

Learning to Value LEISA: Experiences in Global Knowledge Networking for Low External Input Sustainable Agriculture

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Abstract

This is the story of a growing global knowledge network for the exchange of knowledge and information on Low External Input Sustainable Agriculture (LEISA). In 1984, the Centre for Information on Low External Input Sustainable Agriculture (ILEIA), brought out the first issue of the *LEISA Magazine* (then called *ILEIA Newsletter*). It was distributed to 1000 development field workers. Today, twenty-three years later, the *LEISA Magazine* is going strong. It appears in six languages, in a global and six regional editions, is read in Latin America, Africa, Asia and 'the North' by a quarter million readers.

We describe and reflect on ILEIA's journey over the past twenty-three years.

Chapter 1 (1984-1994) describes the pioneering years wherein the LEISA concept was crafted and gradually given shape. **Chapter 2 (1994-1999)** focuses on ILEIA's efforts to build evidence for LEISA, through its collaborative research programme. This was partly a response to needs for validation of the LEISA concept, expressed by mainstream agencies; in particular ILEIA's donor, the Netherlands Government. It was also a response to an internal need of ILEIA to engage itself in participatory research, rather than just documenting and disseminating others' experiences. This was a difficult period, with some important lessons. **Chapter 3 (1997 – 2006)** describes how ILEIA returns to its core competency, that of making a magazine, whereby a unique bottom-up process of sourcing and editing is followed. It also touches on the process of 'regionalisation', i.e. the development of partnerships with organisations in Peru, India, Senegal, Indonesia, Brazil and China, and the start of regional editions of the *LEISA Magazine* by the respective partners. **Chapter 4 (2007 - ...)** outlines the challenges ahead for both the regional partners and ILEIA. The paper concludes that, anno 2007, in the wake of major global challenges, the LEISA concept is even more relevant than it was in 1984, and hence there is a need for a dynamic, locally and regionally rooted yet global network to further LEISA practice and policy.

Chapter 1: Crafting a Concept (1981 – 1994)

The pioneering years

In the early 1980s a crisis began to surface: 'Farmers who for generations have relied on agricultural systems using low quantities of external inputs have been urged to adopt modern agricultural technologies to increase food supplies. Today, many small subsistence and market-oriented farmers are unable to produce enough food or cash crops to meet their needs. In addition they are experiencing the effects of the Green Revolution strategies. (...) Although the Green Revolution was benign in intent, it evolved into a massive social experiment in which safety nets for many social groups and for many women were full of holes and our understanding of the holistic character on nature was revealed to be far from complete'(Reijntjes et al, 1999).

ILEIA, the Information Centre for Low External Input Agriculture, was among the first to identify this crisis. It was established in 1981 by a small group of 'practical visionaries' who were part of ETC

Foundation, an innovative consultancy group based in the Netherlands. ETC managed to get funding for this 'out of the box' project from the Netherlands Government; this was clearly a time where there was space for innovation.

ILEIA wanted to better understand the extent and nature of this agricultural crisis, but it was also keen to learn more about alternative practical strategies towards agricultural development. In 1981 a fact-finding survey was carried out to learn about organisations and individuals involved in developing low external input sustainable technologies. It was observed that activities were going on but they were fragmented, and there was little or no systematic guidance from established institutions. In the course of this search process for a different, more self-reliant type of agriculture, ILEIA crafted the term LEISA: Low External Input Sustainable Agriculture.

The thinking behind this was that High External Input Agriculture (HEIA) was reaching a phase of increasing problems. It was clearly not appropriate for many small producers world wide, more so for those in degraded, ecologically fragile dry land areas. For these farmers there were no suitable, easy technological alternatives. On the other hand, these regions are often characterised by a high cultural and biological diversity. ILEIA's hypothesis was that there must be a wealth of knowledge *out there* but it remains local, scattered, unless we create a forum that encourages people to articulate this tacit knowledge and share it with others working in other places but likely similar conditions. ILEIA further envisaged that there is a need for a different approach, which is by definition is farmer centred, participatory and knowledge intensive. As there are no standard solutions, locally-specific knowledge about agricultural options would have to be un-earthed and if needed, blended with 'external' knowledge about suitable technologies and approaches. And thus, the first issue of the *ILEIA Newsletter* was launched in 1984. Farmers, field level workers (NGOs, Government) and researchers were encouraged to share practical experiences with LEISA approaches in the Newsletter.

ILEIA's focus on the problems of LEI(S)A farmers was new. But also the approach was different and in a way revolutionary. The starting point for knowledge generation and exchange were not researchers but farmers themselves, and fieldworkers (local and expatriate) working closely with farmers, had built up many practical insights but more often than not, had not articulated or documented their experiences, learning and frustrations. And so ILEIA began to encourage people who had never before written articles, to start writing down their experiences. In the beginning it did so with a small group of people known to ILEIA. But gradually the network started to grow.

Networking was mainly done by increasing the readership and by bringing core groups of stakeholders together in workshops for further deepening of the approach. In the late eighties and early nineties ILEIA organised several workshops; the results of these workshops were published in a series of readers¹. The book *Farming for the Future* (Reijntjes et al, 1992) was a comprehensive effort to systematize the state-of-the art knowledge about LEISA, considering the technical, environmental, social and economic aspects. *Farming for the Future* became a big hit; it was reprinted several times and was translated in eight languages.

With this growing momentum, ILEIA was able to establish several valuable contacts world wide, increasingly also with reputed international organisations like FAO. In the Netherlands, ILEIA contributed to formulation of DGIS' policy on LEISA. In the preparation for Rio Conference the role of NGOs in sustainable agriculture development were recognised. ILEIA played an important role in this.

Responses

This was a truly pioneering phase. There was no readily available conceptual framework, a disciplinary background in agriculture did not help; everybody had to un-learn. Commonly used methodologies were not appropriate. Everybody involved learned a lot. On the other hand, there was right from the beginning a sympathetic reception, a positive political climate, and support from DGIS, the donor. This was the time of experimentation. Jan Pronk himself released the book *Farming for the Future* in 1992.

¹ (1) Haverkort, B. et al (1991) *Joining Farmers' Experiments. Experiences in Participatory Technology Development.* (2) Hiemstra, W. et al (1992) *Let Farmers Judge. Experiences in assessing the Sustainability of Agriculture.* (3) Alders, C. et al (1993) *Linking with farmers. Networking for Low External Input Sustainable Agriculture.*

In spite of all this, an evaluation of ILEIA in 1993 pointed out that there was a growing interest in LEISA but also 'a widespread doubt on the larger relevance of LEISA, its viability in the light of the need for an increase agricultural production for an expanding and more urbanised population'. This critique in itself expressed that the development sector was getting divided in a slowly growing number of 'LEISA believers' on the one hand, and 'LEISA critics' on the other. The main critique towards ILEIA was that it was too ideological. It should become more scientific. It was felt that ILEIA should play more the role of knowledge broker, positioned in between the formal research institutions and field-based NGOs, rather than taking too much side with alternative, yet 'unproven' agricultural approaches that were, according to the critics, grounded in ideologies rather than proper science.

Another question raised was whether ILEIA's main focus should be on fieldworkers or policymakers. This was clearly a question of strategy; so far no clear decision had been taken in favour of one or the other. Actually the key issue for ILEIA was the link between policy and practice. Though the primary target group of its newsletters and various other initiatives were fieldworkers, ILEIA intended to reach policymakers as well and envisaged that the newsletter could become a tool in bridging the gap between policy and practice.

A problem was that ILEIA did not have solid tools for measuring progress and results: to what extent have LEISA techniques been applied or have LEISA concepts been accepted by policymakers? These questions had no answers. This made ILEIA vulnerable to critiques like the ones mentioned above. It could not prove the validity of LEISA, nor the relevance of its approach to generate knowledge and information exchange on LEISA.

Chapter 2: Elusive Evidence (1994-1999)

Crisis and confusion

After the pioneering phase followed a more problematic period. DGIS, the Dutch Development agency and financial lifeline of ILEIA, wanted to see more 'tangible' results after thirteen years of funding. Though ILEIA could show several impressive communication products (the Newsletter, the 'bestseller' Farming for the Future, and several readers), the donor and other mainstream institutions in ILEIA's environment were not yet convinced about the validity of the message: they wanted to see evidence that LEISA was relevant, both at the farmers' level and at the policy level. In response, comparative assessment studies were initiated with the aim to compare between LEISA and conventional agricultural methods in different agro-ecological contexts and to prove the validity of the LEISA concept.

Thus, ILEIA's mandate was expanded: it now included research to assess the viability of LEISA technology systems. ILEIA took up this challenge but it wanted to ensure that the research would be participatory and inclusive. Contacts were established with formal research institutions, NGOs and other relevant stakeholders in three agro-ecological settings where the research programme would be implemented. This collaborative research programme should become ILEIA's new flagship activity. Unfortunately, it capsized in 1996. The result was a near-collapse of ILEIA itself.

Looking at the ensuing crisis from a distance, more than ten years later, it appears to be at least partly due to an (over-) ambitious effort to bridge the gap between a participatory, constructivist research paradigm and the conventional R&D paradigm, which meant different things for different people. There was no shared Theory of Change, neither explicit nor implicit, and ILEIA and ETC found it hard to manage the situation.

The research programme re-started in 1997 with a modified set-up; yet it became a difficult compromise between two different needs which ILEIA wanted to address. One, there was the 'external' need for evidence of the validity of LEISA, as expressed by DGIS and others. And two, there was the 'internal' need of ILEIA to engage in participatory research itself, rather than only reporting about the experiences of others.

Research programmes took place in the Philippines, Ghana, Peru and India. Their objective was 'to provide farmers, researchers, policy makers and funding agencies with convincing insights into the necessity and viability of developing LEISA'. The second objective was to demonstrate the

effectiveness of participatory approaches to technology development by strengthening and supporting farmer experimentation. The collection of scientifically valid data was imperative. The aim was to convince policymakers of the importance of supporting the development of LEISA and to influence conventional research agendas and sensitize the researchers to the real needs and priorities of farmers and the significance of the LEISA concept. The over-all research approach entailed a stakeholder concerted action process, wherein formal researchers, NGOs and other stakeholders took part; facilitation was done, in most cases, by ILEIA.

Some important learning

Meanwhile, the *ILEIA Newsletter* continued to appear on a regular basis. In a special issue, *Finding Common Ground*, in September 1999, ILEIA made up the balance of four years of research experience. Major lessons learned from the studies in the four countries were presented; technological content as well as various aspects of the participatory process and stakeholder dynamics were addressed. An over-all conclusion was that the project had been more successful in creating learning on the dynamics of multi stakeholder processes than in proving quantitative data, facts and figures. The irony however is that it was the perceived need for validation which made ILEIA to embark on this research project.

Reports in the magazine were apologetic about the fact that a quantitative validation could be only partly accomplished:

Results were seriously affected, however, by adverse weather conditions. In the Philippines, reliable quantitative data is only available for the first season because of drought and typhoons in the second and third seasons. (...) Less quantitative data were available for Peru and Ghana where conditions in the experimental fields were less homogenous making quantification unreliable. As the data obtained from the PTD experiments only covers two or three seasons it is only possible to draw preliminary conclusions about the viability of LEISA practices under specific conditions.

ILEIA was, understandably, disappointed that the research process had not led to robust quantified outcomes. Attributing this 'failure' however to adverse and unpredictable weather conditions (!) and other variable factors, appears a bit odd. ILEIA could have used these examples to illustrate the point that unpredictability and variability by themselves are part of LEISA farming, and that therefore the research design itself may have been part of the problem. ILEIA could (should) have learned the lesson that LEISA research requires a different approach that takes these 'uncontrollables' as starting point, rather than as disturbing factors.

The more quantitative the research became, the more tension there was with the participatory spirit which had to be maintained. For instance, 'participatory assessments' of LEISA practices were carried out. These were attempts to combine farmers' assessments with scientific validation. Participatory tools were combined with the use of FARMS, a software tool enabling the quantitative analysis and comparison of performance at crop, plot, farm and aggregated area levels. Both sets of tools were useful and relevant by themselves; they had proven their worth in other situations. But efforts to combine them proved unsuccessful and frustrating. The use of FARMS required systematic and regular collection of data. This was a problem for most NGO field staff, who were not used to this type of scientific rigour. Adequate supervision was lacking. The quality of data collected was therefore poor and hence the very purpose of the effort was defeated. This also affected the participatory dimension. Farmers in India commented: 'Why do we have to produce so much data? Are we doing experiments for ourselves or for the researchers? We are convinced about the technologies long before we can convince the researchers'. Again, these tensions could (should) have formed the basis for a deeper reflection on the research design itself, and about the underlying assumptions.

Good learning emerged however about collaborative processes between farmers, NGOs and researchers and Ministries of Agriculture. The following account from Ghana is a clear example:

The start of the ILEIA research programme in Northern Ghana gave momentum to the earlier initiatives of ACDEP (a Ghanaian NGO network) in developing closer ties with government extension and research. In 1995 this led to a new but informal institutional arrangement, the Northern Ghana LEISA working group (NGLWG) that brought together various organisations concerned with agricultural development. There was keen interest among all professional

disciplines to explore the potential of LEISA . Both the orientation (LEISA) and the approach (PTD) contributed to strengthening relations within the working groups. Mutual respect developed between farmers, NGOs and scientists. A sense of collective responsibility was generated and the confidence of both scientists and farmers in farmer-led research increased. By 1998 the working group had changed its character. Individual members were now supported by their institutions. The informal character had created space for experimentation without jeopardising institutional relationships. In a relatively short time the working group had succeeded in raising the interest of other stakeholders as well as district directors of agriculture, universities and research institutes (ILEIA, 1999).

In some cases the results of these collaborative learning processes have been tangible and lasting. For instance, the Northern Ghana working group has become a truly important stakeholder platform that plays an important role in regional and national level policy discussions (without any further involvement of ILEIA).

These mixed experiences with 'farmer-led research' have taught ILEIA that when embarking on such processes, clarity is needed about the roles of various actors and about everyone's underlying assumptions. Research can serve to *prove a point* or to *improve a learning process*. Mixing up these different functions without clearly articulating them is bound to lead to 'messy' processes and to endangered partnerships. This was important learning for ILEIA and its partners, though it appears – looking at this episode now, almost ten years later - that much has remained implicit and has not fed into the institutional memories of ILEIA and/or its partners.

Chapter 3: Building Bridges and Beyond (1999 – 2006)

Back on track

After four difficult years ILEIA brought its research programme to a closure. A mandate analysis commissioned in 1998 to consultants representing various geographical regions should help ILEIA in getting back on track. It confirmed what ILEIA already knew: 'Do what you are good at; your core business is to make a good newsletter ... and leave research to researchers'. This did not mean that ILEIA should have nothing to do with research, but it did imply that rather than engaging actively in research activities itself, ILEIA should work *with* research institutions. The mandate analysis also concluded that ILEIA's focus should be primarily on field level workers (NGO and GO) and on Academe, in view of the spin-off that could be expected in terms of influence on research, teaching and extension. Secondary target groups would be agricultural research institutions and policymakers. It was further recommended that ILEIA should decentralise and regionalise.

Going regional

ILEIA's efforts from 1997 onwards to support the establishment of regional editions of the Magazine were successful. Six regional editions saw the light. The first one was the Latin American edition *LEISA Revista de Agroecología*, in Spanish, set up by ETC-Andes in Peru in 1997. After this several others followed: *LEISA India* (in English), by AME Foundation in Bangalore (1999); the francophone edition *AGRIDAPE*, by IED Afrique (then IIED Sahel) (2003), the Bahasa edition *SALAM* by VECO-Indonesia (2003), and *Agriculturas*, the Brazilian edition by AS-PTA (2003). The most recent entrant is 可持续生态农业 (*LEISA China*) implemented by CBIK, a Kunming-based support NGO (2006). The regional editions, together, had in 2006 more subscribers than the global edition of the Magazine.

Subscribers' statistics clearly show that the regional magazines take four to five years to establish themselves. During this period ILEIA supports them, content wise, organisationally and financially, in building up their magazines, their sourcing and distribution strategies. Once they are on the road, a fast growth, both qualitatively (in terms of the regional content) and quantitatively (in terms of numbers of subscribers) is being observed. As of December 2007 the regional editions together have almost twice as many subscribers as the global edition.

The long haul towards success

The continuing popularity of the *ILEIA Newsletter*, since 2000 called *LEISA Magazine*, and the successful process of decentralisation and establishment of regional editions, have not just happened, but are a result of strategic planning and joint efforts. Another strategic assessment study,

carried out in 2002, identified some important clues to ILEIA's success in global knowledge and information networking for sustainable agriculture (ECDPM, 2003).

First of all, the open-endedness of the LEISA concept was seen as a key factor contributing to the successes of ILEIA and its growing network of regional partners. It is an inclusive concept that provides direction rather than clear boundaries, inspiration rather than dogma. This practical, non-dogmatic approach to sustainable agriculture development is one of the elements that set ILEIA apart since its conception. Readers said this:

'It is not easy to explain it, but ILEIA has not pretended to present LEISA as a rigid or exclusive way to go, but more as a synthesis of ecological-sustainable agricultural technologies with a strong social foundation. In this sense it is more than a technology; it comes close to being a systemic proposal (for change)'.

'LEISA's relative independence is appreciated. This does not always occur in the same way in national or international research programs'.

Secondly, the *LEISA Magazine* is seen as a powerful instrument, a unique vehicle for knowledge and information sharing in support of sustainable agricultural development and poverty alleviation in the South. The magazine has been able to maintain high quality standards and the focus continues to be on the relevance and resilience of small producers in poor areas. It reaches where it matters most: readers' surveys consistently indicate that, even with increasing access to internet world wide, the magazine reaches many readers with no or very limited access to internet and other sources of agricultural information, especially in Africa. Government extension field staff is an important category which has poor access to the internet (Rizopoulos, 2007). Readers made the following comments:

'I love reading the magazine because it offers practical solutions to problems that hinder development or production in most of our small scale farming areas. If most of our farmers are exposed to such experiences, this will go a long way in alleviating poverty'.

'The magazine is one of our great resources through which we are providing appropriate technical know-how on farming amongst the rural people. We have established a rural library ... after sunset we gather in it to read and learn'.

'The magazine has brightened and opened my mind by the way of showing me different approaches, ideas, research discussions made by different groups of farmers and organisations to the development of agriculture'.

'In fact the magazine is my personal lover, wife, and my friend. For that matter I always have one or two copies in my field handbag. It is my main source of reference whenever I am in the field with farmers'.

Readers' statistics

Over the years, the *LEISA Magazine* has built up a large readership; as of December 2007, the seven editions are together reaching almost a quarter million readers. 43% of these are development field staff, 26% are researchers, 10% are administrators/decision makers, 6% are teachers/lecturers, 13% are farmers/ community leaders, and 2% belong to other categories. They work in government organizations (41%), NGOs (21%), schools/training Institutes/universities (18%), community-based organizations (18%), International organizations (3%), others (8%). 41% of readers survey respondents say they have practically applied approaches which they have read about in the magazine, 46% has used material for teaching and training purposes and 23% has translated articles into other (local) languages. These facts indicate that information sharing through *LEISA Magazine* has a wide spin-off effect.

An often undervalued part of the effort that goes into making the *LEISA Magazine*, is the discovery, systematisation and documentation of practical experiences. This is a learning process in its own right

where local stakeholders, experts and academics engage in practical enquiry to understand and assess the value of local practices and/ or the effects of new technologies. ILEIA and its partners liaise regularly with hundreds of institutions. At least a thousand authors, mostly practical experts, are being stimulated yearly to actively share their LEISA experiences. This shows the strength of the global LEISA network in mobilising local knowledge for documentation and global sharing. Equally undervalued is the effort and skill required in the process of selecting and editing field-based experiences, for which LEISA editors have adopted the term *didactic editing*.

Complementary to the *LEISA Magazine* is the www.leisa.info website, which is connected to the six regional websites and gets about 30,000 visitors per month. In a review commissioned by IDS it was rated as one of the top five websites on agriculture (Hurst, G. and C. Brown, 2006). This website provides free access to the database with LEISA material. More than three thousand articles published in all the Magazines are available to download free of charge, in line with the open access ideology of ILEIA and partners. The website, with a wealth of LEISA related experience accumulated from all over the world, may well be considered as a proof of the validity of the LEISA concept.

In contrast to its evident role in reaching out to large numbers of practitioners world wide, ILEIA continues to play a rather invisible role on the background when it comes to policy advocacy. This is not strange considering that LEISA is a pragmatic and open-minded concept. Organising a focussed lobby for advocacy on it is almost impossible. A striking element however is that ILEIA's policy influence is achieved through providing information through its magazine. On the other hand, some of the regional partners are active in local and regional level policy advocacy; they use the magazine as an instrument in their advocacy work.

Chapter 4: Relevant and Resilient (2007 -)

Regional partners' challenges and achievements

During the next phase we expect increasingly dynamic knowledge networking especially at the regional level, while ILEIA's role will gradually shift from coordinating to one of facilitating joint learning and content- focussed advocacy. Looking at the present situation of ILEIA's six regional partners, some important challenges being faced by them are:

- Finding high quality, locally sourced articles, more so in areas where 'writing is not a common habit', and primarily from those who are interested in 'doing work' rather than in publishing per se. This requires a constant communication with authors, in a 'didactic editing' mode.
- Achieving an appropriate balance between 'regional' and 'international' articles of good LEISA quality.
- Creating a unique niche and becoming influential among more than 400 agricultural journals in the region (China).
- Coping with the increasing numbers of subscribers and distribution costs: 'Most subscriptions are from personal subscribers and some of them are willing to pay, but are based in remote rural areas and do not have bank facilities or credit cards, nor access to internet' (Peru).
- Designing a fundraising strategy to sustain the production and distribution of the magazine.
- Creating a system that will make sure that the magazine is well delivered/distributed and that provides feedback on the usage of the magazine.

On the other hand, regional teams can capitalise on some important achievements:

- LEISA knowledge is being systematized in the regional context
- Regional editions have been successfully linked to LEISA Radio Projects (Peru, India)
- After electronic communication facilities had been established, there has been a significant increase in the number of new subscribers (Peru and India, over 100% in three years)
- Being recognised as a unique magazine – serving the needs of the practitioners as well as those involved in training and teaching.
- A two year documentation capacity building programme of consortium partners was undertaken resulting in enhanced sharing of LEISA information in public domain and visibility for the partners' work (India)
- Increasing activity and visibility in national seminars and debates. The LEISA concept is more often being quoted in policy approaches and documents of mainstream research and

- academic institutions which seek publication focusing on their participatory experiences (India)
- More local articles are being published in the global edition (Indonesia).

Lessons learned about the relevance of publishing *Agriculturas* (the Brazilian edition)

The main lesson from our years of publishing is that the success depends on the creation of a favourable social setting that promotes initiatives with more than rhetoric, but that takes it on as the expression of a socially-shared practical experience, both intellectually and politically. For it to appear and to be consolidated, this favourable social setting must arise out of a dynamic social process that finds its source of vitality in ongoing interactions aimed at mutual learning based on experiences generated out of local initiatives by the groups and organizations of which it is composed.

This setting is being progressively built over the past two decades, with the emergence of many local social processes and of thematic and/or regional networks that bring together dynamics in social experiments that promote ecological family farming in Brazil. Yet it has been above all in the past five years, coming out of initiatives to give a nationwide expression to the local and regional networks, that exceptional conditions have been created for the establishment of *Agriculturas* project, which can enrich local experimental processes and stimulate interaction amongst the social agents who promote those experiences.

In the context of AS-PTA's institutional strategy, the magazine plays at least two important roles. The first relevant aspect is that the *Agriculturas* seeks to grant visibility to practical experiences linked to real processes in rural development, rather than to agro ecological theory. In this sense, fortunately there are already some good periodicals published in Brazil on agroecology. While they play an important role in disseminating agroecological thinking, especially for academics, these vehicles are poorly linked into social processes of sustained rural development in Brazil. The publication of a magazine on experiences in agroecology, which goes beyond the theory to present concrete social experiences, plays a strategic role in promoting interactions amongst local social processes and the academic and political spheres. At this moment we are evaluating the results of the readers' survey and some answers confirm this hypothesis. The second aspect is that *Agriculturas* magazine plays a key role in stimulating processes to systematize local experiences which have not yet managed to become visible due to the lack of available channels for public exposure.

The challenges for ILEIA

As a network organisation, ILEIA will have to transform its role of co-ordinator into that of a co-learner. We will review and renew the focus and contents of the global edition of the *LEISA Magazine*. Should it continue to be a global edition, or take a more European perspective? A priority will be to intensify support to LEISA-like initiatives in African countries. We will support the development of regional strategies towards institutionalisation and financial sustainability. Financial autonomy of the regional partners will be important for a further balanced growth of the network. Capacity-building for documentation and systematisation will be an important feature of our work in the coming years as it creates the conditions for effective articulation of LEISA experiences.

Content-wise we see some major challenges ahead. The World Bank's World Development Report has set the stage for a worldwide renewed interest in agriculture. LEISA advocacy will be needed in the coming years. The renewed attention to agriculture tends to overlook the multi-functionality of agriculture as it reduces rural entrepreneurship to farming, and farming to commercial farming. Current development policy thinking tends to focus, on the one hand, on commercial agricultural production and, on the other, on the creation of social safety nets for the most needy. But what about the huge category of some 600 million (semi)subsistence LEI(S)A farm households that cannot (yet) benefit from commercial agriculture? A strong case must be made for these small farmers who ought to be seen as (potential) assets rather than liabilities. Their role in maintaining biodiversity, in providing local and regional level food security, cannot be underestimated; the resilience of their farming systems may well prove of crucial importance in the context of climate change.

At the same time we see a rapidly increasing interest in fair and green (organic) trade. A major challenge for small producers in the South is to keep pace with the fast increasing demand, both globally and locally, to meet with quality standards, certification and various organisational and

institutional challenges. The changes required from farmers are knowledge and information intensive, and ILEIA, along with its partners, will have a role to play, not only in keeping track of the very rapid changes but to the extent possible, in providing hands-on information on how to deal with newly emerging opportunities and risks.

We see a major challenge when it comes to furthering the systematisation of LEISA experience. Still a large part of the LEISA experiences documented remains localised and scattered. Using existing systematisation experience in e.g. Brazil and taking this to other contexts, would be important.

The LEISA concept has been appreciated for its inclusiveness. We believe that, now more than ever, the world needs inclusive and practical concepts. We therefore believe that twenty-three years on, LEISA is even more relevant than it was in 1984. It requires a dynamic, locally and regionally grounded, yet global network to promote the exchange of innovative LEISA knowledge and information.

Author biographical note

Edith van Walsum has been engaged with local and global LEISA networking, and with Farmer First thinking and practice, since the 1980s. As a development practitioner in Ghana she found inspiration in the ILEIA Newsletter. As a lecturer Gender Studies in Agriculture at Wageningen University she incorporated Farmer First and LEISA notions in her teaching. In the 1990s she was team leader of AME, a bilateral project that transformed into an Indian support NGO, promoting Sustainable Agriculture in South India. In this capacity she initiated the establishment of the LEISA India Magazine. She is presently director of ILEIA.

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