

PRESS RELEASE

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NEW BOOK: PUT FARMERS FIRST TO TRANSFORM AGRICULTURE

Agriculture and food are urgent global priorities with farmers on the front line of some of the world's most pressing issues. Putting farmers at the vanguard of responses to the food crisis and climate change in Africa and beyond is vital.

Putting farmers at the centre of agricultural innovation and development is the subject of a new Practical Action Publishing book, *Farmer First Revisited: Innovation for Agricultural Research and Development*, edited by Ian Scoones and John Thompson, foreword by Robert Chambers and launched today in Nairobi, Kenya, by Achim Steiner, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and Carlos Sere, Director General, International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI).

The book's 150 contributors review cases of farmer-led innovation in 30 countries around the world over the past twenty years. It aims to re-energise the debate about farmer involvement in agricultural research and development, refine the 'farmer first approach' methodologies and set new challenges and goals for the immediate and long-term future.

Farmer First Revisited discusses:

- The methods, institutions and support systems required to transform agriculture research and development systems
- How farmer first approaches can help boost production and get the right seeds and other inputs into the hands of farmers
- How farmers can lead climate adaptation responses, using local knowledge and systems to improve resilience and the capacity to change

The book is published twenty years after the original 'Farmer First' book, when the idea of promoting farmer-led agricultural innovation was considered a marginal, almost subversive, issue. This was followed in 1994 with 'Beyond Farmer First'. But today mainstream opportunities exist for transforming agriculture and putting farmers firmly in the driving seat of change.

In the intervening two decades, the Farmer First movement - a loose, informal network stretching across the world - has experimented with a range of participatory approaches to agricultural research and extension with farmers at the heart of the innovation process.

Participatory plant breeding, for example, has involved farmers in the process of choosing and testing new crop varieties. Extension systems have equally been transformed, moving from top-down instruction towards farmer-to-farmer exchange and joint learning. The use of new information technologies has expanded too, allowing information sharing between farmers. As a result, farmers are increasingly seen as partners in the innovation process, rather than merely recipients of national and international research and extension systems.

Yet failures of conventional agriculture and associated institutional arrangements are apparent everywhere. The generation of an African Green Revolution, for example, requires a new agriculture based on partnerships, not top-down impositions and rooted in diverse knowledges

rather than singular technical solution. Wider perspectives on innovation, linking with research and markets, technology development and users are needed.

Judi Wakhungu, Executive Director, African Centre for Technology Studies, Nairobi, Kenya and co-chair International Assessment of Agricultural Science, Knowledge and Technology for Development (IAASTD) argues the book shows “why we need to continue questioning conventional assumptions about agriculture, and why multiple knowledges and sources of innovation are more important than ever.”

That opportunities exist for farmers to drive this innovation are especially evident in Africa. Government commitments through the CAADP/NEPAD framework are in place; funding support is being channelled through organisations like AGRA; and policy wider commitments are being affirmed by the IAASTD, the World Bank’s World Development Report on agriculture and the discussions around the Global Partnership for Agriculture.

And as this new book shows, there are two decades of ‘farmer first’ experiences to build on. Gordon Conway, Chief Scientific Adviser at the UK Department for International Development (DFID) notes: “Twenty years on and the concepts and practices of Farmer First remain powerful and compelling, and even more relevant in today’s world”.

Joachim Voss, former Director General of the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture in Colombia comments: “Farmer First has won broad acceptance by rigorously proving its superior efficiency in making science work for the poorest and most marginal farmers. It is indeed a pleasure to see how the established and dedicated practitioners, together with a new generation of committed young scientists, have built upon the original concepts and methods to create this dynamic, exciting and effective corpus of work. “

ENDS

EDITOR’S NOTES

Editors John Thompson and Ian Scoones are available for interview

Photos from the Nairobi launch are available upon request.

The Future Agricultures Consortium aims to encourage critical debate and policy dialogue on the future of agriculture in Africa. The Consortium is a growing partnership involving research-based organisations in Africa and the UK, with core funding from the UK Department for International Development (DFID). Through stakeholder-led policy dialogues on future scenarios for agriculture, informed by in-depth field research, the Consortium aims to elaborate the practical and policy challenges of establishing and sustaining pro-poor agricultural growth in Africa. <http://www.future-agricultures.org/>

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