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OVERVIEW

IIED Natural Resources Group

Project name:
Sustaining Local Food Systems, Biodiversity and Livelihoods

Project leader:
Michel Pimbert

Time frame:
2001 to 2011 (continuing)

Cost:
£2 million

Objective:
To facilitate long-term action research to analyse how — and under what conditions — decentralised governance, farmer and citizen participation, and capacity building can help sustain local food systems, biodiversity and livelihoods in the face of rapid social and environmental change.

PROJECT SUMMARY

The Sustaining Local Food Systems, Biodiversity and Livelihoods initiative collaborates directly with local farming and indigenous communities in regenerating biodiversity-rich farming and locally controlled food systems in India, Indonesia, Iran, Mali and Peru. The bottom-up approach combines traditional knowledge systems with modern science, strengthens biodiverse food systems and supports their spread through horizontal networks and federations of small farmers, pastoralists, indigenous peoples and food consumers. Working as co-researchers with IIED and partner organisations, these participants have developed a range of new institutions and tools to feed communities sustainably.

THEORY OF CHANGE

Our work is designed to directly empower communities to move towards more equitable and sustainable agrifood systems. By linking local voices, experience and research evidence to public and private sector policy processes, we inform debates and help shape better policies and institutions. We create safe spaces to build capacity, knowledge,

Sowing innovation for sustainable food

Farming communities are taking the lead in action research to revive diverse, locally controlled food systems.

In a world full of food, farmers everywhere are going bankrupt. Yields are higher than ever, thanks to technologies such as mechanisation, chemical fertilisers and pesticides, but smallholder farmers are being driven off the land by agricultural modernisation and policies that favour the largest producers.

At the same time, food has become a global commodity, increasingly controlled by transnational corporations. The world's largest seed company controls 23 per cent of the global proprietary seed market, for example, and the top 10 seed companies account for 67 per cent.

IIED's programme on Sustaining Local Food Systems, Biodiversity and Livelihoods seeks to reverse this growing disconnect between people and the production and distribution of food. Together with partner organisations in five case study areas, we are working to return control over the food supply to farmers and local communities, and strengthen local food systems and cultures. These shifts build resilience to environmental and economic shocks, and help relieve the damage done by industrialised farming to soils, water supplies and the global climate.

Grassroots action

In the drylands of southern India, for example, women farmers' collectives from the Deccan Plateau have created an alternative grain distribution system, parallel to the national government's. Whereas the government ships rice and wheat from Green Revolution industrialised farms to feed this drought-prone region, the new village granaries are supplied with locally grown millet, sorghum and chickpeas. Women farmers organised into 'sanghams' — village-level associations of poor, often low-caste and non-literate women — have restored degraded lands by reviving traditional crop varieties and farming systems adapted to the dry soil, eliminating the need for heavy chemical inputs and softening the impacts of droughts. The women themselves manage the grain stores and offer subsidised food to the poorest households, deciding collectively how this safety net should be applied.

These new food institutions grew out of participatory action research between sanghams and local NGO the Deccan Development Society (DDS), with IIED collaborating as 'co-inquirers'. First, we asked sanghams and small-scale farmers working with DDS to carefully assess whether and how they wanted to engage in this collaborative research. Participants adopted an ethical code — emphasising that institutional partners would support local people in undertaking and owning the research and outputs — and established a steering group including sangham leaders. As well as shaping and carrying out the research agenda, women sangham members argued they should use digital video to document the process and communicate findings to non-literate community members.

The other case studies, in Indonesia, Iran, Mali and Peru, have based their work on the same foundation of

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mutual understanding, and alliances between different actors, using different formats for different audiences. We combine local knowledge and cutting-edge science to develop alternative models and reframe dominant narratives, policies and practices for food, agriculture and land use. This approach helps promote local food systems that are rich in biological and cultural diversity, that are decentralised and democratically controlled, and that combine equity with social and ecological resilience.

KEY LESSONS LEARNT & INNOVATIONS

- In southern India, collectives of marginalised women working with the programme created a Community Grain Fund to distribute locally grown, drought-tolerant grains to poor villagers.
- In Indonesia, farmers are learning sustainable methods through field experiments in Farmer Field Schools — and building skills and confidence for collective action.
- In Iran, nomadic tribal organisations are advocating to 'co-manage' rangelands with the government, using indigenous knowledge and new insights from the science of non-equilibrium ecology to adapt to the impacts of climate change in fragile agro-ecosystems.
- In Peru, work is underway to link community conserved areas, including the Potato Park, into 'food sovereignty corridors' stretching across the landscape.

PARTNERS' VIEW

ANDES and communities in the Potato Park have been involved in the Sustaining Local Food Systems, Biodiversity and Livelihoods project for the past 11.5 years. During this time, the project has been extremely innovative, giving us enormous room to experiment with new ideas and adopt approaches which empowered the communities through power-equalising research — a possibility that might not have been open to us in a more formal policy, academic and government environment.

Alejandro Argumedo
ANDES

IIED NATURAL RESOURCES GROUP

The aim of the Natural Resources Group is to build partnerships, capacity and wise decision making for fair and sustainable use of natural resources. Our priority in pursuing this purpose is on local control and management of natural resources and other ecosystems.

Photo: **Deccan Development Society**

In southern India, women farmers' collectives distribute locally grown drought-tolerant grains to poor villagers.

informed consent, an ethical code, and community leadership on research and communication. In each case, the flexible, bottom-up model has produced distinctive innovations.

In Farmer Field Schools in Indonesia, farmers learn ecologically sound techniques by running experiments in their fields and analysing results with other farmers and facilitators. First focused on controlling rice pests without pesticides, the field schools have expanded to work with other crops and issues such as soil fertility and plant diseases. Ten thousand local farmers and former students have been trained as facilitators, and their aim is increasingly to strengthen leadership and advocacy by their peers: participants have analysed policy, dealt with high-level decision makers and produced a newspaper printing 10,000 copies. These ever-evolving curricula offer tools to tackle ongoing environmental change.

In Iran, some pastureland has become desert as a result of government policies to settle traditionally nomadic, pastoralist tribes into villages. But indigenous customs for managing rangelands agree with the latest science, which sees these lands as non-equilibrium systems, changeable but resilient. IIED, with partner CENESTA, is helping tribal groups make the case to officials that nomadism is vital in managing natural resources and adapting to the impacts of climate change. In a few areas, tribes have reached 'co-management' agreements with local and state government.

Early work in Peru by IIED and the ANDES organisation led to the opening of the Potato Park in 2000 — now well-known internationally as a Community Conservation Area that protects more than 1,500 potato varieties, nourishes the sociocultural systems that have created and preserved this biodiversity, and affirms indigenous people's territorial rights. Indigenous groups have extended the approach to several new community-managed areas, and are now seeking to link these into 'food sovereignty corridors'.

Spreading the word

In the past five years our research programme expanded into Mali, and as the other initiatives matured, we brought participants together to exchange ideas and lessons. In 2007, for example, farmers from four continents met in Sélingue, Mali, to jointly develop strategies against the privatisation of seeds in West Africa.

IIED is now taking the programme into a new phase, aimed at spreading and communicating these practical experiences, strengthening federations and networks of food producers, and empowering local organisations to influence governments, corporations and investors. For other research institutions and donors, the innovations sprouting from these grassroots initiatives underline the need to move away from rigid 'blueprint' project planning. Flexible funding, open-ended learning by doing, commitment to long-term collaboration and 'handing over the stick' to local people — all are vital in regenerating diverse food systems and harvesting their benefits for ecosystems, economies and human wellbeing.

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