

**FROM UNCED, RIO DE JANEIRO 1992, TO WSSD, JOHANNESBURG 2002
NATURAL RESOURCES POLICIES AND MANAGEMENT,
TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE**

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In recent decades, a wide variety of doomsday stories have repeatedly documented the growing role of agricultural systems in the degradation and depletion of natural resources, the pollution of the environment and the contamination of food products. These alarming trends and the multiplication of droughts, pest and disease outbreaks and food shortages and famines, seemed to cast doubt on the feasibility of providing sufficient, reliable and safe food supplies to an ever-increasing world population. In addressing these problems in Rio de Janeiro, the UN Conference on Environment and Development adopted in 1992 a series of measures for action in three important areas: sustainable agriculture and rural development (SARD), combating desertification and drought, and integrated planning and management of land resources.

Ten years later, the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) decided to review progress in these three closely related areas as part of one single cluster “land and agriculture”. It underlined the importance of the commitment taken by the World Food Summit in Rome to half the number of undernourished by 2015 (nearly 800 million people at present). The CSD pointed to the urgency and the difficulty of this challenge particularly in the face of a shrinking land resource base for agriculture arising from competition for land and water resources and multiple degradation and depletion processes and in the wake of multilateral negotiations on agricultural trade. The member governments of the CSD therefore requested more concrete evidence that progress in these three areas was not only feasible but also actually occurring. To this end, the author, in collaboration with a number of individuals and national and international institutions collected and analysed an important number of “success stories” illustrating positive developments in the land and agriculture cluster which is the background to this contribution.

As illustrated, there is great diversity in agricultural and rural systems throughout the world. Thus the adoption of common criteria and indicators for a worldwide selection of successful cases represented a significant challenge and could have gone against the basic values attached to this diversity. A further difficulty is represented by the problems of the scale and the time frame for measuring progress towards sustainability. Such progress was assessed jointly on the three fronts of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. Moreover a balance was sought among the cases presented (for example, many cases of successful agriculture practices were available whereas only few cases of integrated SARD policy were obtained). The selection was, therefore, made on the basis of a consensus of experts and local stakeholders relying on their experience and judgment.

The resulting mosaic of successful cases collected is heterogeneous and so shows that there is no simple panacea, but rather a wide range of possible initiatives and contributions to the attainment of SARD and sustainable land resource management. Most are addressing a specific situation or problem encountered. In order to facilitate their review and assessment, a framework of basic questions and areas of intervention was developed within which the cases were sorted according to their main thrust. The emerging picture shows the many areas where some promising progress is being made. This compendium is not, however, an exhaustive account of all the positive results achieved at various levels in the implementation of the Rio agreements in the agricultural and rural sectors.

The optimism which might come out of the “success stories” presented here should not conceal the existing shortcomings and gaps and the immensity and difficulty of the tasks ahead of us in achieving the objectives of SARD and sustainable management of our land resources. The compendium draws attention to the trade-offs and secondary problems which result in successes in one area or for only some segments of the population. There is no room for complacency. This was confirmed by the review recently made of the progress achieved five years after the World Food Summit, which showed that, at the present pace, the reduction by half of the number of undernourished in the world by 2015 will not be attained, unless a much stronger political will emerges to reduce food insecurity.

The challenge is likely to become even harder as the agricultural and rural sectors are particularly vulnerable to the ongoing global changes such as those created by the globalisation of trade, the introduction of new technologies, and the anthropogenic modification of climatic conditions. Nevertheless the basic premises underlying the strategies of SARD and of integrated management of our land resources remain as valid today as when they were enunciated in the Agenda 21 adopted by governments in Rio ten years ago. The sustainable development of the agricultural sector should go hand-in-hand with broader development and investment efforts in rural areas, with the steady improvement of the rural livelihoods, the achievement of a better food security and food safety for consumers, and a more rational and equitable utilization and conservation of our limited land resources for present and future generations.