

Controversies in agriculture

Agriculture is changing fast due to growing populations, as well as changing habits, economic conditions, technologies, visions and aspirations. In regions with better production conditions agriculture has become primarily market oriented, replacing traditional agriculture with high input agriculture. In the more marginal areas the viability of this market-oriented agriculture is a serious problem. For economic, as well as cultural and ecological reasons, agriculture in these regions has maintained its traditional semi-subsistence focus.

Liberalisation of trade is pushing small farmers out of the market, while consumers with western tastes are often not interested in their products (PFARD, p.38). Scientists often consider traditional and ecological agriculture as unproductive and labour intensive. Upawansa (p.35) indicates that under tropical conditions, the opposite is often the case. But also in traditional agriculture, both ecological sustainability and productivity are under pressure.

Soil fertility

PFARD mentions loss of soil fertility as an increasing problem, where many farmers see chemical fertilisers as the solution. But chemical fertilisers often are too expensive for farmers in less favourable circumstances. Organic fertilisers and other ecological practices, as advocated by many NGOs, do

not always provide a ready solution. Producing for the organic market, therefore, can provide new opportunities while also posing new questions. How can adequate certification and control mechanisms be introduced? How can we ensure soil fertility and local food security under organic agricultural conditions?

Feminisation

A strong tendency towards the feminisation of agriculture is occurring, due to phenomena such as male out-migration to earn income outside agriculture, and the HIV-Aids epidemic. Women, however, often lack the right to take major decisions, to own land or to implement specific tasks traditionally

ascribed to men, such as ploughing or conducting spiritual rituals (Kahandawa, p.31). Moreover, women often lack access to information on traditional land use management (Tengeza, p.29), or the means to implement modern agricultural practices and

inputs. They are often overburdened due to their multiple tasks. Important questions include: how can we build on female concepts and practices in agriculture? How can their access to land be enhanced? How can we make their voices heard and build on them?

Rituals and festivals

PFARD (p.39) indicates how in Uganda the traditional vision of life, including the spiritual practices related to the agricultural cycle, is eroding due to the process of westernisation, to Christianity and Islam, and due to the influence of western based agriculture. For many farmers, however, especially those living in the more remote areas, the agriculture related rituals and festivals are an intricate part of their farming system and culture. They are the means to celebrate the reciprocal relationship between the human, spiritual and natural worlds, which stands at the basis of their cosmovision. Some spiritual practices in agriculture, for example in crop protection (Upawansa, p.35) or grain storage (Gurung, p.40) are believed to be effective and essential for the resilience of farming. Leaders of formal religions, as well as scientists and development workers, often see rituals and other spiritu-

al practices as superstitious, outmoded and contra-productive. Gurung argues that a change towards a more

open and participatory approach among development workers and scientists is required. Only by respecting spiritual practices it

is possible to experiment with and optimise them.

Animal production

In this issue van 't Hooft and Puls (p.26) indicate how in the industrialised countries, and increasingly also in the less-industrialised non-western countries, animal production has become very intensive and increasingly unsustainable. In these systems animals are reduced to a means of production for highest profit. Ecologically these animal production systems are out of balance. This is reflected in high medicine use and the recent outbreak of several large disease epidemics, such as foot and mouth disease, mad cow disease, and fowl pest. The control mechanisms include the destruction of millions of healthy animals. Recently, public pressure to enhance ecological agriculture in Europe has increased. Questions posed here include: will other regions and cultures in the world simply copy the industrialised livestock system, or will they include the lessons learnt in Europe? How can a new agricultural system in Europe learn from the role of animals in other cultural contexts? How can the transfer be made to a more regionalised market system?

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Both modern and traditional agriculture are confronted by a variety of problems and controversial issues. Farmers and support agencies often have to deal with these controversies. Several of them are mentioned in this issue. Other major issues, such as burning for land preparation, biodiversity, patents on indigenous varieties and knowledge, and genetic engineering, are not touched upon here.

Profitability and sustainability

Many small-scale farmers cannot compete on the national or international market with larger farmers, who produce under more favourable conditions.