

Women, biodiversity and culture

On the 16th of October 1998, FAO organised a World Food day in the Netherlands on the theme 'Women feed the World'. Vanaja Ramprasad of GREEN Foundation in Bangalore, India, represented Compas on this occasion. She gave a keynote speech and acted as a resource person during one of the workshops.

Rural women and private corporations have very a different relations to food production. In India, corporations have reduced women's space as food providers. These corporations, dominated by men, focus on the market. For this, the corporations genetically modify seeds and make unauthorised changes in food to increase market value. They base their activities on monocultures, laboratory experiments and unsustainable external inputs, thus exploiting nature for profitable ends. On the other hand, rural women focus on household food security. Women depend on their wisdom for nutrition, health and food production. This wisdom has survived over generations and has sustained their food requirements. Biodiversity is essential if women are to feed their families and community. Therefore, food security and sustainable agriculture are linked and the conservations of diversity is culturally embedded. In Indian rural communities even crops grown for the market, such as flowers and betel leaves, are considered sacred and are hardly ever grown with the sole intention of profit.

Vanaja Ramprasad explained the importance of cultural activities as a vehicle for development programmes. The following statements are a summary of the

discussion in the workshop.

Biodiversity can only be maintained if the cultures of the people that foster this biodiversity are maintained. Every culture has positive and negative aspects; some elements in cultures may in fact block biodiversity, whereas others may enhance it. We should attempt to enhance the positive aspects, irrespective of a culture being 'western' or 'non-western'. The dynamic aspects of cultures should be taken into account, as the statement suggests a static culture. The importance of culture as a vehicle for the development process was acknowledged.

Globalisation is a threat to bio-cultural diversity. It is imperative to consider endogenous development as a necessary response to globalisation. Globalisation of consumption patterns, food habits, the spread of commercial agriculture and the global exposure to mass media (the so-called 'Mac Donaldisation') leads to a reduction of bio-cultural diversity. On the other hand globalisation also offers opportunities for worldwide exchange and debates to counter the loss of bio-cultural diversity.

Gender sensitive policies should take traditional knowledge, values and spirituality as starting points. All workshop participants

stressed that policy makers need to appraise and recognise female values in knowledge systems. Vanaja's presentation explaining the difficult position of women in relation to the corporations was particularly relevant here.

Non-western knowledge is diverse and often encompasses the natural, human and spiritual worlds. All participants fully agreed. It was also acknowledged that western knowledge quite narrowly focuses on the natural, material world. This is a limitation of development co-operation.

Endogenous development is a necessary response to globalisation. The participants' viewpoints converged on this statement. Development should start at the local level. This does not mean, however, that processes such as globalisation are denied or that we 'close our ears and eyes'. On the contrary, endogenous development can be considered a good response to the negative impacts of globalisation and an opportunity for maintaining bio-diversity.

Bertus Haverkort

Forging meaningful partnerships

In November 1998, I attended the sixth international congress of Ethnobiology organised in New Zealand on the theme 'Ethnobiology: Dialogue Between Cultures - Forging meaningful partnerships'. Representatives of Indigenous Peoples, ethnobotanists, environmentalists, people working with farmers and local healers from 38 countries shared their experiences.

During the plenary sessions issues such as intellectual property rights, the ethics and morality of scientists, an ethical code for ethnobiologists, the role of science in developing useful products versus the acceptance of 'The Great Mystery' embodied in the spiritual practices of indigenous people were discussed.

The indigenous Maori in New Zealand find themselves at the crossroads. Many Maori seem to be almost completely assimilated with modern culture. Some highly educated Maoris are not willing to go back to their villages and have lost touch with their indigenous knowledge and culture. Other Maori, however, are going back to their cultural roots: learning their old dances, singing their traditional songs.

During a workshop I explained the Compas approach and the role of outsiders in a process of interaction with farmers and spiritual leaders. This was considered an important contribution by the ethnobiologists. The question was raised if Compas partners had agreed on protocols with the local people to ensure intellectual property rights of the communities. In my reaction, I indicated that the topic had been extensively discussed and that a code of conduct has been developed. Moreover, due to the trust relationship between the partner organisation and the rural communities, there is not always a need for formal protocols for joint activities. Maybe some Compas partners may want to reflect on this issue in the next Newsletter.

Another question raised was how Compas partners deal with situations of conflict, such as sacred sites taken away from rural peoples. To my knowledge, no Compas partner works in actual conflict situations. The religious sects in Bolivia and Peru, that discourage farmers from following their traditional practices, have arrived at a sort of agreed co-existence. Conflict with modern consumer culture that does not recognise spiritual values is more widespread. Compas hopes to remain in close contact with members of the Ethnobiology Society, sharing mutual learning points, especially on methodology and cosmovision.

Wim Hiemstra