6 Conclusions and lessons learned

Agriculture and sustainable development in the Netherlands

The Netherlands has a highly productive and competitive agro-sector. This is the result of a number of favourable geographical and bio-physical conditions, good entrepreneurial skills, key roles of agricultural research and education, and a pro-active and stimulating farm policy in the past. This policy was developed and implemented over the years in good dialogue between government and farmers organizations. Initially the aim was to strengthen the economic position of farmers by increasing farm productivity levels. More recently, under much societal pressure, this policy had to change in order to counter the negative environmental impacts of these high-external input production systems. Among the problems incurred are: oversupply of nutrients from fertilizers and manure, high emissions of ammonia and other gasses (CO_2, CH_4 and N_2O) and high concentrations of agro-chemicals in ground and surface water and in the air. The introduction of the new measures and regulations was difficult as farmers were opposed -the costs of implementation being too high- and many changes were made during the implementation process. On hindsight, and given the actual level of know-how available in the Netherlands in dealing with the impacts concerned, it would have been much better if environmental guidelines had been incorporated in the farm policy at a much earlier stage. In addition to the environmental issues listed above, societal concern in the Netherlands is growing on animal welfare, animal diseases and food safety.

If a lesson were to be drawn, it would be on the need to develop and implement integrated policies and strategies for agricultural and rural development, which incorporate socio-cultural, economic and environmental objectives in a balanced way. Such policy development is most effective if done in close interaction between governmental authorities, the private sector including farmer organizations, and representatives of civil society, including environmentalists.

Land and rural development

Agriculture is by far the largest land user in the Netherlands, occupying some 70 percent of the land surface. Land prices are rising steeply, by some 10 percent per year but land ownership is on the increase relative to tenancy arrangements. Along with changing functions of the land in rural areas, also the social status of the Netherlands' countryside is changing. Access to land is well-embedded in the Netherlands' land registration and cadastral system. A number of threats exists to land and soil quality, including the declining quality of peat lands, soil compaction and soil sealing. In many countries in the world peat lands are rapidly disappearing and the knowledge gained in the Netherlands can be used to design programmes to meet the challenge of reducing oxidation of peat elsewhere. Likewise, some European countries have taken over Netherlands' legislation on soil at contaminated sites. Legislation -and remediation techniques- were established as a result of negative experiences occurring in the Netherlands between 1970 and 1980 mainly. Conversely, in dealing with soil erosion, lessons learned from abroad are being applied. These include agreements on regulations between local government and farmers. For soil compaction the lessons have yet to be learned.

Drought and desertification

Due to favourable climatic conditions, the Netherlands is not encountering severe problems in the areas of drought and desertification. Meanwhile, the country addresses drought and desertification policy issues in the European context and world wide. This is done through participation in multilateral environmental conventions, agreements and processes and by collaboration in international research and education programmes. A particular drought problem in the Netherlands relates to low ground water levels in nature conservation areas caused by artificial drainage of nearby agricultural land.

Africa

In spite of growing macro-level economic performance of African states, rural populations hardly share in their country's economic gains. Africa (e.g. AU, NEPAD) has decided to invest in agriculture by applying the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Plan (CAADP), and new (international) policies on agricultural development generally argue for increased agricultural productivity, access to resources and services, market development, and reshaping institutions. The Netherlands' will support Africa through its policy as formulated in the forthcoming policy document '*Agriculture, Rural Entrepreneurship and Food Security'* . The document lists the following lessons learned: (i) The sector approach, which was meant to increase the effectiveness of development aid, resulted in an increased focus on health and education and in a decreased focus on agricultural and rural development, as well as on relevant societal target groups. Also, it came along with cut backs in (Netherlands') technical assistance; (ii) The support to productive sectors has decreased; (iii) Technological innovations, which form the basis of increased productivity, have to be adapted to location-specific conditions; (iv) Market incentives are important in steering economic development; (v) Enabling institutional environment are a key requisite for development; (vi) Checks and balances are of major importance in the public domain and can be done through capacity strengthening, organizational development and institutional change.

Based on these observations, five priority areas have been identified, which are necessary for sustainable agricultural development with a prospering rural private sector. These five priority areas constitute the basis for the Netherlands' support towards a stronger sustainable growth in rural Africa:

- Increased productivity: Research and local innovations remain necessary to increase agricultural productivity in developing countries. They enable producers and rural entrepreneurs, women and men, to meet the increased demand with a higher production.
- Enabling environments: Whereas it is the private sector's task to take care of production, (value-adding) processing, trading, etc., national governments are responsible for facilitating the right frameworks and effective services and institutions. Developing these, requires the involvement of civil society organizations, including producer organizations, in order to create the necessary checks and balances.
- Sustainable development of supply chains: Improving supply chains and making them more sustainable is key in establishing the required balance between economic equality, ecological sustainability and economic growth.
- Improved access to markets: Economic development will be stimulated through stronger functioning of local and regional markets and by promoting access to international markets and trade.
- Food security and re-distribution mechanisms: Attention is required for the most-vulnerable groups in society that carry risks of being excluded from development efforts.

The Netherlands' position on biomass production for the generation of energy includes the development and implementation –at the international level- of sustainability criteria that specifically address the possible environmental and social effects in biomass producing countries in the South.