



# Policy Brief



## International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge Science & Technology for Development (IAASTD): The Process Re-Visited

by

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*Panel discussion by Prof. Judi Wakhungu, in Rome, Italy during the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (established by The Committee on World Food Security in FAO). This seminar is organized at the initiative of France together with other Member States Argentina, Brazil, and Germany. Other organizations (FAO, IFAD, Bioversity International, Cirad, Iddri) are also associated with this event which is targeted to the Permanent Representatives of the three Rome-based UN agencies (FAO, IFAD, WFP).*

### Did the report build on previous assessments?

Six years ago, the World Bank and the Food and Agricultural Organization set up a consultative process to find out whether an international assessment of agricultural knowledge science and technology (AKST) was needed. This was following up on discussions that the World Bank had with the private sector and some NGOs on the state of understanding of biotechnology, specifically transgenics. In 2003 an international multi-stakeholder steering committee convened 11 consultations, the result of which recommended that an international assessment on the role of agricultural AKST be set up.

The IAASTD was launched in September 2004 in Nairobi and was recommended by an intergovernmental plenary of stakeholders. The plenary recommended setting up a Secretariat at the World Bank. The plenary also endorsed the IAASTD design of a multi-thematic, multi-spatial, multi-temporal intergovernmental process with a multi-stakeholder Bureau. The IAASTD governance structure was a hybrid between the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the non-governmental Millennium Assessment (MA).

The multi-stakeholder Bureau was geographically balanced with 30 governments and 30 civil society organizations (NGOs, producer and consumer groups, private sector entities and international organizations). The 30 governments were six from sub-Saharan Africa; five from Latin America and the Caribbean; four from Central and West Asia and North Africa; nine from North America and Europe; and six from East and South Asia and the Pacific. The co-sponsoring agencies served as ex-officio members of the Bureau.

This idea of having a multi-stakeholder process involving everyone from civil society organizations, to scientists, to corporate representatives, and with the final product being approved by 30 governments had not been tried before. But the idea here was to be politically legitimate, to be participatory, and scientifically sound. Another idea was to develop a new style, or format of engagement in order to produce knowledge.

### How were the experts selected?

The nomination process took place in 2004. Stakeholder groups (private sector, consumer groups, producer groups, NGOs etc) nominated the experts/writers by organizing wide calls. They argued that the Assessment was an important process to which they ought to engage, and the final 400 hundred experts were selected by the Bureau, to prepare the IAASTD Report. It is important to mention, that the work for many of the authors was voluntary. This is my personal opinion, but I believe that the reason that the authors were very generous with their time is that the IAASTD provided them with the opportunity to re-think about relationships between AKST, practice, and policy, in novel ways that had previously not been imagined.

### How was the work organized?

The IAASTD goals, scope, structure, management budget and timetable were approved at the first Plenary. (The Plenary comprises the Member States of the co-sponsoring agencies.) The Assessment's development and sustainability goals were approved at the first Plenary. It was agreed that these dovetail the Millennium Development Goals. Therefore, the overall purpose of the Assessment was to assess how agricultural knowledge, science and technology

(AKST) could be used more effectively to reduce hunger and poverty; improve rural livelihoods and human health; and to facilitate equitable, socially, environmentally and economically sustainable development.

But the IAASTD also noted that in order to achieve these goals the multi-functionality of agriculture needed to be acknowledged, with a major challenge being how to simultaneously increase agricultural production while achieving the sustainability goals.

In other words, the Assessment's approach was to critically integrate questions about agricultural commodity production in relation to the environment, livelihoods of poor producers and consumers. This allowed the IAASTD to examine the complex relations that we may need to understand if we are to offer decision-makers viable options for policy generation.

### What were the major debates?

The first major debate – from the very beginning - was about the process itself. You see, the assessment was built on a set of democratic ideals that included inclusiveness, transparency, and decentralized decision-making, and engagement. But this required careful thinking about empirical evidence that could be challenged on evidentiary grounds.

We experienced antagonism among public sector representatives, international research and development representatives, private sector representatives, CSO representatives, and representatives from academia. Bringing natural science and social science authors and experts together created productive tensions. Significant issues that arose included selecting the appropriate strategies to best meet the integrated goals of increased production, sustainable environments, rural poverty reduction and enhancing livelihoods.

These productive tensions were made possible by our commitment to ensure that every author irrespective of discipline and status had the right to provide evidence and support for their interpretation and claim. It behooves me to say that the process provided many opportunities for resolving these tensions and debates. Many were resolved within the chapter teams, while others required the secretariat's intervention in efforts to seek balance in the written documents.

Did we as a secretariat always succeed? No, because in some instances productive tensions turned out to be unproductive exchanges that led some authors to resign. Others withdrew because they were unable to explore alternative interpretations and evidence about production, securing livelihoods, and enhancing sustainability.

Another debate revolved around methodology, and the proposal to use the scenario analysis that sought to build on the MA assessment. The MA offered four scenarios of the future: - global orchestration, order from strength, technogarden, and adapting mosaic around which possible options and trade-offs were designed. We thought that this would allow us to unify natural science and social science perspectives. Many authors thought that this would allow us to build on previous quantitative assessment of options. But this strategy was immediately hotly debated.

Many authors thought that the scenarios work and its quantitative underpins would narrow the framing of

the IAASTD goals and narrow the option of alternative perspectives. Many authors even found it intimidating, exclusive and professionally elitist, and that it was designed to exclude their perspectives and significant alternatives because it was not open debate by multiple stakeholders. After much debate we decided to drop the scenarios work, but its imprints resonated in the final reports.

Another big debate that challenged the process was that of GM crops. The IAASTD did acknowledge in what places GM crops have made positive contributions to some agricultural systems and in which ways the impacts have been positive. A key message from the Assessment, on modern biotechnology (especially transgenics), was that these technologies favor large scale farming of a small number of mega-crops. Transgenics have the potential to contribute to the needs of the poor and subsistence farmers in the future but certainty of contribution is low because this promise has not been realized over the past decade of commercialization, not because of the technology *per se*, but because of how we are using genetic engineering.

But for the industry groups, such analyses was not based on sound understanding of science, and could even undermine poverty reduction, by withdrawing new science and technology opportunities. Driven by these perceptions, the industry groups were not pleased, and went on the attack a few weeks before the IAASTD inter-governmental plenary in Johannesburg in April 2008.

### How were stakeholders consulted (surveys, interviews, workshops)?

The draft chapters were reviewed both within the secretariat through a process led by review editors formally selected by the Bureau, and by the interested public through dedicated websites. I must say that this process challenged our assumptions about the hierarchy of disciplinary knowledge, and perceptions about how owners of particular expertise are ranked – especially in situations where we have contradictory interpretations of evidence.

### How were the results communicated to the different audiences (media)?

The secretariat had a dedicated website where draft reports and final reports were posted for review and feedback. The secretariat also used press releases, press conferences, and employed the services of a recognized media and public relations firm to coordinate the global launch of the IAASTD findings.

In conclusion, the IAASTD process attempted to build on the shared knowledge of all experts. An important message is that even if we do not agree on how to set agriculture, food and nutritional security on the right course by achieving the IAASTD sustainability goals, we must agree that setting agriculture on the right course is a goal that we have not yet achieved. But we must be vigilante about exploring what AKST combinations make sense to the diverse future requirements for the diversity of peoples' needs in different parts of the world. The IAASTD despite the controversies associated with it has served as an effective vehicle for raising contentious issues that have been central to policy discussions about the future of AKST in meeting enormous challenges. This process taught us that business as usual is not an option.