

PANEL DISCUSSION:

How can agroforestry rise to the challenges?

The main aim of the discussion, explained Ravi Prabhu, the moderator, was to get the panel, with the help of the audience, to articulate the challenges facing agroforestry. The six-strong panel included representatives of a wide range of different organisations and interests, including the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), an Indonesian indigenous peoples' group, a Kenyan goat farmers' association, a major Indian industrial company, a network of African research institutes and an organisation devoted to the research and promotion of bamboo and rattan. Following some 40 minutes of discussions with the panel, the moderator summarized the range of challenges facing agroforestry before inviting contributions from conference delegates. Some of the challenges related to policy issues; some were technical; some concerned partnerships and scaling up. One of the key challenges, identified by some of the panel and by speakers from the floor, related to the issue of communication. "To a considerable extent, agroforesters are still talking to themselves," suggested Prabhu. "They're not getting their message across to policy-makers and others who really matter."

Prabhu began by posing particular questions to each panellist. A series of challenges began to emerge. As far as Jan Heino, head of forestry at FAO was concerned, more needed to be done to raise awareness about the importance of agroforestry and its many benefits. "And we need better data to provide to politicians," he explained. The level of knowledge about agroforestry varies from country to country, and it's important to maintain a dialogue about agroforestry with politicians and decision-makers.

Abdon Nababan, secretary general of Indonesia's national indigenous peoples' organisation (AMAN), was concerned about the failure of politicians and decision-makers to recognise the importance of the agroforestry systems practiced by indigenous people. "We have the systems, we have the knowledge and we have the institutions," he said, "but the challenge lies in getting decision-makers to recognize the importance of agroforestry."

"Technical knowledge about agroforestry is not enough on its own," explained Aissetou Yaye, secretary-general of the African Network of Agriculture, Agroforestry and Natural

Resources. "We need soft skills too, which involves building the capacity of women, scientists, extension people and others." Coosje Hoogendoorn, the director-general of INBAR, whose research focuses on bamboo and rattan, talked about the challenges of scaling up successful agroforestry projects. She had much praise for an Indian project which has helped to rehabilitate degraded land using bamboo, jatropha and other species. She believed that this sort of project could inspire similar efforts in other parts of the world.

Ambika Upadhyay, the chief scientist at the Imperial Tobacco Company in India, described the importance of the public-private partnership between his company and tens of thousands of Indian farmers. Was this just good PR, asked the moderator, Ravi Prabhu? No, said Upadhyay; his company was helping to supply agroforestry technologies to farmers, benefiting them, as well as the company's balance sheets. "We have to make a profit, but there needs to be a win-win situation for both us and the farmers," he said. That's a challenge other companies must face too.

One of the main contributions from the floor came from Roger Leakey. The panellists, he suggested, had missed out one challenge; or at least, they had failed to be explicit about it: the failure of agroforesters to promote their research and the importance of agroforestry to policy makers. To some extent, he attributed this to some of the overblown claims made in the past. However, we now have ample data to show that agroforestry can provide a range of benefits, both to the environment and society. Besides influencing policy makers, agroforesters also need to convince agribusiness that agroforestry is more than just a low grade science, as he called it. "We are also considered to be boring," explained Leakey, "and we need to spend more time linking ourselves up with professional communicators - even if they don't always know what they're talking about!"

Nyaga Mwai of the Kenya Dairy Goat Association was also concerned about communication. He wasn't talking about promoting agroforestry to TV producers and newspaper editors; rather, he was complaining about the failure of researchers to share their results with farmers. This observation elicited sustained applause from the audience. Another member of the audience, a representative of farmers' group in Uganda, asked pointedly how many others farmers' representatives were present at the congress. Just four, according to a show of hands.

Reflecting on the discussion afterwards, Prabhu remarked that the panellists and the audience had identified a wide range of challenges facing agroforestry, and we now have

solutions to nearly all of these challenges. The pressing need now – and a key challenge – is how to communication the virtues of agroforestry to a wider audience.

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