Women's advances in agriculture: the sky must not fall

Women hold up half the sky, according to the Chinese proverb. Women also sustain more than half of ACP agriculture. In recent decades, much has been achieved in empowering women within the agricultural sector. However, recent structural adjustments, and the associated drive towards increased cash crop productivity and exports, point to the need to address broader issues when considering matters affecting women farmers. Recent advances by women are threatened with erosion and need safeguarding, but beyond that, a new series of advances is needed for them to gain better access to male-dominated domains: credit, land and technology.

The expression 'The African farmer and her husband' has appeared in several publications recently, including Spore (see issue 67). It draws attention to the fact that two-thirds of the agricultural labour force in some African countries is made up of women.

Women typically work longer hours than men when producing food. On average, they work 13 hours more than men each week in Asia and Africa. In Uganda, they work more than twice as long: 50 hours a week, compared to 23 hours for men. While men tend to produce cash crops, or hire out their labour, women produce the bulk of the food for local and family consumption. In sub-Saharan Africa, they grow and sell 80 to 90% of this food, and in the Caribbean 45%. In tropical Africa, Asia and the Pacific, up to 80% of all fish and shellfish caught by local fisherfolk are cleaned, dried, smoked and marketed by women and children.

Caretakers of the food supply

The key role played by women in agricultural production is not yet adequately reflected in national and international policies. Less than 1% of the projects of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) actually include strategies for reaching women. The United Nations system as a whole, less than 4% of projects benefit women. The gap is clear. 'Men receive most of the agricultural extension services, new technologies and credit, and women are the caretakers of the food supply' stated the report 'Women: the Key to Food Security' by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), based in Washington. 'If women were given the same resources as men, developing countries would see significant increases in agricultural productivity'.

Most investment in women's agriculture has focused on income-generating strategies, and labour-saving devices. Thus every self-respecting village association, women's group, and non-governmental organisation in every country have projects to increase the
PRODUCTIVITY OF HOME-LOT GARDENING, using simple methods to increase soil fertility and to improve pest control and product storage. Within the limits of the local market, these approaches have doubtless generated income for women farmers, and have increased nutritional levels.

The last few decades have also seen an upsurge in appropriate village technologies for the cultivation and processing of small volumes of produce. From the hoe, the solar fruit drier and the hand-held nut sheller, to the small bottling plant operated by a women’s group, there are countless examples of low-cost technologies which have removed part of the drudgery experienced by women who farm and process food. These technologies and their lived experiences have been valued both by the communities themselves and external sources (from small NGOs to international agencies). They have led to innovations in technology transfer, with experience and equipment being shared between villages, countries and even continents.

LIMITS TO GROWTH?

These programs aimed at improving the way women farm, have clearly had their impact on the income and material quality of their lives, and on agricultural production. However, their contribution towards gender equality is less clear: many would argue that they have led to no significant changes. It is argued that because these programs are grounded in income-generation and the elimination of drudgery in the subsistence sector, instead of micro-enterprise development or cash crop production (projects which usually target men), these approaches tacitly accept the notion that women’s productive work is less important than men’s, and hence, that lower standards for women are acceptable.

The growing commercialisation of agriculture has led to an increasing focus on the optimisation of production and on conquering markets — instead these two are of CTIA’s priority information themes. These strategies are intended to provide and maintain food security, and thus meet part of the material needs of all peoples regardless of gender. However, there is a risk that given their initial male bias they will exclude women and thus slow down, hinder or even replace the long walk of women towards empowerment.

In Rwanda, in most ACP States and elsewhere, it is men who have access to land, technology and credit at the levels required for profitable small-scale production. In contrast, women’s access to land, credit and equipment for post-harvest processing and food production. Demand from the urban market for processed foods is growing fast (see article on pages 4 and 5). The local and regional demand for items such as canned and bottled traditional sauces is filling a small industrial revolution. Yet early attempts by women’s cooperatives to bring about this change were thwarted by lack of access to credit. The reluctance of banks to invest in women’s enterprises, which have little or no collateral, reflects that seen in the field. In some African countries, according to the International Women’s Network, women farmers receive less than 10% of the total credit allocated to small farmers, and only 1% of the total credit allocated to agriculture.

HOUSEHOLD LEADERSHIP

Giving women a household leadership role often has dramatic effects. United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) reports that recent research into households headed by women revealed that theirs had markedly better diets. In Rwanda, female-headed households consumed 377 more calories per day, as compared to male-headed households in the Gambia, the difference was 322 additional calories per day. Pre-schoolers from female-dominated households in Kenya have a significantly greater incidence of diarrhoea than do children from male-dominated households.

B EYOND CREDIT?

An alternative to credit that is now being developed in several women’s agricultural and small enterprise programmes is ‘income-smoothing’. Instead of taking out a loan, other financial services are exploited, such as savings and/or insurance. By saving and/or buying insurance, a borrower can have access later to lump sums at crucial moments — to bridge a crisis, to pay school fees or to replace a g推荐 on a go-with-the-market basis is replaced by their ability to save a credit that is no longer ‘women’s’. In this way, the financial sector can be seen as part of the solution to the gender bias.

SECURITY OF LAND AND PROPERTY

The last few decades have also seen a change in the importance of strategies which improve property rights for women. He suggests that, in Uganda, laws about land ownership are gender-blind, and that nowhere in the constitution does it say that women cannot own land. In practice, he points out, the majority of rural women have access to land but lack control or ownership of it — that remains in the hands of male kin. Unless property rights can change, we risk having a deliberate policy of intensifying the burden of women, in the name of ensuring increased agricultural production.

If it’s not appropriate to women...

As well as a need for land, there is a need for technology. Access to technology, for both women and men, requires education, information and finance. ‘Under-investment in women’s education has high costs elsewhere, it is men who have access to land, and, hence, that lower standards for women are acceptable.

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Women and agriculture....
Yam in the home

Yam can be grown anywhere: even down- town, on paved roofs, terraces, balconies and – why not? – in boasts in Dakar, in Cameroon, for example, a clever do-it-yourself senior citizen of some sixty odd years has developed an original method of growing a white Yam variety. It has the decided advantage of being cheap and represents a good example of economic use in cities.

The yams are planted in plastic sacks or cases made from raffia bambou. These are filled with a mixture of soil and compost, and a yam seedling is planted 10 cm deep. The stalks are attached to stakes, and guarded by a wire collar, or by planting them near by trees. They are protected from sun and rain by a straw sheet. When the yam tubercle starts to form, the downward head is removed, taking care not to dam- age the root. This allows the tubercle to be sliced up into several new pieces.

When ready to harvest, the yam is almost the same size as the sack or case (about 1 metre in length).

Moving goods depends on the quality of the road networks. This is not a major prob- lem for the average farmer in Côte d’Ivoire, who has good access to tarred roads and well- maintained rural tracks. In M dagascar the situation is less secure. Take the case of Aouna Bal, president of the Circle of Madagascan Farmers (CAM), who grows a variety of crops (primarily rice, but also cassava, maize, taro, banana and clove) on a seven hectare farm, 160 km north of the port of Taomasina (for- merly Tamatave).

“In our area, it is the col- lectors working for the large traders who still call the tune,” he rues. “They have small boats to get around the problem of bad roads. The only alternative for a farmer who does not want to accept prices which are too low, nor see his crop perish on the spot, is to carry them by back or donkey, for 15 km to the nearest town.”

Modern and informal sectors

The food transport sector in Africa is, gen- erally speaking, rarely well-end. An expert in this field, Jérôme Lombard, describes the sector as ‘very segmented’. He refers first to the market for commodities (‘poor’ and ‘light’ freight) which in fact shapes the major ar- teries for transport between areas of production and consumption. When there is the market for food products, (‘poor’ freight), which has greater constraints, for example in the form of far-flung sources of supply, and run-down roads. Transport in the food sector is often run by small operators who have little capital and usually few special- ized skills, and who cover the risks of the business by diversifying their activities (2).

At the consumption end of the chain, a major focus is on re-furbishing existing mar- kets (covering market stalls, providing water and electricity), and on building large whole- sale markets, as in Bouda (Côte d’Ivoire). In future, both the central government and local authorities will have to make sure that these essential facilities are featured in urban development plans.

The food transport sector is organized in a way that allows the modern and the infor- mal approaches to co-habit. In the modern sec- tor, there are production contracts with quar- tered purchase, removing many of the infor- mal fees for the parties involved. The informal sector bustles with imagination and job creation.
There’s oil in those kernels — but how much?

Small producers, mill owners, extension workers and others interested in learning crop oil content, especially where market value, can now do so simply and with fast accuracy. Researchers in India have come up with a way to rapidly determine the oil content of groundnuts.

The device, known as an archimelometer, is an inverted, polystyrene cup (the calibration cup) attached to a graduated ‘stem’ of copper tubing, itself attached to a ‘buoy’ made from a stainless steel container with a lid under which hangs a galvanized iron-wire hook that holds a perforated stainless steel cup called the ‘pan’. In total, it measures about 40 cm, is easy to assemble and transport. For these reasons, the archimelometer is ideal for use in small rural communities and local agricultural research stations.

Specific advantages of the new cutter are that: graps is chopped quickly and uniformly, thus avoiding waste; there is no risk of cutting one’s fingers; it considerably reduces the physical labour of the task; and it is portable and can be used to chop grass directly into the feeding trough. The chuff cutter is available through various sales outlets in the country.

Chuff cutter saves time and labour

In recent years an inexpensive Tanzania-made cutter has become popular among farmers in Uganda and southern Africa. Known as the ‘chuff cutter’, it is a simple, easy-to-use tool for chopping chuff also known as chaff — a constant supply of livestock.

By the time the government of Madagascar put out an appeal for international assistance in July 1997, the most recent invasion of locusts had already wreaked havoc, in the southern half of the country, in the Central Highlands and part of the Eastern and Western Regions. The entire region had been devastated.

It was a catastrophe waiting to happen. A 1993 report of an evaluation mission on the impact and prevention of locust plagues, financed by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), had left no doubt about the urgency of the situation and the shortcomings of anti-locust measures at the national level. However, at the time, the success of government campaigns was in doubt. With too little action being taken too late, and despite an emergency credit obtained in September 1997 mainly from the World Bank, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and the European Union, the plague has not been tamed.

The list of shortcomings is long. It includes the institutional mix, and the lack of the national committee for the anti-locust campaign. run by the armed forces; the development management structure; policy divergence among funding agencies; irregular supplies of pesticides; and crop-duster airplane breakdowns. The litany of complaints and criticisms must be music to the ears of the well-fed locusts and grasshoppers.

Lessons of past mistakes have been learned slowly. In 1958, it is recalled, more than ten specialists and 1,000 consultants were sent to Madagascar to fight the grasshopper plague. The results showed that the locust plagues were not preventable.

Ambitious databases on the Americas and Caribbean

Agroinfo Americas is a set of free, agricultural and livestock databases accessible by the Internet, which is also of interest to other regions. The databases are designed to provide users in the Americas and Caribbean with access to a large amount of practical and market information, so that they may better compete in the agricultural market.

The databases are arranged in a hierarchical database. Linked to related agricultural Websites are also provided.

This ambitious Website is being developed by the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation in Agriculture (IICA), Caribbean/Latin American Action (C/I/AA) and Texas A&M University. Planned features include an agricultural supply, demand, trade and price database; Oline Analytical Processing (OLAP), which will be supported by SAS Decision Support Software; environmental impact, Geographical Information System (GIS); and a trade and tariff database.

Help update ‘Natural Crop Protection’

The much-used book ‘Natural Crop Protection’ is being updated. The revised edition will be a case-studies on participatory research approaches in natural crop protection methods, and seek to stimulate more adaptive and farmer-oriented research. The book will be expanded, using new information from readers. Everything from bulb characteristics to new tools, methods, and kinds of fermented substances and local practices for natural enemy management, including mixed cropping, will be featured. Anyone having a particularly effective method is encouraged to send their contribution(s) to the editor/author.

There are six important vegetables in the world, in terms of their output and the conditions under which it was grown.

Family farming schools

Seeing a son or daughter heading off to town to hunt for work has been a sadly familiar sight for farmers across the ages. It connotes three fears: the end of the family farming tradition; departures to towns to hunt for work; and the depopulation of the countryside.

Rural entrepreneurs who will have provided their children with an education so that they may join in agricultural work and turn a profit are fundamental, and their importance is underscored by the current step backwards in the national education system. Parents is fundamental, and their involvement of parents is essential, their involvement of parents is fundamental, and their association runs the establishment of the community. It often involves selecting students to work as assistants in the training centres. The trainers are recruited from the agriculturalists, agricultural students, and teachers, whom governments may make a decent living from agriculture in today’s world. It is this wish that lies at the root of family farming schools. The first family farming school was set up in a small French village in 1937. Established on the initiative of a group of farmers, the parish priest and a local agricultural adviser, the school used a teaching system that combined theoretical knowledge with practical field sessions. Today there are more than 800 such schools in the world, of which 100 are in Africa.

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METHODS EMPLOYED WERE BELIEVED TO INCREASE, BECAUSE THE TRADITIONAL YAM CULTIVATION COULD NOT BE REPEATED DUE TO ITS REQUIREMENT FOR MUCH WATER.

FARMERS HAVE ADAPTED THEIR CULTIVATION TECHNIQUES IN RESPONSE TO NEW CONSUMER DEMANDS FOR MORE AND DIFFERENT YAMS.

THE 'PODLET' IS LIGHT AND EASY TO HANDLE IN COMPARISON TO THE NORM.

THE 'DIET' IS PARTICULARLY PLEASING TO YOUNG CHILDREN.

FISHING WITHIN LIMITS

THE FISHERMEN OF TIKERÉ, A VILLAGE 70 KILOMETRES FROM THE SMALL VILLAGE OF KPINGDEBBE, A MOUTHANG, HAVE TAKEN STEPS TO SPECIFICALLY SUPPORT SMALL-SCALE FISHERS IN THEIR COMMUNITY.

THE MEASURES TAKEN INCLUDE RESTRICTING FISHING CATCHES OR PROHIBITING FISHING IN SPECIFIC AREAS.

THOSE WANTING TO CATCH CAIMANS MAY HAVE BEEN FOUND BY THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES.

THE SUCCESS OF THESE MEASURES HAS RENEWED INTEREST IN THE VILLAGE.

INCOME FROM SALES IS NOW USED TO FINANCE LOANS TO MEMBERS OF THE GROUP.

THE INTERNATIONAL COURSE ON PROTECTED CULTIVATION IS DESIGNED FOR PROFESSIONAL CULTIVATORS, TEACHING THEM ABOUT CONSERVATION OF THE GLASSHOUSE AND POLYHOUSE CROP PRODUCTION NATIONWIDE.

THE ECOLOGICAL LAND USE MANAGEMENT WORKSHOP IS OPEN TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT WORKERS AND IS AIMED AT STRENGTHENING THE CAPACITY OF ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED IN DEVELOPMENT.

THE FUTURE WORKSHOP FOR TRAINED HONEYBEES HAS BEEN ORGANISED TO PROVIDE ACCESS TO ITS TRAINING COURSES FOR PEOPLE IN ACP COUNTRIES.

THE MASTERS DEGREES IN 15 DIFFERENT DISCIPLINES PROGRAMME IS DESIGNED TO PROVIDE A WIDE RANGE OF AGRIBUSINESS PROGRAMMES.

THE POSTHARVEST TECHNOLOGY PROGRAMME OFFERS FIFTEEN MSc PROGRAMMES IN AREAS SUCH AS POSTHARVEST HORTICULTURE.
The future of plant virology in Africa

African crops are affected by many viral diseases, some of which cause serious losses and undermine food security. Given this it is reasonable to ask: Are there sufficient virologists in Africa? Are the facilities and resources available to them adequate? Does African plant virology receive sufficient support from the wider scientific community? The answer to these questions is a resounding ‘no’; so what can be done to improve the situation?

The number of plant virologists in Africa is low in relation to the wide range of crops grown there, the huge areas of land under cultivation and the magnitude of other problems encountered. Plant virology in Africa has not always been in such a parlous state. In the early decades of this century, when the discipline was still at an early stage of development, the virology being done in various parts of Africa was comparable to that being carried out in the rest of the world. Maize streak, groundnut rosette, tobacco and cotton leaf curl and several other important virus diseases were described during this period and considerable progress was made in transmission studies and in developing resistant varieties.

The disparity began to emerge after the Second World War when the electronic microscope, ultracentrifuge and serological techniques became generally available in developed countries. This, and the big expansion in agricultural research, led to rapid progress in purification, characterisation and identification of viruses and facilitated the development of control measures. Progress has continued, although there has been a trend towards a more fundamental approach associated with the spectacular developments in nucleic acid chemistry and molecular biology.

In recent decades, some progress has been made in Africa but the overall effort has been limited and has lacked resources and skilled personnel. This is not surprising in view of the fact that the livestock sector is trying to develop, measures should be taken to cut down losses like this. I would like to develop an exchange with those of other crop science disciplines because of the relatively low number of trained and available personnel, and the need for sophisticated equipment and facilities. It is also necessary to recognise the need to establish facilities and training programmes, rather than to maintain the current heavy dependence on resources in developed countries. Indeed, it becomes increasingly difficult to arrange suitable training courses overseas as the research programmes and priorities in developed countries differ so greatly from those in Africa, where there is a continuing need for ‘biological’ studies of the type done elsewhere after World War II.

More opportunities for the exchange of knowledge are essential. In particular, there is a need for a conference to follow up the CTA seminar on cassava mosaic disease which was held in Côte d’Ivoire in 1987. Above all, there is a need to bring together plant virologists from developed and developing countries, together with representatives of donors and funding agencies, for discussions on the future of plant virology in Africa and in order to develop an action plan to address present weaknesses.

The opinions expressed in this Viewpoint are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the CTA.
African publishers and international organisations form partnerships

Parthers in African publishing came together at two very fruitful meetings recently, one held in Nairobi in February, and another in Madrid in April. As a result of these meetings, the following initiatives have been proposed, or are under discussion:

- **Participation in a network of African publishers.** A proposal to establish a network of African publishers will be discussed at the General Assembly of the Association of African Publishers (AAP) in 1998. The proposal is to establish a pan-African platform on the Internet, set up with the help of the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education and the University of Malaya, and to work towards the development of a database on African publishers.

- **Joint publishing initiatives.** A proposal to publish a series of books on African agriculture, with the support of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations University. The series will cover topics such as agricultural research, biotechnology, and market studies.

- **Networking and information sharing.** A proposal to create a database on African agriculture, with the support of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). The database will be used to share information on agricultural research, biotechnology, and market studies.

- **Training and capacity building.** A proposal to establish a training programme for African publishers, with the support of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Canadian government. The programme will cover topics such as copyright, editing, and marketing.

The meetings highlighted the importance of collaboration and networking among African publishers and international organisations. The proposals are likely to be discussed at the next meeting of the Association of African Publishers (AAP), which will be held in 1998.
How sweet it is: Honeys are in.

The recent surge of interest and investment by small farmers in beekeeping and honey production reflects growing understanding of the various uses of honey, and increased demand from local and international markets. This set of papers from a 1994 conference organised by the Overseas Development Institute and supported with support from the UK Department for International Development, is an expanded review of literature, which considers the changing roles of the public and private sectors in agricultural service provision. It addresses agricultural research, extension work, rural credit, agricultural marketing, veterinary services, fertiliser and seed supply. It focuses on the changes in effectiveness, efficiency and accountability. Much has been achieved in recent programmes of reform and public sector retrenchment. It pays special attention to the effect of reform and adjustment on the poorest sections of rural communities, and on the interactions that characterise rural livelihoods.

As such, it provides a compact but rich overview of current trends in rural development sector reforms. The discussion of rural credit, for example, follows the new trend of providing financial service packages such as insurance and savings, in addition to credit.


Food crises in the Sahel

The Network for Food Crisis Prevention was set up by the Club du Sahel after the serious drought in the Sahel region. The initiative aimed at creating an informal discussion arena for improving their ability to intervene in crisis situations. Preventing food crises in the Sahel brings together the evolution since 1985 of the various systems of crisis prevention and management and covers the contribution of the network to the improvement of these systems.

The experience is generally considered to be positive, but much remains to be done to achieve and ensure optimal food security, and to improve intervention coordination. One priority is to rationalise the various information systems in order to ensure ownership by individuals and organisations at the national and sectoral level. Information systems need to be reviewed and adjusted to the countries’ economic and financial circumstances.

According to the authors, the Sahel is better equipped to deal with a severe crisis than it was in 1984. The prevention mechanisms set up over the past ten years are such that any response is now guaranteed to be more suitable, swifter and better co-ordinated. They recommend that, as regards food security and other development sub-jets, it is time for the donors to change their ways and design their aid instruments to suit the problems to be solved rather than vice versa.


Electronic village trails

Much has been written and said in recent years about the use of Internet technology in rural development, and the Spore 75’s address on TCA’s website, Geeks, is in this context. However, none took it as irrelevant in a context where electricity and telephone networks are unreliable. Some take the other extreme and worship the fantasy world of post-industrial affluence and management. Others can make possible a decentralised world of rural bliss. This is probably somewhere in between, as this Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) publication suggests.

It is a sober but optimistic review of Internet use in rural development (principally in Africa and Latin America), as a way to share information on needs and local knowledge. It argues that the Internet offers a means for agricultural producers, rural people and development professionals to communicate, leading to dispersed and improved assessment of critical information.

Various applications in the field of sustainable rural and agricultural development are described, including economic applications for agricultural producers and small rural enterprise development. ‘Best practices’, or those that allow the Internet to be more rurally accessible, are examined, from infrastructure to community-based management of information services.

At one point the author addresses the publisher (FAO), and says that is important to link up ‘electronic village trails’ with the world of the global information superhighway.


Abo Nutons Communication Development O mio, SOM, via delle Terme di Cascara, 00110 Rome, Italy.

Multiplication tips

This handy colourful booklet describes how to increase cassava multiplication rates, i.e. the increase in propagatable material over that planted, notorious low in vegetatively propagated plants.

In this manner, germplasm may be quickly produced for evaluation and/or distribution. This booklet is published as a series of instructive photographs, slides of which are available from the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA).


Training Program, IN, PM 5 120.

Unless otherwise stated, the books on these two pages are not available from CBA. Readers are advised to write to the publishers for further information.

Multispecies - SPORE 76 PAGE 14

Multiplication tips

This handy colour booklet describes how to increase cassava multiplication rates, i.e. the increase in propagatable material over that planted, notorious low in vegetatively propagated plants.

In this manner, germplasm may be quickly produced for evaluation and/or distribution. This booklet is published as a series of instructive photographs, slides of which are available from the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA).


Training Program, IN, PM 5 120.

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The Association for the Promotion of African Community Initiatives (APICA) is an international association recognised under Swiss law. It was established in 1980 with the objective of supporting development initiatives in rural and urban areas in six countries of central Africa: Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon. Its activities are aimed at promoting new technologies, training development workers in community development and management, and supporting the implementation of mini-projects. These activities form part of a programme which emphasises:

- community development in urban and sanitation issues
- support for farmers’ activities
- job creation and microenterprise development
- promotion of the interests of women and craftspeople
- information exchange and communication.

APICA operates from two offices. The Douala (Cameroon) office covers the countries of west central Africa; the other office, in Sarh (Chad) covers the most westernly countries. Each office provides two support services, one for development and another for technology. In addition, there is a documentation centre focusing on development, and a centre for research, extension and technology training. Staff total forty, including one French and one Swiss national.

In its eighteen years of operation, APICA has implemented a great many projects, through its “all-terrain” approach. These include: the design and implementation of A complete line of technology, sold throughout the coastal belt of western and central Africa, for the extraction of palm oil; production of donkey and cattle carps, ploughs and other agricultural implements; and research and development on the processing of agricultural products.

The magazine “Communautés Africaines” is produced by APICA’s communication service, based in Douala. It is a medium for the exchange of information, experiences and contacts on development, and has a print-run of up to 4,000 copies. The communication service also produces video materials, and has so far published ten practical manuals as well as other publications. Finally, the service organises various meetings on general development issues.

Contact: APICA
BP 5946, Douala Aérea, Cameroon
Fax: +237 37 04 05; Email: apica@camnet.cm

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**APICA: 18 years of robust service**

With the growing need for increased agricultural productivity in ACP States, many believe that biotechnology has a key role to play in improving the quantity and quality of crop yields. Provided they are properly integrated into production systems, biotechnological innovations offer new opportunities to increase productivity. Often, too, they allow users to switch to more sustainable and ecologically friendly production systems, for example, by reducing dependence on chemicals to control pests and diseases. Yet biotechnology applications are owned primarily by private corporations, and the benefits of these technologies are generally not accessible to most developing countries.

To overcome this, a new institutional mechanism, the International Service for the Appropriate Transfer of Agri-Biotech Applications (ISAAA), was created in 1991. It is sponsored by public and private sector institutions, including many donor agencies, and aims to transfer agri-biotech applications from the North, particularly proprietary technology from the private sector, to developing countries.

In its “altruistic dissemination of biotechnology”, ISAAA has a five-pronged approach. It assists countries in identifying biotechnological needs and priorities, and in assessing potential socio-economic impacts. It monitors available applications, and provides honest broker services, matching needs and appropriate proprietary technologies. It mobilises funds from donor agencies. Finally, it provides advice on the safe and responsible testing of biotech products, on biosafety and food safety regulatory procedures, and socio-economic analysis.

So far, ISAAA has developed programmes with institutions in Africa, Asia, the Americas and Caribbean: in total twelve countries, including Kenya and Zimbabwe. Among the projects it is involved with in private-public partnerships are: transfer of a selectable gene marker in cassava (Novartis Seeds/Africa & Latin America); South-South exchange of information, experiences and contacts on development, and has a print-run of up to 4,000 copies. The communication service also produces video materials, and has so far published ten practical manuals as well as other publications. Finally, the service organises various meetings on general development issues.

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