

A critical review of the Tropentag 2007:

What is new in agricultural research?

Since 1996, the Centres for Agriculture in the Tropics and Subtropics of the Universities of Hohenheim and Göttingen and of Berlin's Humboldt University have organised a conference, the "Tropentag", once a year to present and discuss recent findings in research on agriculture and rural development. Other universities, like Kassel-Witzenhausen, have joined in, and the number of participants, papers and posters presented has more than doubled. Over 600 scientists and a number of practitioners from 72 countries gathered in Kassel-Witzenhausen in October at the 2007 Tropentag – *"Utilization of diversity in land use systems: Sustainable and organic approaches to meet human needs"*. More than 100 scientists came from developing countries, invited by Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD), GTZ and InWEnt.

For most visitors, it was hard to follow an unbroken thread relating to their own priorities, as the 129 papers and 310 posters presented were arranged in 29 thematic sessions in a colourful and sometimes arbitrary manner. This could reflect that the conference theme indeed attracted the scientific world. The presentations covered a wide range of issues, and no topic was left out that does not move the mind and heart of an agricultural researcher. But it was difficult to find out what is really new in agricultural research and to detect any really practical findings that would help farmers and the rural poor to solve major problems. However, some good examples were presented, e.g. a paper presenting preventive methods for the urban population in

West Africa who consume vegetables grown watered with untreated wastewater. As these communities cannot yet afford and maintain safe sewage plants, agronomists have to find a solution. More creative research that focuses on urgent human needs is required.

Climate change not yet on the agenda of agricultural research?

The major challenge of our days, climate change, is going to seriously affect agricultural production in the tropics and subtropics during the next decades. For an outsider to the research community, it is difficult to understand why this issue played hardly any role at the conference.

Climate change will force us to change production systems, grow more resistant varieties, monitor changing ecosystems, and develop new strategies in plant protection. Some of the papers did address this important topic. But what was badly missing was suggestions by the agricultural research community on how to meet this challenge. Moreover, closer cooperation between agronomists, meteorologists and geographers is essential to develop strategies to improve plant and animal production under changing climatic conditions.

Agricultural research has an important role to contribute to sustainability with regard to food supply, environment and human needs. On the first day, a panel discussed the quantitative indicators of sustainability in land use systems – unfortunately, without any result. The panellists and the audience

agreed that while indicators for unsustainability in land use could be found, there were none for sustainability. The views and priorities of the different stakeholders – producers, companies, politicians and society as a whole – simply differed too much.

It was unfortunate that the panellists and the audience did not pay more attention to the keynote address of Professor Miguel Altieri from the University of California, who presented a vivid vision for a sustainable agricultural development. He derived the current needs of agricultural research from his experience as a long-term observer and guide of traditional small-scale farmers applying sustainable or organic production systems. Professor Altieri pointed out that traditional farmers in Central America who practise a highly diversified agricultural system were far less affected by Hurricane Mitch than conventional, so-called „modern“ farmers. To overcome the challenges of climate change, we should learn more from these "diversity farmers", said Professor Altieri. He pledged for closer collaboration with the farmers, learning from their experiences and asking about their needs.

At the end of the conference, good news was spread. Representatives of the donors, amongst them Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), DAAD, GTZ and Volkswagen Foundation, announced that they would be funding agricultural research in future. The promotion of agricultural research is urgently needed but must be devoted to the right research projects.

Hartmut Gast, InWEnt