

Agriculture can't wait

Organised farmers are easier to support

Author: Agnes van Ardenne, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and former Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation. <mailto:info@capacity.org>

Farmers face a wide range of risks, including depleted soil, irregular rainfall, unexpected drought, rising input prices, decreasing output prices, diseases and sudden changes in demand, to name but a few. Many of these issues could be dealt with very effectively if farmers could get organised and if external stakeholders could provide a helping hand. The role of government is to put in place consistent agricultural policies that encourage increased production, as well as legal institutions that ensure equity and transparency in providing land titles and access to water for farmers. Stakeholders in a value chain can collaborate in initiating relevant research and establishing systems for sharing knowledge and information.

A good example of a collaborative effort to mitigate the risks to small farmers is EurepGAP, a certification scheme that promotes good agricultural practices (GAP). EurepGAP was initiated by 30 European supermarket chains in an effort to meet increasing consumer demands for environmentally friendly and safe food that is produced in a healthy working environment. One supermarket's decision in 2006 to accept only EurepGAP-certified agricultural products by 2008 posed a tremendous threat for hundreds of individual smallholder producers in Kenya and Senegal who had supplied green beans to the supermarket for many years. Product certification was new to them, and they did not think they would meet the European market standards.

Dialogue

Inspired by the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, where agriculture and public-private partnerships were the most important topics in the plan of action, the Netherlands Ministers of Agriculture and Development Cooperation started a dialogue with the supermarket to find a solution not only for the green bean producers in Kenya and Senegal, but for all stakeholders in the value chain. This included the interests of traders and consumers. The idea was to assist the small farmers with the EurepGAP certification and to convince the supermarket that it should guarantee reasonable green bean prices for small farmers.

It took many months before all the parties agreed to participate but then the process went very fast. Other stakeholders took part, including food standards agencies, the umbrella organisation of European supermarkets, certification bureaus, and farmers' unions and traders'

organisations. Even the Netherlands Auctions for Fruit and Vegetables wanted to participate in the experiment, as well as the Ministers of Agriculture and Trade in Kenya and Senegal. Finally, everyone involved contributed financially or in kind with expertise and advice to achieve a common goal ? the survival of small green bean farmers in Kenya and Senegal.

Important lessons

At least two important lessons have been learned from this successful experiment. First, reaching out to individual small farmers to help them meet the certification standards is almost impossible. Therefore farmers need to get organised in order to share knowledge and information. The green bean farmers went further. For efficiency reasons they redistributed their land and organised joint transport for their inputs and for delivering their produce to urban markets.

Second, governments and other actors in the value chain have an important role to play in confidence building and establishing an enabling environment for farmers to understand that economic improvement requires coordination and collaboration. Unfortunately governments often don't live up to this responsibility, and rural areas are mostly forgotten in governments' strategies. Hopefully, worldwide attention to the current food crisis will soon be transformed into permanent actions in favour of sustainable agriculture and food production. Agriculture can't wait.