

SUMMARY OF THE FSN FORUM DISCUSSION No. 41
**LOOKING BACK TO EFFECTIVE RURAL PRACTICES ... DID WE MISS
SOMETHING?**
FROM 31 AUGUST TO 21 SEPTEMBER 2009

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I. ISSUES RAISED

Walter Mwasaa raised the question if we have left behind effective rural practices and if blending traditional and modern methods can help to achieve sustainable livelihoods in rural communities.

All contributors to this discussion agree that there are “pieces missing to the puzzle of sustainable agriculture development”. (C. Ramezanpour)

On the one hand there are many examples of techniques and practices rural communities used to have that have been partly or completely dismissed and that were once providing or contributing to livelihoods in rural communities.

On the other hand there are also more intangible aspects that are undermining choices and policies on rural practices: wrong perspectives and assumptions, lack of values, limited models of thinking are often preventing us from achieving the ultimate goal of sustaining the livelihoods of rural communities. In many cases a wise combination of tradition and modernity appears to be the best solution, if we also consider on a case by case basis the new challenges posed by changed conditions and contexts

Emerging perspectives and policies can contribute effectively to the process of blending traditional knowledge with modern methods: sustainable and organic agriculture proves to be a good example.

Summing up “While looking back can be instructive, we need to avoid being nostalgic about it”. (J. Opio-Odongo)

II. GOOD RURAL PRACTICES THAT HAVE BEEN DISCARDED

Looking back at rural practices used in the past, one can find several examples of traditional knowledge that have been left behind; also there are now many efforts to recall these practices and studies on their effectiveness:

- **Many effective traditional practices** can be found in areas of post harvest crop management, livestock disease management, crop husbandry that can still provide household outcomes and be blended with modern methods. Examples of such techniques include the use of maize cob powder in storing maize harvest, use of ash in storing sweet potatoes, use of tephrosia to control ticks in livestock, use of traditional knowledge to preserve wetlands, forests etc. (E. Mutandwa)
- In some areas of Uganda traditional practices such as food banks used to ensure food security in the colonial period have been very effective in the past but then have been abandoned due to mistaken policies; however changed conditions should also be considered when recalling them, as they may not be as effective anymore nowadays. (J. Opio-Odongo)

- **Traditional nomadic pastoralist livelihood systems in drylands** in Northern Kenya and bordering countries are disappearing: in the past the efficient use of the drylands for most of the year depended on these pastoralist's ability to move herds to wetter areas for shorter periods. Mobility is now very limited and this confines pastors to fragile low potential lands all year round. Reasons are: conflicts, boundaries between countries but also conversion in farmlands or conservation areas of the smaller more productive lands. (K. Munyao)
- **Diversification of cultivations:** many farming communities in drylands of Eastern Kenya abandoned diversification in favour of monocultures, enlarging their exposure to risk (K. Munyao); in India, the focus on high input agriculture and cereal increase has also led to a **loss of nutritional orientation of agriculture**. (M.S. Bamji)

III. WHAT'S MISSING TOWARDS THE GOAL OF SUSTAINABLE RURAL LIVELIHOODS

Looking at the present situation, various elements can be found that are preventing effective rural practices being put in place in changing contexts.

Contributors pointed out at:

- **Lack of proper planning and thinking ahead for future challenges;** this includes a need for continuous capacity building on the use of modern equipment by farmers, to address the issue of increase of the population and storage. (F. Adetunji)
- **Wrong models applied in wrong contexts:** the model of agricultural extension system was, in most countries, based on models developed in advanced economies (E. Mutandwa) and have been developed with the aim of maximizing productivity and income on large scale farms, encouraging specialisation rather than diversity, heavy dependence on purchased inputs and ample use of farm machinery, all things that are not suitable for small scale farms. The assumption made was that what is good for the large farmer must be good for small holders. (A. MacMillan)
- **Lack of flexibility of thinking:** often only one course of action or one model for solving the problem have been pursued being easier to fit in policy agendas also when proven to be ineffective. Also the training and capacity building could be ineffective if not coupled with some solution to overcome instinctive risk aversion in farmers enabling them to try new more profitable alternatives beyond the "grow what you eat pattern" of rural poverty (C. Ramezanpour). Moreover also means of earning money in rural communities other than farm-based opportunities should be considered, as hunger is usually primarily due to a shortage of money. (G. Kent)
- **Lack of humanity:** values, customs and traditions have often been left behind in favour of profitability. (M Shoaib Ahmedani)
- **Ineffective evaluation systems of donors and investors projects:** missing is the ability for donors and funders to implement traditional techniques as it is difficult to spend large amounts of money on traditional practices i.e. promoting seed saving, diversification of traditional crops etc. The budget and timeframe of spending money has to change as has the way in which policy makers, founders, implementers need to show the results of their work which is most often assessed in term of budget spent, areas planted, yields achieved. (P. Scherzer)
- **Limitations posed by environmental and development agencies:** The case of the rural communities in Nepal offers an example where the treat to livelihoods of rural communities is played by environmental agencies restricting the access to forests that were traditionally used for maintaining livestock and integrating the poor income from the small land resources. Restrictions in forest uses have increased over the years and the

offset of green house emissions of developed countries has also restricted rural livestock business has decreased while large portion of forests are underutilised. (B. Dhakal)

IV. OPPORTUNITIES AND GOOD PRACTICES

- **Organic and sustainable agriculture** represents a re-claiming and up-dating of older practices and features by combining traditional and scientific knowledge. There are many examples of traditional farming practices that are part of this modern approach as well as the emphasis in making the most effective use of available resources and the greater community cooperation. Several evidences of the success of organic agriculture in providing wider opportunities of wealth, employment and long term livelihood are quoted. (A. Nagvi)
- **Modern practices blended with traditional customs** can yield an optimum level of production and livelihood. The cases of China and Japan can be quoted in this regard. (M. Shoaib Ahmedani)
- **Interventions in after conflict areas:** After a conflict the dismissing and neglect of effective rural practices can be even worse, due to dependency on hand out emergency and rehabilitation phases, displacement of farmers for long periods and missing opportunities to study. In Sierra Leone there are programs facing this problems such as FAO campaigns to encourage farmers to save their seeds, Farmer field schools and community radios. (K. Gallagher)

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