



GREEN PERSPECTIVES

Views from NGOs, Farmers and Communities

END HUNGER • ADVANCE SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE • EMPOWER RURAL COMMUNITIES

Judgment from Johannesburg: “Business as Usual is Not an Option”

On April 7, 2008, as the world’s newspapers carried headlines about falling grain stockpiles, soaring prices and food riots, representatives from 61 nations gathered in Johannesburg, South Africa to hammer out a plan to address the underlying problems of the global food system and identify urgently needed solutions.

The International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) addressed the central question: *What must we do differently to overcome persistent poverty and hunger, achieve equitable and sustainable development and sustain productive and resilient farming in the face of environmental crises?*

Sponsored by United Nations institutions (including the FAO), WHO, World Bank and others, the IAASTD represents four years’ work by more than 400 scientists and development experts who examined the intertwined problems of global agriculture, hunger, poverty, power and influence. Their findings sent shockwaves through the conventional agriculture establishment.

Call for global agricultural revolution

“Business as usual is not an option,” declared IAASTD Director Robert Watson, echoing the Assessment’s call for a radical transformation of the world’s food and farming systems. The final report—endorsed by 57 governments and released worldwide on April 15—concluded that industrial agriculture has degraded the natural resource base on which human survival depends and now threatens water, energy and climate security. The report warns that continued reliance on simplistic technological fixes—including transgenic crops—will not reduce persistent hunger and poverty and could exacerbate environmental problems and worsen social inequity. It also critiqued transnational agribusiness influence over public policy and the unfair global trade policies that have

left more than half of the world’s population malnourished.

Fortunately, the IAASTD affirmed, we have options. By revising policies to strengthen the small-scale farm sector, increasing investments in agroecological farming and supporting multidisciplinary inquiry, we can establish more socially and ecologically resilient systems while

Seven Key Findings

- Agriculture involves more than yields: it has multiple social, political, cultural and environmental impacts and benefits.
- The future of agriculture lies in agroecological farming and “triple-bottom-line” business practices that meet social, environmental and economic goals.
- Reliance on resource-extractive industrial agriculture is dangerous and unsustainable; short-term technical fixes do not address complex challenges and often exacerbate social and environmental harm.
- Achieving food security and sustainable livelihoods for people in chronic poverty depends on ensuring access to and control of resources by small-scale farmers.
- Fair local, regional and global trading regimes can build local economies, reduce poverty and improve livelihoods.
- Strengthening the human and ecological resilience of agricultural systems improves our capacity to respond to changing environmental and social stresses. Indigenous knowledge and community-based innovations are an invaluable part of the solution.
- Good decision-making requires building better governance mechanisms and ensuring democratic participation by the full range of stakeholders.

maintaining productivity. A reconfiguration of agricultural research, extension and education is also needed, one that recognizes the vital contribution of local and Indigenous knowledge and innovation, and that embraces equitable, participatory processes in decision-making.

Pesticide Action Network delegates hailed the report as a “wake-up call for governments and international agencies to act now to ensure the survival of the planet’s food systems.” For the first time, an independent, global assessment has acknowledged that small-scale, low-impact farming offers crucial ecological and social functions that must be protected, and that nations and peoples have the right to democratically determine their own food and agricultural policies.

Food crisis vs. food sovereignty

Today’s global food problems have been triggered by a number of factors: the large-scale conversion of food crops to agrofuel production, price volatility driven by rampant commodity speculation, changing diets in China and India, and climate-related production shortfalls. However, as documented by the IAASTD, the deeper roots of today’s crisis lie in decades of government neglect of the small-farm sector, grossly unfair trade arrangements and Northern governments’ practice of dumping their food surpluses in developing countries at prices far below local cost of production—these factors, along with heavy reliance on environmentally destructive industrial agricultural practices, have destroyed rural farm communities around the world, undermining their ability to produce or buy food, and contributing to environmental pollution, water scarcity, worsening climate and poverty.

The IAASTD presents compelling options for confronting the food crisis. By strengthening farmers’ organizations, creating more equitable and transparent trade agreements and increasing local participation in policy-formation and other decision-making processes, we can begin to reverse structural inequities within and between countries, increase rural communities’ access to and control over resources, and pave the way towards local and national food sovereignty. The IAASTD concludes that ensuring food security and recognizing food sovereignty necessitates ending the institutional marginalization of the world’s small-scale producers.

An inconvenient truth for the agricultural establishment

The IAASTD was precedent-setting as well for its bold experiment in shared governance. Civil society groups played a key role, not only in authorship of the report, but also in its oversight and governance. History shows that governments and transnational corporations acting on their own have not been successful in meeting broad societal goals. The IAASTD’s success has proven that active civil society participation in intergovernmental processes is critical to meeting the challenges of the 21st century.

The radical shifts proposed by the IAASTD will inevitably shake up the status quo. Indeed, the IAASTD has already rankled some participants, including the US government and the agrichemical industry (Syngenta walked out of the IAASTD process in its final days, complaining that their synthetic pesticides and transgenic products had not been sufficiently valued). The US and Australia were especially stung by criticism of their trade liberalization policies, which were found to have had adverse social and environmental impacts while doing little to alleviate hunger and poverty.

Four countries attending the Johannesburg plenary—Australia, Canada, the UK and U.S.—refused to endorse the report. Like the climate crisis, the IAASTD’s findings are an “inconvenient truth” for the industrial agricultural establishment and the world’s dominant economies. Washington, the agrichemical trade association CropLife, and other beneficiaries of the current system continue to argue loudly against doing what needs to be done.

Pesticide Action Network is calling on the four hold-out governments to fully endorse the IAASTD’s bold vision for the future and to work closely with all segments of civil society to adopt more sustainable food and farming practices. The findings of the Johannesburg meeting present our best chance to apply the lessons of climate change to agricultural policy—and to take a decisive step towards advancing the productive, healthy and resilient farming on which our future depends.

For more information see:
<http://www.panna.org/jt/agAssessment>

All IAASTD documents are available at:
<http://www.agassessment.org>