

How the Science Media Failed the IAASTD

You may not have heard of it, but a potential landmark document in the fields of development and agriculture (called by some the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) of agriculture) is currently in the late stages of reaching fruition.

Drafted by 4,000 scientific and social science experts from around the world, it is called the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD). The IAASTD (www.agassessment.org/) is unusual in being a collaborative document evaluating solutions for agriculture, poverty and development that is actively inclusive. Thus it is multi-disciplinary but also inclusive in terms of geography, institution and gender. As such, the IAASTD is potentially extraordinarily valuable as a uniquely representative and holistic document of the best current thinking in agriculture and development. In this it is a significant departure from most international agriculture reports that are typically dominated by one perspective, one government or one interest group (and which typically fail to help poverty for that reason).

As if that were not enough, there is even a further cause to value the IAASTD. It asserts repeatedly what it terms the multi-functionality of agriculture, by which it means that agriculture is not just a provider of food or fodder, but a provider also of social security, of ecosystem services, of landscape value, as well as other 'outputs'.

Perhaps inevitably, given this broad and deep perspective the current IAASTD draft adopts a more sophisticated analysis than is usual in international reports. Most international reports propose solutions to poverty that resemble Escher's impossible objects. Each report may be internally consistent but clash with other goals. Thus agricultural objectives for example typically are incompatible both with social objectives and environmental objectives for development. IAASTD therefore should be seen as an attempt to use inclusiveness and multidisciplinaryism to circumvent these problems.

Instead of principally understanding agricultural development problems as principally functions of low yields and lack of productivity, it considers wider issues such as food quality, sustainability, water use, land tenure, energy use *etc.* as crucially important components of any solution. Furthermore, it attempts to recognise the rights and needs of small farmers, women farmers and the hungry while also giving appropriate emphasis to the significance of power and its unequal distribution in the creation and maintenance of poverty. In line with this analysis the draft promotes special policy emphasis on small/poor farmers, the involvement of women in farming and non-chemical farming in order to promote food security.

If they are ever implemented, the lessons drawn by IAASTD (at least those in the current draft) would represent a remarkable break with current practices which, in most countries typically

emphasise (though they usually do not call them so directly) farm consolidation and chemical-intensive agriculture.

It is often lamented that our societies have an abundance of knowledge and a shortage of wisdom, but the current IAASTD draft comes as close to providing wise guidance for agriculture and development as we have yet seen. Its chief message is appropriately revolutionary: we have so far fed the world principally by depleting natural capital and we must now look beyond business as usual if we really want to address poverty.

The GMO Angle

The IAASTD draft document is surprising for still another reason. Although supported by the World Bank, it does not offer much support for transgenic crops as the best hope, or even as a particularly useful tool, to alleviate the ills that beset developing countries, the hungry and the poor.

Most likely, inclusiveness and scarce support for GMOs by the IAASTD are in fact connected. It is probably no coincidence that a document arrived at transparently, using a tolerably democratic process (i.e. it was not written behind closed doors), and using a multidisciplinary approach, should conclude that GM crops have 'lingering safety concerns' and may even be unhelpful to rural development.

These conclusions in general, and the lack of support for GMOs in particular, are immensely unwelcome in some quarters. The biotechnology publicity machines of Monsanto, Syngenta and others have not spent twenty years carefully positioning transgenics as the solution to every agricultural problem in order for them to be ignored by the largest and most diverse collection of agriculture and development policy experts ever assembled.

Last October, Monsanto and Syngenta resigned altogether from the IAASTD project. Though they gave no public reasons for their resignation, the industry body CropLife International told *Nature* magazine that an inability to make progress in arguing for GMOs was the fundamental reason (1).

A Tragedy for the Poor?

In a recent editorial, *Nature* magazine argued the interesting point that withdrawal of these companies was a tragic event. The companies, said *Nature*, were 'Deserting the poor' (1). Leaving aside that Monsanto and Syngenta were a very small part of the IAASTD process, this statement is hard to support from a scientific point of view. Are Monsanto scientists more knowledgeable about poverty, development and the needs of developing country agriculture than university or government scientists? Probably not. Do Syngenta scientists have fore-knowledge of impending agricultural developments not available to the rest of us? They may do, but if so these are company secrets which have not so far been made available for discussion or disputation. Does *Nature* believe that academics and government scientists are unable to make

the arguments for biotechnology? But if the scientific need for the companies' presence was hardly overwhelming, it follows that neither is their loss a particularly significant one.

The inclusion of these company scientists was primarily a recognition, not of their expertise but of something else - most likely the power and influence of their employers, plus the company presence on the IAASTD steering committee and the companies' financial support of the IAASTD. All of which are essentially political reasons for inclusion. Once included, it would be naive however not to have expected that their primary goal would be anything other than to ensure that the assessment erected no obstacles to the introduction of transgenics, and so it proved. It was predictable perhaps, but Monsanto and Syngenta were about as useful to the assessment as Exxon would have been at the IPCC.

The Real Motive for Withdrawal?

As the science media correctly asserted, the IAASTD is important (which begs the rather important question of why they have up to now ignored it). But if their accounts are to be believed, Syngenta and Monsanto's withdrawal from the IAASTD can be fully explained by the frustration and difficulties of a handful of mid-level employees (2, 3). But is this really a plausible explanation? That multinational companies base strategic decisions on the 'frustration' or convenience of their employees? Far more likely surely, especially given that some negative publicity for the companies would (and did) accompany withdrawal, is that this explanation is not the real one. More plausible by far is the possibility that Monsanto and Syngenta's withdrawal was carefully calculated.

History tells that the most common reason participants abandon important but frustrating multi-party negotiations is when they believe they can better achieve their aims by abandoning, and therefore delegitimising, whatever agreement is eventually reached. And for maximum effect delegitimation has to occur in public. If this was in fact their strategy, then Monsanto and Syngenta would have been very pleased indeed by what happened next.

Following their withdrawal, *Nature Biotechnology* devoted its full editorial page to questioning the credibility of the (post-corporate) assessment, reporting that IAASTD's criticisms of GMOs were "unsubstantiated" and reflective of a "bias against top-down solutions" and further that the report was "skewed" and not "representative" (2). *Nature's* editorial called the report "undoubtedly over-cautious and unbalanced" and agreed that the company defections were "a blow to the credibility" of the IAASTD (1). The largest article of all was a feature in *Science* (3). As with *Nature Biotechnology*, the core of the *Science* article focused on the "question of balance" and assertions that the outcome was negative because of "bias". *Science* even reported the no doubt impartial molecular biologist Jonathan Gressel as saying "The whole thing was incredibly stacked". Though giving more-or-less respectful attention and space to defenders of inclusiveness, *Science* gave no space at all, in four pages, to anyone prepared to argue the possibility that the IAASTD assessment of GMOs was fair and realistic. Perhaps what would have made Monsanto and Syngenta most pleased was the allegation by a person "who asked not to be named" that the "best scientists" were not on the IAASTD (3).

In placing the blame for the corporate boycott exclusively with the IAASTD, perhaps it never occurred to any of the journal editors that in so doing they were supporting a tiny handful of corporate biotechnologists against the aggregated views of 4,000 independent scientists?

Monsanto and Syngenta have so far won the media battle, but the real test of their strategy is still to come: will they attempt, and if they do, will they succeed, in derailing adoption (or modifying the text) of the final report. If they were to succeed that really would be a tragedy for the poor, because the IAASTD, at least in its draft form, is a potentially world-changing document. It offers a lot and it asks a lot: a chance to make a real improvement to livelihoods and sustainability in return for rethinking agriculture as usual. It is a shame that the science media would rather support (big) business as usual.

References

- (1) Anonymous (2008) Deserting the hungry? *Nature* **451**: 223-24.
- (2) Anonymous (2008) Off the rails. *Nature Biotechnology* **26**: 247.
- (3) Stokstad, E. (2008) Dueling visions for a hungry world. *Science* **319**: 1474-76.

Download the draft executive summary of the IAASTD (called the Synthesis report) at the end of the online version of this Commentary at <http://www.bioscienceresource.org/commentaries/brc9HowthesciencemedifailedtheIAASTD.php>