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What agenda now for agriculture?

A response to the World Development Report 2008

19 October 2007

Introduction

After two decades of indefensible neglect, agriculture is back on the agenda. The World Bank's publication of the 'World Development Report 2008: Agriculture For Development' (hereafter WDR), the first WDR on agriculture since 1982, reflects this renewed interest in the sector's potential to reduce rural poverty and inequality¹.

The context is now vastly changed: as the Report outlines, agriculture² faces new challenges, from natural resource degradation, and climate change to trade and market liberalisation, the rise of powerful new private actors and the development of new technologies. So what is the agenda now for agriculture?

This Briefing Note argues that the broad messages of the WDR 2008 are welcome. However, to tackle rural poverty effectively in this new context, policies for rural development will need to change, along with the conception of how different institutions will deliver those policies. In emphasising efficiency gains, the WDR fails both to grapple with new relations of power in the global marketplace and to ensure that equity (including gender equity) remains a core goal for policy-makers.

A step forward...

The WDR sends a strong signal that:

- Agriculture matters to economic growth, food security, livelihoods, and environmental sustainability. Smallholder farming is a 'powerful path out of poverty', and women play an important role in smallholder agriculture. This is a much-needed message. Three-quarters of people living in poverty in developing countries live in rural areas, mostly dependent on agriculture; poor populations will remain predominantly rural for the next two decades³ and poor rural areas are consistently the sites of the most entrenched poverty.
- Improving levels and quality of investment in small-scale agriculture is critical. Twenty years ago, as a proportion of all aid, the major bilateral donors provided more than three times the amount they provide for agriculture today.⁴ The countries most dependent on agriculture have the lowest levels of public spending on the sector, at around four per cent of government budgets.⁵ Quality of funding is as important as quantity, and the Report rightly emphasises the need to increase donor and government effectiveness, and public participation in national policy-making.
- Industrialised countries must urgently scale up their support for climate-change adaptation funds, and adaptation should be mainstreamed into agricultural planning. Countries and communities dependent on agriculture are particularly vulnerable, with the effects already being felt. While the Report argues that current financial commitments to adaptation are 'grossly inadequate', it fails to add that international funding should not be counted towards meeting the UN agreed target of 0.7. While rich countries have caused the problem with many decades of greenhouse-gas emissions, poor countries, and especially the poor and most vulnerable, will be worst affected, facing greater droughts, floods, hunger, and disease.⁶
- The empowerment of producers, including women producers, through organisation is vital in enabling them to get a fair deal from market opportunities (see 'Empowering producer organisations' below).

And a step back

Beyond this, this Note examines two areas of policy in which Oxfam works – trade policy and labour rights – and questions the policy prescriptions in the WDR. It then assesses the WDR's messages concerning the roles of the private sector, producer organisations, and the state. The Report makes some much-needed recommendations, but ignores the negative impact that powerful corporations can have on rural livelihoods. The Report is also too ambivalent about the state's role in promoting rural development.

Who gains from trade?

The 2008 WDR, like the 1982 WDR, asserts that full trade liberalisation will bring decreases in poverty levels. It says, rightly, that OECD agricultural trade-distorting subsidies distort trade and thereby disadvantage poor producers. However, greater liberalisation for developing countries without concurrent reforms of Northern agricultural policies will further exacerbate rural poverty and food security in many poor communities.

The Report argues that poor consumers bear the costs of protecting domestic production. It is true that in some cases liberalisation allows for cheaper food imports, but such a price reduction should not be assumed. As the case of Honduras shows (see Box 1), those with economic power can skew prices to their own advantage.

Box 1: Consumers lose out in Honduras

In Honduras, the top five rice importers currently control 60 per cent of the trade. When rice tariffs were lowered, the import price fell by 40 per cent between 1994 and 2000. The real consumer price, however, actually rose by 12 per cent between 1994 and 2004. The benefits of cheaper imported rice were captured by importers and millers, leaving both consumers and farmers worse off.⁷

The WDR envisages that the governments of developing countries should use trade policy to ensure food security in the narrowest of circumstances. It argues that there could be a 'theoretical case' for 'modest protection' where world prices have a strong impact on domestic market prices and where domestic produce can be directly substituted with cheap imports. Yet, as the history of liberalisation in Peru shows, such a narrow approach could have grave implications for smallholder farmers who depend on the domestic market for their incomes (see Box 2).

Box 2: Peruvian smallholders fail to compete with new imports

In the early 1990s, the Peruvian government introduced a 'shock' programme liberalising imports and promoting exports. Food imports increased dramatically, especially in the cereals and rice sectors. This significantly increased the market competition faced by smallholder farmers – many of them women – who cultivate traditional Andean products such as quinoa, beans, and potatoes. Greater availability of cheap, imported grain accelerated changes in consumption patterns in favour of wheat-based food and rice, while per capita consumption of potatoes declined.⁸

Earnings from export opportunities, while valuable, often only accrue to better-resourced farmers and agri-businesses, and not to smallholders. In this scenario, liberalisation compounds inequality, and often compounds gender inequality (an aspect completely absent from the Report's analysis of trade reforms).

Ultimately, the WDR's prescriptions – 'liberalise and provide transitional support' – fail to recognise that liberalised trade is the *result* of successful growth rather than its *cause*. Rapid liberalisation can undermine a sector before it is ready to compete. The lesson of history is that 'successful' countries succeeded through what would be considered 'unorthodox' means under the WDR prescriptions. The agriculture policies pursued by Indonesia, Malaysia, and Korea, for example, which all used state trading monopolies and import licences and quotas, would not be compatible with the prescriptions in the Report.⁹ The WDR draws its conclusions from a different source – trade modelling – despite recognising that these models 'require strong assumptions'.¹⁰

What agenda should there be, then, for agricultural trade negotiations? While the WDR views the failure of the current Doha round as the worst possible outcome for

developing countries, agreeing a multilateral round that does not deliver on development would in fact impose far greater costs than the status quo. The WDR views regional and bilateral agreements as an alternative means to multilateral discussions where liberalisation is not being achieved. But regional and bilateral free trade treaties impose radical tariff liberalisation without sufficiently addressing rich-country subsidies or non-tariff barriers to market access. Furthermore, they can restrict states' capacity to effect pro-poor agricultural policy (see 'enabling a visible state to exercise effective power').

Ensuring equity in labour markets

The WDR recognises that 'making the rural labour market a more effective pathway out of poverty is a major policy challenge that remains poorly understood and sorely neglected'. As it rightly points out, working conditions in the agriculture sector are particularly hazardous, and often only inadequately covered by labour laws.

What the WDR does not address is how supply chains in agriculture base themselves on the casualisation, and commensurate feminisation, of agricultural labour. The systematically gendered division of roles in the agro-export industry is the result of a model of global purchasing in which employers rely on short-term, flexible female (and often migrant¹¹) labour.

The focus of the Report is on creating more jobs, and it includes little consideration of the quality of those jobs, or how this may be relevant to women workers. The authors see the fundamental policy challenge as 'flexibility versus formality'. This is a false debate, on two counts. First, the notion that raising wages discourages employment is not necessarily correct – in some cases it can raise productivity and profits. Research in Brazil showed that increased minimum wages actually led to higher wages in the informal sector and had no impact on employment in the formal sector.¹²

Second, while waged jobs have improved the economic situation for many women, other facets of employment, such as the stability of income and health and safety benefits, may be equally important both to poverty reduction and gender equity (a dimension missed in the Report). In fact, the recommendation of 'piece-rates' as a suitable way to increase worker productivity carries huge hidden costs for women workers, with longer hours compounding the impact of the time burden of their other household duties. Sustained policy support will be needed to ensure that women receive fair benefits from their participation in the labour force. Box 3 highlights some of the common disadvantages suffered by women employed on a flexible basis in developing countries.

Box 3: The cost of women's participation in agricultural labour markets in Chile

The economic success of the agro-export sector in Chile contrasts with the precarious working conditions for its wage-workers, particularly for women, who make up the majority of the packing house workforce. They are perceived to be more careful, more compliant, and cheaper to hire than men. They often work without a contract, limiting their possibilities of claiming their rights. Their lack of social security protection compromises their future: as temporary workers, they are not able to claim a pension as they lack the minimum contributions to qualify for one. In packing plants where work is paid on a piece-rate basis, workdays lasting up to 20 continuous hours are on record. This becomes a serious risk factor for women's physical and mental health. The impact of such precarious employment also goes far beyond the workplace. Most women are still expected to raise children and care for sick and elderly relatives when they become cash-earners, becoming doubly burdened. Women may involve their children in assisting in piece-rate work, perpetuating a cycle of poverty through the generations.¹³

The WDR mentions that creating political coalitions to support workers' rights is a challenge, but fails to point out the legal impediments to workers' rights to organise. The right to freedom of association and collective bargaining are two of the ILO's Core Labour Standards. The omission of any reference to such globally-binding standards – which have been endorsed by the World Bank itself – leaves out a critical component of an agenda to improve the livelihoods of agricultural workers.

New power relations: what roles for the private sector, producer organisations, and the state?

After two decades of 'market-led development', the WDR correctly identifies that market failure and the absence of effective institutions have led to large welfare losses for small farmers and labourers. In order to deliver on an agricultural agenda for poverty reduction and equity, therefore, it is crucial to ensure that new institutional arrangements strengthen rural communities by rebalancing power relations in their favour.

Channelling corporate power for poverty reduction

A weakness of the WDR is its failure to follow through on the consequences for smallholder farmers and agricultural labourers of immense corporate power in uncompetitive market chains. It recognises the enormous consolidation that has taken place in retail and input markets, and the limits of market forces in facilitating the participation of smallholders. But it ignores the fact that powerful new market forces can undermine, as well as enable, rural livelihoods:

- The Report assumes that 'contracting firms share production and marketing risks with farmers'. In fact, powerful firms can offload such risks, transferring them to the very people who are least able to assume them. As expressed by a wine producer in South Africa, 'We are penalized if the product is not delivered on time, but if the retailers decide they don't want it, it's up to the producer to sell it elsewhere.'¹⁴
- Vast asymmetries of power in market chains mean buyers are able to force down prices of produce and increase the costs of seed and chemical inputs, often inducing a spiral of indebtedness for small farmers. A chain in Malaysia uses

'Cheap gets Cheaper' as its motto, which means its prices are so low that farmers cannot pay for on-farm investments.¹⁵

- Powerful private actors are able to control land and natural resources that sustain rural livelihoods: in Paraguay, 40 per cent of the expansion for soya cultivation has taken place on land belonging to rural communities.¹⁶
- The purchasing practices of supermarkets create intense pressure for low cost, high speed, and high quality fresh produce, a pressure that is 'passed down the chain' to female agro-export workers¹⁷.

The political power of the private sector is portrayed as a purely positive force in the WDR. But, as Box 4 indicates, such power can easily distort policy outcomes away from the interests of the poorest and most marginalised groups.

Box 4: The power of transnational agrochemical companies in Guatemala

Agrochemicals are a significant input cost to small farmers. In Guatemala, the association Crop Life (an organisation whose members include transnational agrochemical companies including Syngenta, Dow, Basf, Monsanto, Dupont, and Bayer) has successfully lobbied the government to keep generic competitors off the market. No new generic competitors have received marketing approval in Guatemala for more than three years, in spite of the fact that nearly all the patents for the relevant products have expired. Seventy-four per cent of agrochemicals available in Guatemala are marketed by transnational companies under virtual monopoly conditions, keeping the prices for agricultural inputs consistently high.¹⁸

A well-regulated agri-business sector can be a significant force for rural development. However, the WDR is short of suggestions about how to achieve this, focusing mainly on corporate social responsibility initiatives. Such voluntary codes can be important in promoting good practice and improving minimum standards. But reform of commercial business practices – for example, short lead-in times – rather than ethical initiatives at the margin, is often more important. Ultimately, voluntary codes require no enforcement and incur no penalty for violation, and thus do not substitute for effective national legislation. Implementing and enforcing legislation to maximise the social and environmental benefits of corporate investment should be a strong element of the rural development agenda.

Empowering producer organisations (POs)

An important message of the Report is the urgent need to support PO performance in order to make smallholder farming more productive and sustainable.¹⁹ Increasing farmers' bargaining power through POs can help to rebalance power in market chains. One example is from the Union of Peasants and Associations of Southern Niassa (UCASN), an association of over 7,000 small-scale farmers in Mozambique that negotiates advance contracts with companies for products such as white sesame and soya. Companies often provide seeds and the association receives higher prices by cutting out informal traders.²⁰

There is a danger that POs are promoted as the new panacea to overcome market failure and the withdrawal of the state. However, PO development itself is reliant on effective state intervention, to provide rural business services, for example, or adult education. One problem is that there are high expectations of what POs should deliver, but a lack of clarity about what they should be empowered to do compounds the problem. The WDR recognises that POs can facilitate access to markets and inputs, exercise a powerful 'voice' to improve public accountability, and provide public services. Yet too many conflicting objectives could undermine the rationale for POs,

and place too great an organisational burden on institutions that may lack the scale and capacity to manage it.

Ensuring fair representation in POs is another major challenge, particularly regarding the inclusion of women farmers. Without examining the range of barriers to female participation (which the Report has not done), it is unlikely that donors or governments will make progress in promoting it. Women are more likely than men to have competing demands on their time – fulfilling household and caring roles, for example, as well as earning an income. According to a testimony from UCASN: ‘I asked the one woman member of the management committee why the others were unable to join the meeting... Two women could not leave their home because they are caring for a sick family member and the third has no access to transport during the week...’²¹

The ways in which POs are supported is vital for the sustainability of such organisations. In Mali, a ‘top-down’ approach, driven by deadlines to privatise the cotton sector, means that many co-operatives exist in name only. A more ‘bottom-up’ approach could improve capacity and broaden their leadership.²²

Enabling a ‘visible’ state to exercise effective power

Regulating powerful private enterprise, upholding core labour standards, and providing the enabling conditions for independent POs to flourish are just some of the areas that require an effective state. The WDR acknowledges this need for a strong state, and recognises that structural adjustment policies have weakened state functions. But it falls short of setting out a vision for the way forward, concluding simply that, ‘Beyond providing core public goods, the state has to facilitate, coordinate and regulate, although the degree of state activism in these roles is debated.’

However evidence from history deserves more attention. In the 1950s Korea and Taiwan built their growth paths on the back of land reforms and rural investment by states that created a pro-poor distribution of income from agricultural growth. The WDR underplays the potential role of the state to enable, regulate and enforce the interests of small farmers and agricultural labourers, while obscuring altogether the state’s place in ensuring equity, particularly gender equity.

The Report also omits the role of bilateral and regional trade agreements in constraining states’ ability to use a variety of agricultural policy tools, acknowledging this only in the case of Intellectual Property patents that prevent farmers from saving the seed of protected varieties. But it leaves out the impact such agreements can also have on agro-chemical prices, biodiversity and the use of indigenous knowledge, financial services, retail, and foreign investment²³

Developing countries for example liberalise financial services in the hope of introducing greater competition and efficiency, which in turn should improve poor people’s access to finance. This however can have adverse effects in practice as recent studies by the International Monetary Fund and the UN show that opening up the banking sector leads foreign banks to ‘cherry-pick’ only the most lucrative customers in the economy, leaving poorer and higher-risk customers for local banks.²⁴ This in turn reduces the profitability of local banks, which previously provided finance to poor segments of the population, and drives them out of business.

In Mexico, the financial-services sector was liberalised in 1993 through domestic legislation that accompanied NAFTA. This had a devastating impact on poor farmers in rural areas. While foreign ownership of the banking system increased to 85 per cent

within seven years, lending to Mexican businesses dropped dramatically. In southern Mexico, the number of small farms with access to credit halved, and where finance was available it came at exorbitant rates.²⁵

Conclusion: what agenda for the World Bank itself?

The agenda for agriculture as laid out in the WDR 2008 contains important and urgent messages, but it is limited in its scope. A broader vision is needed that pays more attention to issues of power, equity, and rights. This would emphasise:

- trade rules that allow developing countries to determine their trade-policy mix based on the development needs of the rural sector;
- the implementation and enforcement of labour legislation for the agriculture sector that ensures decent work for all;
- building an effective state to implement investment and rural development policies for the poorest and most marginalised sectors;
- how men and women are affected and respond differently to new threats and opportunities in agriculture. While the WDR highlights the importance of women's role in agriculture, it often lacks a comprehensive gender perspective.

Implementation is also critical if more 'lost decades' are to be avoided. The Report's strong emphasis on implementation is undermined by its resounding silence on the role and record of the World Bank's own policy and practice. As Box 5 illustrates, this is often at odds with the agenda set out in this Note.

Box 5: Examples of World Bank policy in practice

- World Bank recommendations have promoted significant deregulation of labour markets. Its resource allocation for projects is based on an index that rewards employment laws providing high 'flexibility' to hire and fire at low cost.²⁶ In Morocco, the Bank is recommending more flexible firing to reduce labour costs, and temporarily reducing the minimum wage.²⁷
- In Mali, where until recently the state retained core functions in marketing and price stabilisation, the Bank continues to promote a rapid privatisation agenda. Reform is needed, but the use of lending conditionalities to push through reforms before the necessary institutional frameworks are in place threatens the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of small farmers.²⁸
- Support for producer organisations in Bank lending programmes is mainly focused on their role as civil society organisations in public service reform. While important, less practical support is being given to enhancing their power in the market place.²⁹

An approach that entails more of the same, but with increased financial backing, will not reduce rural poverty and inequality. As numbers of rural poor people rise in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, and climatic shocks increasingly affect rural areas, a fresh agenda is needed, and quickly, to deliver agricultural 'take-off' for small producers and labourers.

Notes

- ¹ This response is based on the near-final draft text of the WDR, and may change in accordance with the final text to be released on October 19th 2007.
- ² Agriculture here includes fisheries, which is critical to the livelihoods of 400 million of the world's poorest people.
- ³ In South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, the number of rural poor will likely exceed the urban poor until 2040 (WDR Overview).
- ⁴ The major DAC donors gave 11.5 per cent of their total aid to the agriculture sector in 1984–85, but 3.4 per cent in 2004–05 ('DAC Development Cooperation Report', 2006, OECD: Paris).
- ⁵ World Bank (2007) 'World Development Report 2008: Agriculture For Development', p.10.
- ⁶ Oxfam International (2007) 'Adapting to Climate Change'. Oxford: Oxfam International.
- ⁷ Oxfam International (2005) 'Kicking Down the Door'. Oxford: Oxfam International.
- ⁸ Oxfam International (2002) 'Rigged Rules and Double Standards'. Oxford: Oxfam International.
- ⁹ M. Stockbridge (2006) 'Agricultural Trade Policy During Take-Off'. Oxford: Oxfam GB.
- ¹⁰ See L. Taylor and R. von Arnim (2006) 'Modelling the Impact of Trade Liberalisation'. Oxford: Oxfam GB.
- ¹¹ The WDR discusses migration as a pathway out of poverty, but does not discuss the important role of migrant workers in agriculture itself, or the conditions under which they are employed.
- ¹² S. Lemos (2006) 'Minimum Wage Effects in a Developing County'. Working paper 06/1. Department of Economics, University of Leicester.
- ¹³ P. Caro (2003) 'Consequences and Costs of Precarious Employment for Women Workers in the Agro-exports Sector.' CEDEM: Santiago, Chile.
- ¹⁴ Oxfam International (2004) 'Trading Away Our Rights'. Oxford: Oxfam International.
- ¹⁵ A. Shepherd (2005) 'The Implications of Supermarket Development for Horticultural Farmers and Traditional Marketing Systems in Asia.' Revised version of paper first presented to the FAO/AFMA/FAMA Regional Workshop on the Growth of Supermarkets as Retailers of Fresh Produce, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, October 4-7, 2004. Rome, 2005
- ¹⁶ T. Palau (2004) 'Avance del Monocultivo de Soja Transgénica en el Paraguay'. Compilación de datos y analisis. Universidad Católica Nuestra Señora de Asunción, Centro de Estudios e Investigaciones de Derecho Rural y Reforma Agraria (CEIDRA), Asunción, Paraguay; and R. Fogel and M. Riquelme (2005) 'Enclave Sojero: Merma de Soberanía y Pobreza.' Centro de Estudios Rurales Interdisciplinarios (CERI). Asunción, Paraguay.
- ¹⁷ Oxfam International (2004) 'Trading Away Our Rights'. Oxford: Oxfam International.
- ¹⁸ R. M. Bolaños (2007) 'Polémica Por Agroquímicos', *La Prensa Libre* (Guatemala City, Guatemala), 31 July; and interview with Luis Velasquez, director of the Latin American Association of National Agro-chemical Industries (ALINA) and president of the Guatemalan Association of Agro-chemical Manufacturers (25 September, 2007).
- ¹⁹ For this section, the authors have drawn on the analysis by Chris Penrose-Buckley in 'Background Public Policy Brief on Producer Organisations', commissioned by Oxfam GB, August 2007.
- ²⁰ C. Penrose-Buckley (2007) 'Producer Organisations: A Guide to Developing Collective Rural Enterprises'. Oxford: Oxfam GB 2007.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Oxfam International (2007) 'Pricing Farmers Out of Cotton'. Oxford: Oxfam International.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ E. Detragiache, T. Tressel, and P. Gupta (2006) 'Foreign Banks in Poor Countries: Theory and Evidence', IMF.

²⁵ Oxfam International (2007) 'Signing Away the Future'. Oxford: Oxfam International.

²⁶ The Bank's 'Doing Business' indicators are highly influential and are also used in the World Bank resource allocation, through the Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA). The indicators reward an employment law that provides high 'flexibility' to hire and fire at low cost, and allows for unrestricted night and weekend work. This approach contradicts the Bank's own Core Labour Standards Toolkit. See http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/No_44_statement_imfwb_1007_2_.pdf. Thanks to Peter Bakvis at the International Trade Union Confederation for his comments on this section.

²⁷ With thanks to Carlos Montes and Anja Linder for their draft, 'World Bank's Policy Advice on Labour Legislation and Waged Agricultural Workers', commissioned by Oxfam Novib, September 2007.

²⁸ Oxfam International (2007) 'Pricing Farmers Out of Cotton'. Oxford: Oxfam International.

²⁹ Oxfam GB (2007) 'Background Public Policy Brief on Producer Organisations'. Oxford: Oxfam GB.

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