Section III
Strengthening the Role of Major Groups
Chapter 32

Strengthening the Role of Farmers*

PROGRAMME AREA

Basis for action

32.1. Agriculture occupies one third of the land surface of the Earth, and is the central activity for much of the world's population. Rural activities take place in close contact with nature, adding value to it by producing renewable resources, while at the same time becoming vulnerable to overexploitation and improper management.

32.2. The rural household, indigenous people and their communities, and the family farmer, a substantial number of whom are women, have been the stewards of much of the Earth's resources. Farmers must conserve their physical environment as they depend on it for their sustenance. Over the past 20 years there has been impressive increase in aggregate agricultural production. Yet, in some regions, this increase has been outstripped by population growth or international debt or falling commodity prices. Further, the natural resources that sustain farming activity need proper care, and there is a growing concern about the sustainability of agricultural production systems.

32.3. A farmer-centred approach is the key to the attainment of sustainability in both developed and developing countries and many of the programme areas in Agenda 21 address this objective. A significant number of the rural population in developing countries depend primarily upon small-scale, subsistence-oriented agriculture based on family labour. However, they have limited access to resources, technology, alternative livelihood and means of production. As a result, they are engaged in the overexploitation of natural resources, including marginal lands.

32.4. The sustainable development of people in marginal and fragile ecosystems is also addressed in Agenda 21. The key to the successful implementation of these programmes lies in the motivation and attitudes of individual farmers and government policies that would provide incentives to farmers to manage their natural resources efficiently and in a sustainable way. Farmers, particularly women, face a high degree of economic, legal and institutional uncertainties when investing in their land and other resources. The decentralization of decision-making towards local and community organizations is the key in changing people's behaviour and implementing sustainable farming strategies. This programme area deals with activities which can contribute to this end.

Objectives

32.5. The following objectives are proposed:
(a) To encourage a decentralized decision-making process through the creation and strengthening of local and village organizations that would delegate power and responsibility to primary users of natural resources;

(b) To support and enhance the legal capacity of women and vulnerable groups with regard to access, use and tenure of land;

(c) To promote and encourage sustainable farming practices and technologies;

(d) To introduce or strengthen policies that would encourage self-sufficiency in low-input and low-energy technologies, including indigenous practices, and pricing mechanisms that internalize environmental costs;

(e) To develop a policy framework that provides incentives and motivation among farmers for sustainable and efficient farming practices;

(f) To enhance the participation of farmers, men and women, in the design and implementation of policies directed towards these ends, through their representative organizations.

Activities

A) Management-related activities

32.6. National Governments should:

(a) Ensure the implementation of the programmes on sustainable livelihoods, agriculture and rural development, managing fragile ecosystems, water use in agriculture, and integrated management of natural resources;

(b) Promote pricing mechanisms, trade policies, fiscal incentives and other policy instruments that positively affect individual farmer's decisions about an efficient and sustainable use of natural resources, and take full account of the impact of these decisions on household food security, farm incomes, employment and the environment;

(c) Involve farmers and their representative organizations in the formulation of policy;

(d) Protect, recognize and formalize women's access to tenure and use of land, as well as rights to land, access to credit, technology, inputs and training;

(e) Support the formation of farmers' organizations by providing adequate legal and social conditions.

32.7. Support for farmers' organizations could be arranged as follows:

(a) National and international research centres should cooperate with farmers' organizations in developing location-specific environment-friendly farming techniques;
(b) National Governments, multilateral and bilateral development agencies and non-governmental organizations should collaborate with farmers’ organizations in formulating agricultural development projects to specific agro-ecological zones.

B) Data and information

32.8. Governments and farmers' organizations should:

(a) Initiate mechanisms to document, synthesize and disseminate local knowledge, practices and project experiences so that they will make use of the lessons of the past when formulating and implementing policies affecting farming, forest and fishing populations;

(b) Establish networks for the exchange of experiences with regard to farming that help to conserve land, water and forest resources, minimize the use of chemicals and reduce or reutilize farm wastes;

(c) Develop pilot projects and extension services that would seek to build on the needs and knowledge base of women farmers.

C) International and regional cooperation

32.9. FAO, IFAD, WFP, the World Bank, the regional development banks and other international organizations involved in rural development should involve farmers and their representatives in their deliberations, as appropriate.

32.10. Representative organizations of farmers should establish programmes for the development and support of farmers' organizations, particularly in developing countries.

Means of implementation

A) Financing and cost evaluation

32.11. The financing needed for this programme area is estimated in chapter 14 (Promoting sustainable agriculture and rural development), particularly in the programme area entitled "Ensuring people's participation and promoting human resource development for sustainable agriculture". The costs shown under chapters 3 (Combating poverty), 12 (Managing fragile ecosystems: combating desertification and drought), and 13 (Managing fragile ecosystems: sustainable mountain development) are also relevant to this programme area.

B) Scientific and technological means

32.12. Governments and appropriate international organizations, in collaboration with national research organizations and non-governmental organizations should, as appropriate:

(a) Develop environmentally sound farming technologies that enhance crop yields, maintain land quality, recycle nutrients, conserve water and energy and control pests and weeds;
(b) Conduct studies of high-resource and low-resource agriculture to compare their productivity and sustainability. The research should preferably be conducted under various environmental and sociological settings;

(c) Support research on mechanization that would optimize human labour and animal power and hand-held and animal-drawn equipment that can be easily operated and maintained. The development of farm technologies should take into account farmers' available resources and the role of animals in farming households and the ecology.

C) Human resource development

32.13. Governments, with the support of multilateral and bilateral development agencies and scientific organizations, should develop curricula for agricultural colleges and training institutions that would integrate ecology into agricultural science. Interdisciplinary programmes in agricultural ecology are essential to the training of a new generation of agricultural scientists and field-level extension agents.

D) Capacity-building

32.14. Governments should, in the light of each country's specific situation:

(a) Create the institutional and legal mechanisms to ensure effective land tenure to farmers. The absence of legislation indicating land rights has been an obstacle in taking action against land degradation in many farming communities in developing countries;

(b) Strengthen rural institutions that would enhance sustainability through locally managed credit systems and technical assistance, local production and distribution facilities for inputs, appropriate equipment and small-scale processing units, and marketing and distribution systems;

(c) Establish mechanisms to increase access of farmers, in particular women and farmers from indigenous groups, to agricultural training, credit and use of improved technology for ensuring food security.

* In this chapter, all references to "farmers" include all rural people who derive their livelihood from activities such as farming, fishing and forest harvesting. The term "farming" also includes fishing and forest harvesting.