' situation. 'Farmers are under the greatest threat from climate change, but they could also play a major role in addressing it.'

Agriculture may currently account for nearly 15% of global carbon emissions, but agriculture can also contribute to absorbing carbon in the soil. Steer argues that smart interventions can provide a triple win: increase yields (poverty reduction and food security), make crops more resilient to extreme weather conditions such as droughts (adaptation) and make the farm a solution to the climate change problem rather than a part of the problem by sequestering carbon in the soil (mitigation).

Several countries have proved it can be done. One example is the famous Loess Plateau in China, where a desolate, dry area has been transformed into a green oasis. Kenya is also piloting triple-win investments. Smallholder farmers in the west of the country are receiving cash payments for new farming techniques that will store more carbon in the soil and simultaneously increase soil fertility.

African civil society representatives, however, are sceptical about the ease with which this strategy is being presented. They recognize the potential contribution of African smallholders to reducing global warming. But previous experiences do not bode well for them, says Habtemariam Abate of the Ethiopian Civil Society Network on Climate Change.

In India, China and Brazil, the implementation of Clean Development Mechanisms was marred by fraudulent multinational companies. African smallholders do not have the capacity to compete with these multinationals. Moreover, Abate says there is the question of scale to consider as well. The fragmented holdings of African farmers, however rich their potential to lock atmospheric CO₂ into the soil may be, are 'unattractive to the so-called carbon traders, who look for a minimum of 3000 ha'. This 'may lead to mass evictions and the displacement of smallholders, risking the livelihoods of millions'.

A contested roadmap

The conference produced a 'roadmap for action' with key recommendations discussed at the ministerial roundtables. Delegations from sixty countries participated, including the United States, China and Mexico. Their advice included the following:

- Recognize agriculture as a sector that can address climate change issues
- Give local farmers access to knowledge and technology
- Create an innovative financing structure
- Increase agricultural productivity
- Focus on private investments

There were concerns, since the roadmap is a 'non-negotiated document' without a UN mandate, that it would be back to business as usual as soon as the conference ended. Over a hundred civil society organizations signed a joint statement, rejecting the roadmap. 'The Hague conference need not reinvent the wheel,' it reads. 'The debate during the conference was largely about the rather perverse idea that developing countries should advance their agriculture in order to compensate the greenhouse gas emissions of developed countries. In doing so, the conference diverted the world's attention away from food insecurity, unsustainable commodity chains and climate change hazards for producers in developing countries.'

Agricultural consultant Chris Geerling added that the right issues are being raised, 'but always in a top-down context, as if grand solutions are about to descend on people'. The reality is, however, 'that institutional factors determine what goes right or wrong'. The problem is not short- and medium-term food production, it is giving the bottom billion access to it (see the special report in this issue of *The Broker*). 'The Unilevers, Monsanto and CGIAR institutes are skilled at looking after themselves, but where do the bottom billion fit into this picture?' ■

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