Protecting our most precious resource

It is estimated that 24 billion tons of fertile arable land world-wide is lost through erosion each year. At the same time, urbanisation is causing the extent of arable land across the world, which accounts for a mere twelve percent of the Earth’s surface, to further decrease. But without fertile soil, neither world hunger nor climate change can be successfully combated. This is precisely the context that the First Global Soil Week sought to draw attention to. It was organised by the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies and held in Berlin/Germany in co-operation with several German institutions and UN organisations from the 18th to the 22nd November 2012.

Multifunctional, non-renewable, globally in danger

The event brought together around 400 representatives of science, politics and civil society to discuss the threat to the precious resource of soil and adopt an agenda for action towards sustainable land use. The topics discussed ranged from soil contamination, soil degradation and urbanisation challenges through payments for ecosystem services and markets for soil organic carbon to natural resource governance and global soil policy.

Statistically, 0.22 hectares of land is available to every human being now-adays; in 1950, it was 0.5 hectares. Rainer Horn, President-Elect of the International Union of Soil Sciences (IUSS), pointed to the multitude of crucial functions that soils performed. Not only did they provide the basis of the production of food and other biomass, but they were also crucial to environmental interactions such as the storage, filtering and transformation of substances from water and the atmosphere (e.g. in the carbon cycle). Soils constituted a biological habitat and a gene pool as well as a source of raw material, and they were used in the construction of buildings and roads, not to mention their role as cultural heritage. It was all the more worrying that soil represented a resource that was virtually non-renewable, for it took 500 years for a 2.5 cm. layer of topsoil to form on arable land.

In the conference outcome paper, the participants drew attention to the fact that processes such as erosion, loss of soil organic matter or land and soil loss from urban expansion were affecting both the North and the South. Although soils were locally owned and managed, a global approach to soil protection was needed. Sustainable land management practices were of the utmost importance in achieving a land and soil degradation-neutral world. In his video message, Olivier de Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, stressed the role of small-scale farmers in this context. However, crucial obstacles were facing the promotion of smallholders: insufficient support on the part of public policies, one-sided promotion of export-oriented agriculture, a lack of security of tenure, not enough funding for agricultural research and general prejudices against small-scale farming. Many governments were viewing the future solely in terms of large-scale industrial farming while ignoring the advantages offered by smallholder production for food security and the conservation of precious resources.

Of investments and responsibility

In Africa, 90 per cent of the food consumed in the continent was being produced by 33 million smallholders, reported Madiodio Niasse, Director of the International Land Coalition Secretariat. The sector was characterised not only by severe land degradation, poverty and hunger, and a huge generation gap, but also by an enormous investment gap. Only seven per cent of Africa’s arable land was under irrigation (20 per cent globally), while on average, African governments were spending 20 US dollars per rural inhabitant and per year. No wonder that investors
were, as a rule, welcomed with open arms. However, estimates of global large-scale land deals varied considerably. While the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI, 2009) was reckoning with a total of 25 million hectares world-wide, the online database Land Matrix stated an area of 50 to 80 million hectares for the past five years.

However, what was certain was that Africa accounted for 60 to 70 per cent of the land deals, with the investors having their eye on the fertile soils. Niasse noted that a number of common patterns were now becoming apparent among these deals. The countries whose land was being bought up were above all those under poor governance, with deals being secretly negotiated, only a small proportion of land developed, and deals often having adverse impacts on the people and the environment. “The deals pose a risk to food security in the targeted countries,” Niasse maintained. A major share of the land was being used for growing non-food crops, and if food was grown, then this happened above all with a view to exporting to the investor countries. Excessive water withdrawal presented a problem, too. So what could these countries do? First and foremost, Niasse recommended, they could formulate national food security strategies and step up their own investments. If foreign investments were needed, those could be given priority that would not result in any land conversion and were based on exchange agreements.

Pro-poor natural resource governance – easier said than done

Rights-based approaches are coming more and more to the fore in the debate on natural resource governance and the pro-poor effects sought in this context. However, practical implementation presents a number of obstacles. This starts with the redistribution of land also always resulting in changes within a country’s social relationships, according to Saturnino Borras of the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague, Netherlands. Borras maintained that a great gulf frequently existed between the desired policy and unexpected outcomes. One example here was the land reforms in the Philippines in the 1980s. Although they had fulfilled their objective of being pro-poor, they had resulted in only men and Christians being considered in the allocation of land, while women and Moslems were left out. Before the land reforms, women had formed a third of the rural labour force, while afterwards, they played hardly any role at all. Studies on land reforms in Latin America and the Caribbean had revealed that almost all measures had been anti-women.

In addition to the issue of recognising rights, examples from India and Brazil were used to discuss implementation problems: different interpretation of land reform, insufficient co-ordination or conflicts of jurisdiction between authorities involved, contradictory laws, unequal power relations between individual groups, and the question of how to handle community rights. The existence of legal frameworks will be of no use if they are not enforced, as land tenure policy in Mozambique und Cambodia has shown. Moreover, translating rights into practice in society is a tedious process.

A difficult situation could arise for the social movements involved that are campaigning for the rights of marginalised sections of the population. If they ultimately fail to help their groups claim their right to land, they will lose their credibility. And last but not least, it is not easy to get local elites to push for changes in property relations. People don’t usually like to resign privileges.

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Putting people first

The 7th European Development Days, held in Brussels/Belgium, pursued three objectives: discuss how best to empower farmers and scale up agricultural production in development countries in order to reach food security, evaluate new approaches to public-private collaboration, and show ways so that all people can participate in and benefit from wealth and job creation.

Resilience needs human safety nets

The issue of resilience formed a thread followed by a large number of the events. The participants of the Panel “A more effective partnership for a more effective world” agreed that humanitarian and development teams had to work more closely together. The aim had to be to ensure that development gains were not lost to damage from natural disasters and that relief efforts had long-term strategies for development built into them. In this context, Kristalina Georgieva, European Commissioner for International Cooperation, Humanitarian And Crisis Response, criticised that today, just two per cent of development assistance was allocated to disaster preparedness and response, and out of this, only 3.6 per cent benefited preparedness, and the rest response/rehabilitation. Why should this be the case? “Preparedness is not an attractive field of action,” Georgieva commented.

Caroline Anstey, Managing Director of the World Bank Group, noted a further imbalance: Every third US dollar spent in the context of development co-operation went lost because it was invested in areas that had already been established but were then destroyed, for example through natural disasters. “We have been holding a large number of international meetings addressing global financial safety nets since 2008. But what we need is human safety nets,” Anstey maintained, and she reminded participants that across the world, 56 per cent of countries had weak social protection systems. Anstey stressed the importance of reliable data in this context, for “otherwise, we don’t know where the money is supposed to go”. For example, just under half of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa had not conducted any household surveys for ten years.

Many actors, one goal: zero hunger

It is a known fact that how a child is nourished from its conception to its second birthday sets the course for its physical and mental development potential. But one in four children is stunted in its development because of under-nutrition, while one-third of all child deaths around the world are related to malnutrition. Pervasive, long-term under-nutrition is destroying the potential of millions of children, thus slowly eroding the foundations of the global economy. Despite this insight, policy-makers are still hesitating to integrate nutrition into health, agriculture and food security initiatives. Why this should be the case and how this could be counteracted was discussed at the high-level panel titled “Resilience: the nutrition dimension”.

“It is unbearable that so many children are dying from malnutrition. The time to act is yesterday, not tomorrow,” Francesca Mosca of the Directorate-General for Development and Cooperation der European Commission said in her introductory note. This was why the EU was involved in the SUN (Scaling-Up Nutrition) initiative launched in 2010. So far, more than 30 had committed themselves in the campaign to...
significanty reduce child under-nutrition in their countries. The problem here was clearly not a lack or shortage of food, the panelists unanimously stressed. Also, proven, low-cost remedies and solutions to undernourishment were available. What was needed was more leadership and more political will to adopt nutrition policies and take effective action.

“If we can bring nutrition to the forefront, we know that it will have a huge return of investment,” said Paulus Verschuren of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. All the pieces of solution were there. They simply had to be put together and adapted to the local needs. On the one hand, greater and better sustainable production in the field was important; on the other, food had to be available, affordable and accessible for consumers. Here, income and knowledge were equally important.

However, even the best programmes will be of no use if the social conditions are not taken into consideration. This was stressed by Indu Capoor, Director of the Indian Centre for Health Education, Training and Nutrition Awareness. If girls continued to get married at an early age, the problem of low wage births would not be remedied; if women continued to be illiterate, they would not be in a position to feed their children sufficiently. If no attention was given to who was participating in fortification programmes, only the men would benefit from them in patriarchal societies. In her opinion, the focus should therefore be on educating and training girls and mothers; in addition, a sustainable nutrition strategy ought to be developed which was based on local indigenous markets. To achieve this, nutrition had to attain the same status as agriculture, so that farmers would not only be interested in growing cash crops but realise that food crops could be worthwhile, too. Multisectoral action was required to address the highly complex topic of nutrition, Capoor stressed. But this meant that achieving success would be especially difficult, for most donors wished to work bilaterally and sought fast results.

No growth without social protection

In his final address, EU Development Commissioner Andris Piebalgs reminded the participants of Rio+20 and the post-2015 debate, in which sustainability assumes a central position. But according to the EU Commissioner, sustainability was just one half of the growth equation that the EU had established with its Agenda for Change; the other half of that equation was inclusiveness. In addition to poverty eradication, human dignity, decent work and responsible resource management, social protection had to be at the core of the post-2015 development framework as well. Nevertheless, the international community always ought to bear in mind what their work was really about: people-centred development.

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Small farmers – big business?

How can smallholders and producers be integrated into local, regional and global value-added chains? What are the opportunities and challenges that cooperation among smallholders and local producers with internationally organised trade chains poses? These questions were at the centre of the High-Level Panel “Small farmers – big business?” at the European Development Days 2012 in Brussels on the 17th October, which was organised by the Practitioners’ Network for European Development Cooperation, the Europe-Africa-Caribbean-Pacific Liaison Committee COLEACP, SNV Netherlands Development Organisation, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO).

Kandeh K. Yumkella, Director-General of UNIDO, stressed the importance of sustainable and fair value-added chains for smallholders. Mohamed Ibn Chambas, Secretary-General of the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Group of States, noted that only a few years before, private companies had shown no interest in sustainable rural development. Nowadays, this was different. Nevertheless, he criticised the decline in investment in the agricultural sector, particularly in agricultural research and innovation. The private sector had to be involved as a development partner, for this was the only way in which the global goals of food security and poverty reduction could be achieved.

Apollo Owuor of Kenya Horticultural Exporters and Rashid Ally Mamu of Nyemo Investment Company, Tanzania, explained how they were supporting smallholders in fulfilling the rising quality standards in international as well as local markets. It was not only business here and now that counted in this context. Sustainably securing the value-added chain required the social responsibility of entrepreneurs, who had to take the living conditions of smallholder families and farm labourers into consideration in their business decisions.

Stephanie Barrientos, Director of the research programme “Capturing the Gains”, also funded by the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID), noted that a value-added chain was only as strong as its weakest link. “If the smallholders are not benefiting from it, the chain will break,” she maintained. Thus it was important to avoid women becoming “cheap” labourers, as was the case in the flower trade. Hans-Jürgen Matern, Director of the Metro AG’s Sustainability Department, explained his company’s strategy. Smallholders were not regarded as mere suppliers but as consumers at the same time, and for a company like Metro AG, both sides were important. This was why the company was supporting smallholders in gaining access to markets. In addition, smallholders ought to have access to insurance and other financing options, Matern said.

Smallholders are always producing at a high risk. Insurance against inclement weather or natural disasters can prevent smallholders from dropping out of the value-added chain. Michael Anthony of Allianz SE explained that the use of satellite and radar technology was a promising development. A new system to be introduced in 2013 was going to enable insurance companies to identify the extent of damage immediately after the occurrence of a natural disaster. In this manner, farmers with a harvest insurance could be compensated for losses more quickly. Faster loss payment enabled faster reconstruction, which in turn lowered production losses, resulting in more secure income.

Kristian Schmidt, Director of the Human Development Department of the DG Development and Cooperation/ EuropeAid, emphasised that the European Commission intended to support more transparency in trading land title rights, e.g. by providing information on markets and prices, so that smallholders were not disadvantaged here. At the same time, smallholders and producers ought to opt for selling their produce not only in the European market, but also, increasingly in local markets. Schmidt described the Commission’s approaches in the area of rural development: 1) The European Commission had for a long time neglected agriculture as a development objective and so had many African countries. Now the focus on agriculture was back. 2) Private sector engagement was also being fostered now. Europe would try to facilitate stronger cooperation with Africa. 3) There was a need to involve farmers’