We can work with the Rio+20 outcome

The final declaration of the Rio+20 conference has drawn a lot of criticism from the media and from NGOs around the world. It is widely seen as a toothless document that does not really address the world’s problems and allows big business to continue to exploit the planet. Biovision’s media releases from Rio have been much more positive – how come?

Of course it would have been better if the declaration had been more specific with regard to setting goals now, time frames in which they should be achieved and appointing international bodies to oversee and, if necessary, enforce these processes. But the decision to establish an inclusive and transparent intergovernmental process on sustainable development goals by the end of 2013 goes some way in that direction and will help to move us beyond the Millennium Development Goals and guide the Green Economy into a true three dimensional approach involving the environment, society and the economy. This also has relevance for agriculture.

But it is also true that with regard to the overexploitation of marine and forest ecosystems the declaration reflects an irresponsible and ignorant attitude. However, in the current world economic climate that was never going to happen. No one was prepared to bear more costs or agree to measures that might restrict growth.

However, it could have come much worse. Some proposals for the text meant an actual step back from standards that had been set well before Rio+20, such as people’s right to clean water and sanitation which was to be worded much more vaguely. Pressure from some countries prevented these setbacks.

I see the glass as half full and believe some passages form a good basis for progress towards a sustainable future.

The push for a more sustainable agriculture being one of them?

Yes, one such area is sustainable agriculture and food systems, where the Biovision/Millennium Institute team had been active for about a year ahead of the conference. With the help of a number of likeminded allies, such as NGO’s and delegations committed to sustainable development, in particular the Swiss one, we managed to get much of our wording into the final text.
So we are very pleased that the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) has been charged with supporting country led efforts to guide the transition to sustainable agriculture. The CFS will model its support after the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) and, most importantly, the CFS will follow a multi-stakeholder procedure, which includes not only representatives from governments, business and science, but especially includes representatives of the farming community and civil society. This is a great basis on which Biovision and its partners can build to advance both, the agriculture and food system transformation projects on the ground and at policy level in our focus countries in Africa.

**But did you not want more from Rio+20?**

Yes, with respect to agriculture the words ‘transformation’ or ‘transition’ of global agricultural policy that we had proposed on the basis of the IAASTD report were dropped. For example, we would have welcomed some firmer commitments to supporting smallholder farmers and granting land rights – particularly for women, who are the majority of these farmers who are denied such rights in many countries.

I also missed a sense of urgency from political leaders. The IAASTD report clearly stated that business as usual is not an option - and the report was published in 2008. We simply cannot afford to lose more time!

Nevertheless, our position and that of the people we work with on the ground has been strengthened. This is a process that involves many interests and we think that we’re at least heading in the right direction.

**And what about agricultural policies and the interest of big agricultural business?**

We certainly weren’t the only ones, lobbying before and during Rio+20. Big business still would like everybody to believe that only huge monocultures and the massive use of genetic engineering, fertilizers and pesticides can feed the world.

But the IAASTD report clearly came to the conclusion, that this goal can only be achieved with sustainable agriculture, based on smallholder farmers who already produce 70% of the world’s food.

And with the world population due to grow beyond 9 billion by 2050, we cannot afford the ill-effects for the environment as a whole, the destruction of fertile soils, the huge waste of food and the social repercussions caused by the methods used by industrial agriculture. Not to mention the speculative nature of food trading fostered by these companies to maximise their profits.

We did feel in Rio that our view is becoming more and more accepted. But the fight must go on.
Where else could you get support for your fight?

One important player in this field is the consumer. An important point also addressed in the declaration. Unless we learn to shop more responsibly, realise that one calorie of meat requires seven calories of grown food and immense amounts of water to produce, we will be even less able to nourish the growing global population.

And today we accept that nearly one billion people are suffering from hunger. At the same time over a billion are obese, courtesy of cheap, processed food. With the growing middle classes in the emerging economies, this problem is going to get much worse if we do not get through to the consumer with these messages.

And then you have UN Secretary Ban Ki-moon’s Zero Hunger Challenge…

Yes, Ban Ki-moon’s vision presented in Rio that not a single person should go hungry in our world of plenty lends strong support to our position. We can even take some credit for this initiative, as it largely reflects the outcome of a High Level Roundtable that we organised in March in New York on this very subject.

Ban K-moon stressed the need for sustainable food systems everywhere and demanded greater opportunities for smallholder farmers given their great share in the world’s food production. His office has been very supportive of our initiative to place sustainable agriculture higher on the agenda of Rio+20. Overall, we had support from many quarters, some of it we had not expected; another reason why my overall assessment of Rio+20 is largely positive and I think we can really work with these results.

One very positive experience in Rio was the constructive cooperation with other NGOs, delegations and representatives of the private sector. So we invite all likeminded and concerned people to join our efforts. Especially the private sector is welcome to sit down with us to seek solutions for making this world a better place, not just for now, but for our children as well.

Note:

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