



Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food

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SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

**Multistakeholder Consultation: The Challenges Facing the “Green Revolution” in Africa, Luxembourg,
15 – 16 December 2009**

Convened by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter
with the support of the Ministry of Development Cooperation,
Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg

BACKGROUND

This roundtable discussion was convened as a multistakeholder consultation under the auspices of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Prof. Olivier De Schutter. Its purpose was to identify both the opportunities and challenges facing current attempts to support the agricultural sector in Africa, including what has been referred to as a new ‘Green Revolution’ in Africa. The participants were asked to discuss how the initiatives taken to support the agricultural sector in Africa could create an enabling environment where the right to food is respected, protected and fulfilled.

The experts, policy-makers, and representatives from civil society organisations convened at this consultation were expected to enter into a frank and open exchange about how to support agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa, with a specific focus on the conditions which should be created in order to ensure that the efforts made in this direction will contribute to the realization of the First Millennium Development Goal – to halve the number of hungry people by 2015 – and to improve the protection of the right to adequate food. The work of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), while not the exclusive focus of the roundtable discussion, nevertheless figured prominently in the consultation, since this represents the single most important attempt to improve agricultural productivity in Sub-Saharan Africa. The consultation aimed to provide an opportunity for the participants to seek to identify the lessons which may be drawn from the experience of AGRA, and the prescriptions which could be made on the basis of a preliminary evaluation of this experience.

In order to ensure a well-informed and focused discussion, each of the substantive topics was briefly introduced by one of the experts present¹, following which an open exchange of views took place around following the Chatham House rules.

¹ Akin Adesina (Vice-President Policy & Partnership, AGRA) presented the concept of Green Revolution as applied to the African context in its presentation ‘Achieving a Sustainable Green Revolution in Africa’. Judi Wakhungu (African Centre for Technology Studies) made a presentation on the conclusions of the International Assessment of Agricultural Science & Technology for Development (IAASTD), which she co-chairs, in order to introduce the session on the social impacts of technology-driven reform. Eric Holt-Gimenez (FoodFirst- First/Institute for Food and Development Policy) made a presentation on ‘Environmental Impacts and Adaptation to Climate Change: Challenge of Agroecological Alternatives’. Daniel Vandersteen (Collectif Stratégies Alimentaires, CSA) introduced the session on trade: “The role of local, regional, and international markets in the promotion of agricultural reform, and the impact of trade liberalization”. Sam Moyo (African Institute for Agrarian Studies) introduced the session on access to land: “Access to land and water resource and tenure security: the changing uses of land and the role of agrarian reform in enhancing agricultural productivity. Mamadou Goïta (IRPAD, Mali) introduced the session on governance: “Governance issues: participation in decision-making on, and implementation of, agricultural reform”

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SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSIONS

This summary of discussions does not pretend to be a faithful or complete summary of the exchanges held during the consultation. Instead, its purpose is to summarize the ideas which were put forward during the consultation and which deserve further consideration and/or exploration.

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At the opening session a comprehensive overview was provided of the Green revolution as applied to the African context and the work of the Alliance for the Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). African farmers face a low productivity of staple food crops also due to poor soil, deforestation, low use of fertilizer, a complex agro-ecology situation and under-irrigation of arable land. In order to redress this situation structural solutions are needed. The principles guiding AGRA were presented in this context. AGRA noted that a uniquely African Green Revolution must rely on home-grown solutions and have specific measures in place to ensure biodiversity conservation, environmental sustainability, promote secure land tenure, equity for small-holder farmers and gender equity. It must avail small-holder farmers of appropriate technologies; link farmers to markets, especially African markets; and develop African capacity to add value to farmer produce. A Global Fund for Africa, AGRA suggested, is also needed in order to support African governments' efforts in improving farmers' access to affordable inputs and finance and build the supportive institutions and infrastructure needed to support smallholder agriculture. AGRA agreed that the right to food was critical, but that it was important for Africa to produce enough food to feed itself if it is able to secure this right.

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An important outcome of the discussion were points of agreements, including the support for the right to food; the need for smallholder farmers to be at the centre of African agricultural development in order to end poverty and hunger; the need to ensure that small-holder based agricultural development protects the environment and biodiversity, and promotes equity; the important role of governments in establishing the conditions that will enable all of these to happen; and the need to shape a trade system that benefits smallholder farmers.

Participants were provided with several positive successful stories that could be scaled up, but also with deep challenges and choices. While all participants agreed upon the need for changes in African agriculture, several key issues were raised in the discussion. Some of these relate to the initiative of AGRA, others to the paradigm of the Green revolution itself and the role of technology-driven solutions in helping farmers to move beyond subsistence farming, and others highlighted the numerous challenges facing any agricultural development model in Africa.

1. The lessons from the first "Green Revolution". AGRA highlighted that the African Green Revolution is not a direct transfer of the Asian model to Africa and that Africa's Green Revolution must learn from the experiences in Asia to avoid its mistakes and to develop locally-adapted solutions that are specific to Africa. Participants pointed to the similarities and differences between AGRA initiatives and the Green revolutions led in Asia and in Latin America. Certain participants feared that the negative impacts the Green revolution model had in these continents would be repeated in Africa. These concerns relate to loss of biodiversity, land deterioration as a result of badly-managed irrigation, indebted farmers becoming landless, conflicts between and inside communities, and further marginalization of women. Participants also raised the importance of developing from the outset exit strategies which were absent for example in the Green revolution in Asia. The issue of the exit strategy is linked to the up-scaling of current efforts, beyond small pilot projects which have been unable to have a significant impact at the national or regional level.

While recognizing some of the challenges associated with the Asian Green revolution, AGRA also noted that its success should be recognized; including the fact that the Asian Green revolution averted large-scale famine across the region, lowered the price of food and raised real wages. AGRA cited information from the International Food Policy Research Institute in highlighting these successes of the Green revolution in Asia.

2. Farmers' participation in the design and implementation of programmes. AGRA noted that its approach is bottom-up, starting from the farmer. Nevertheless, the lack of farmers' participation was raised as a key issue. Several participants conveyed their impression that AGRA first started its projects, and began to consult only in a second phase, when strategic choices had already been made. Other participants perceived the Green revolution approach as a top-down one, despite the fact that the strategies developed so far by AGRA aim at

building on what is already available in the African context in terms of research (drought-tolerant maize, grain legumes, micro-irrigation and water management, for example). Some participants highlighted the difference between projects where farmers did participate but were not at the center, while there were successful experiences with the farmer-to-farmer innovation model in Latin America where farmers have a leadership role.

AGRA highlighted that it worked very closely with farmers, through its support of farmer participatory breeding programmes as well as its work with farmers' organizations and with national institutions whose researchers work with farmers on a daily basis.

It was suggested that, as farmers' voices may be difficult to hear, AGRA could establish mechanisms where farmers can have their voices heard concerning their needs and priorities. A serious concern was to ensure a demand-based allocation of resources. These mechanisms could also support farmers to get organised and claim their rights. AGRA agreed to set up mechanisms to further enhance the involvement of smallholder farmers and civil society organizations.

Stakeholders expressed their hope for a constructive engagement with AGRA but that some conditions should be met before this could be implemented, such as transparency on strategy and appropriate mechanisms of participation. All participants were of the view that the consultation had been very useful in establishing a first connection, and were optimistic that exchanges should improve in the future thanks to it.

One full session was dedicated to governance in agricultural reform, including participation in decision-making on, and implementation of, agricultural reform. One participant explained the relevance of a co-construction of agricultural development policies and strategies, highlighting the example of Mali (fora with farmers, delegation of the early design of the policy to a coordination of farming organizations, several iterations of participation of farmers' organizations before and after political decisions). A number of questions were seen by one participant as essential to address the issue of participation in, and accountability of AGRA. These are: who established the strategic goals? Who defined the priority areas of work? Who decided on the funding for country projects? Who decided on the thirteen priority countries, possibly at the risk of undermining regional integration? Who decided to prioritize funding for PhD students rather than funding for technical training of farmers and participatory innovation processes? Who decided to de-link farming, livestock, and fishing while the option to maintain these three dimensions together had been made, for instance, in the *Loi d'orientation agricole* adopted in Mali?

AGRA among others noted that its support for PhD training is critical to Africa's development, and that its approach is to train Africans in African universities to stop the brain drain and develop African expertise on issues of critical importance to the continent's food security. In response to the question on the initial choice of countries where AGRA operates, AGRA highlighted that like any other organization, it must start its program somewhere and the current list of thirteen countries was not exhaustive.

The question was raised of whether privately-led initiatives should ensure that their projects are fully in line with national strategies and engage with all relevant actors from the start to ensure their projects respond to the expectations of their constituencies. Some participants said it was essential that farmers be in the drivers' seat. Participants reiterated the need to engage with farmers and farmers' organizations directly in order to develop pro-farmers policies. Examples were mentioned of processes and programmes that failed because farmers were not included in the design and implementation.

The issue of competition for human resources in agricultural development was raised by a participant as one not to underestimate: AGRA, international organizations, development cooperation and non-governmental organizations are in competition for limited highly qualified human resources. The risk behind this competition is that the best people will be diverted from public institutions, while they are vital to short- and long-term development.

The need to keep a constant focus on the gender dimension was underscored several times. In Asia, for example, the Green revolution exacerbated some of the gender inequalities in the agricultural sector. Agricultural systems are mostly blind to the gender dimension. It is therefore necessary that data systems track the results of the efforts by collecting data disaggregated by gender.

3. The role of technology in the "Green Revolution" model. Some participants did not agree on the paradigm of the Green Revolution itself. This paradigm is seen by some as a technology-based concept (agriculture being based on new technologies and on high-value external inputs, giving over-emphasis on the potential of genetic improvement), which does not take into account alternative methods of agricultural production, whose potential to increase yields is proven. Reference was also made to the findings of the International Assessment of Agriculture, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), which *inter alia* highlighted the need for integrated solutions rather than for an exclusive focus on increasing the productivity.

AGRA noted that fertilizer use in Africa is the lowest in the world – averaging 8kg/ha compared to a global average of over 100kg/ha- and that it needs to be increased in a way that is efficient and environmentally sustainable. Some participants questioned the emphasis on increasing the use of chemical fertilizers, which they saw as problematic. There was general agreement among all participants on the need for finding a balance between organic and chemical fertilizers, and that the organic matter level in African soils has to be raised. AGRA advocated the use of Integrated Soil Fertility Management as well as improved land and water management.

While there was general agreement on the need to support smallholders, certain participants questioned whether the technologies which are currently promoted are truly scale-neutral. They feared that the introduction of certain technologies might result in further marginalization of this category of producers, and that the potential for elite capture may be high in programmes such as those of AGRA. Participants highlighted the need to spell out who small-scale farmers are in order to ensure an adequate targeting of the efforts, as this is a highly differentiated category in terms of access to land, tenancy relationship, labour. In addition, involving farmers' organisations in the design and implementation of programmes may not always be the appropriate solution. Some participants stated that farmers' organizations often represent the most organized farmers and not the most marginal ones in remote areas. If we talk about marginal farmers, it was stated, the nature of interventions would be different and more focused on safety nets.

Some participants raised concern about programmes which promote plant varieties which emanates from outside the region as opposed to local varieties (e.g. Nerica rice seeds in Africa). Seeds are exchanged among farmers and are a means of building and entertaining social relations. If some programmes or policies discourage these practices (such as agro-dealers selling seeds), this may have a detrimental impact on these social relationships. The high price of seeds is also of great concern to farmers in Africa. The right to seeds was mentioned by some participants.

Some participants noted that chemical fertilizers have become in many countries a political issue: policies related to fertilizers are highly manipulated (fertilizer subsidies are a way to get votes).

4. The existence of different models of agricultural development. Participants talked about the existence of alternative models of agricultural development to the Green revolution model, mainly those known as agroecological farming approaches².

The discussion on these alternative models emanated from a discussion on the environmental impacts of modern agro-food systems, on which much attention was paid by the participants. Modern agriculture, it was recalled by some participants, is part of the climate change problem, as it is the largest contributor of greenhouse gases emissions, with fertilizers and land conversion the largest sources. In the face of climate change, both mitigation (reducing the impacts of climate change on agriculture) and adaptation measures (improving the resilience to climate change and weather-related events) should be adopted. Recent studies were referred to, which show that sustainable agriculture projects which are outside the Green Revolution paradigm have succeeded in raising yields and stocking CO₂ at the same time.

The existence of different models of agricultural development was also raised in connection with irrigation. One participant mentioned that only 4% of African arable land is irrigated. If that figure is raised to 10% tomorrow, there would still be 90% non-irrigated land. Decision-makers consequently face the choice of investing in high increases on 5-10% of the land, or in modest increases on 90% of the land.

A number of participants called for a shift towards sustainable organic and agro-ecological models of agriculture, by promoting more innovation in the way of doing agriculture. Financial resources, it was noted, should not only be available to high-technology research but also to agroecological farming approaches, farmer-to-farmer training programmes and participatory breeding programmes. Some participants argued that productivity could be doubled or tripled with almost limited financial investment and consequently questioned AGRA's investment in PhDs and high tech agriculture.

Some participants asked, therefore, why these agroecological initiatives have not received more governmental support, as they have proved successful. The fact that they emanated from outside the scientific spheres and

² Agroecological approaches follow the principles of agroecology, which is the application of the ecological science to the study, design and management of sustainable agroecosystems. Organic farming, conservation agriculture, agroforestry, biological control, intercropping, mixed crop and livestock management are frequently associated with agroecology. Agroecology includes the observation of traditional systems, the use of local knowledge of agroecosystems management, but also modern science. It is not opposed to technology. Fertility of the agroecosystem and pest management is mainly sought from well-thought ecosystem interactions rather than on the use of external inputs such as pesticides and chemical fertilizers.

have remained outside the dominant paradigm is seen as a key obstacle. Another explanation is that it has not yet been acknowledged that there are alternatives to the agricultural development model based on the modernization path. Also, agencies too often prefer financing seeds and fertilisers, rather than long-term development, in particular human development (people-centered development). The Cuban experience, where government supported agroecological approaches, was mentioned as an example where public authorities started significant support to agroecological farming in the 1990s³.

The fact that AGRA should be in a position to support these agroecological farming approaches was mentioned by several participants. Certain participants called upon AGRA to bring people outside the “Green Revolution” paradigm around their table in order to support truly a diversity of successful agricultural models.

Certain participants questioned the potential of organic farming to be scaled-up in order to feed large populations, while others referred to recent international scientific studies providing evidence that such forms of farming in fact could significantly improve yields, particularly on degraded soils. Some participants also had different opinions on how to define an agro-ecological approach. AGRA noted that it uses an agro-ecological approach in its breeding program and in its soil health program.

In addition, it was noted by some that agencies and donors might be more balanced in the resources they allocate towards projects, programs and research. Opportunities should be leveraged not only in the ‘high-yielding seeds and fertilizers’ package.

The question of the co-existence, complementarity, competition of these two models (“Green Revolution” or agroecological farming approaches) was raised, as well as the role of governments in promoting agroecological alternatives. Some participants suggested that organic and inorganic approaches needed to be combined to increase farm productivity, while others pointed to the fact that some key differences in the models made complementarity hard or even impossible to reach.

5. The role of the private sector. Some participants were concerned about the role of the private sector in the current efforts to support agricultural reform in Africa, and specifically, about the relationships between transnational corporations, particularly seed companies, and the work of AGRA. AGRA reminded that it focuses its support to local African seed companies and small- and medium-sized, rural agribusiness and retailers, not transnational companies. AGRA noted its partnerships with FAO, WFP, IFAD, African Union, NEPAD-CAADP and African Development Bank.

The issues of improved seeds and associated patents (in contrast to the promotion of seeds exchange among farmers), and of the control of the food system by the farmers themselves or by the large agribusiness corporations were raised. The issue of genetically modified organisms was also raised. These issues require further clarification.

6. The alignment of private initiatives with public programmes. It was also asked whether AGRA could support African led holistic initiatives like the ECOWAS agricultural policies for West Africa which was developed with very strong farmers’ participation. Participants also underlined the importance of CAADP. In this context, AGRA highlighted the importance of partnerships, clarifying that AGRA does not do it alone. Partnerships with FAO, IFAD, African Union, NEPAD, and the African Development Bank were mentioned. AGRA highlighted that it supports and works through national institutions, which have bottom-up approaches in their country, and said it would increase support for farmers’ organizations in the future.

7. Access to land and water resources. It was agreed that access to and loss of land are key ingredients to the achievement or inability of small producers’ food security. Participants said that unequal land holding and tenure systems which disadvantage small producers and women were a major problem.

Access to land has been increasingly threatened and land-related conflicts have been escalating everywhere as land concentration is on the rise. Some noted that there is a pattern among African countries to sell/lease land for agrofuel related projects or contract farming. Drawing from the experience of the Green revolution in Asia, it was noted by some that technological innovation has the potential to increase gender and class inequity. In the Philippines, for example, the Green revolution created a new class of landless workers, which did not exist before. Despite agrarian reform, the Green revolution led to re-concentration of the land, due to indebtedness.

³ Cuba had to rely on agro-ecology and very decentralized research systems after the post-soviet period, as fuel imports almost stopped. Cuba then developed a system where agricultural innovations stemmed mainly from farmers working with well-trained technicians and a few professionals. Whether this can be generalized remains to be seen.

The question was raised of what role property rights should/could play to protect peasants against evictions. The work of the Commission on the Legal Empowerment of the Poor was mentioned, but some participants challenged its orientation as biased towards marketisation of land, using particularly western and legalistic notions of land rights or systems of private property in land, while undermining African systems and practices.

A participant recalled that land policy reforms which started from colonial times continued through the post-independence and Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) era, enabled or formed the basis upon which domestic or transnational large-scale land acquisitions or concessions occurred (for biofuels and contract farming). These large-scale land acquisitions were seen as a problem for the improvement of the small-holder sector. It was also said that the aid system has not adequately supported redistributive land reforms, leading to the persistence of land conflicts in many African countries.

The right to land is a concept that should be clarified, and of particular importance in the African context. Some participants recalled that Governments should adopt legislation to safeguard access to land of smallholders and marginal farmers. The need to pay attention to what type of land is called ‘marginal’ or ‘degraded’ was also highlighted as sometimes these labels serve to obfuscate the usefulness of the land to local populations, particularly indigenous peoples, pastoralists, or poor farmers without a title to the land they cultivate. The extra-territorial responsibilities of States where foreign investors acquiring land in African countries are based were also emphasized.

8. Rural services. Some participants raised the importance of extension services, which are absent or of very poor quality in many countries. The importance of training and improved extension services, while costly, is seen as a priority whose returns should be compared to returns of other agricultural research programmes. No sustainable improvement of agricultural productivity will be achieved, it was noted, without such efforts to rebuild infrastructures.

9. The role of trade in agricultural commodities. Participants discussed the opportunities and threats of international trade. Agricultural prices on international markets are highly influenced not only by the cost structures of a few large-scale farm operations, economically-efficient actors in few areas of the world (which many participants consider to be ecologically inefficient) but also by public subsidies distributed in large amounts in the OECD countries; unfavourable agricultural policies; and market practices of corporate agribusiness. The influence these international prices have against real costs faced by the unprotected and unsubsidized small farmers is a major obstacle to their development. Half a billion people farm with no machinery nor inputs.

In this context, local and regional markets were seen as key for development: local obstacles to exchanges should be removed and liberalization should start from the local, where differences in productivity are small. The usefulness of supply management schemes was also noted, such as those put in place by the EU and Canada in relation to its milk products, in order to ensure stable remunerations to producers while at the same time avoiding the systematic production of surpluses.

The Special Rapporteur has expressed his positions on how the right to food framework could guide the choices to be made between different models of agricultural development in a public statement, issued with this summary of proceedings. This statement is available on www.srfood.org and on <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/index.htm>