

FOUR WEEKS TO THE RIO+20 EARTH SUMMIT

Sustainable agriculture must become a cornerstone of the “green economy”

Zurich, 23 May 2012. The “green economy” will be the centre of attention when the global community comes together at the Rio+20 Earth Summit exactly four weeks from now. The Summit can only be successful if it establishes ecologically sound small-scale farming as the main basis for feeding the nine billion people expected to live on Earth by 2050. This is the overall conclusion from a panel discussion at ETH Zurich.

What shape should agriculture take within the “green economy”? To answer this question, Biovision, SWISSAID, and the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE) of the University of Bern have invited experts and scientists to a panel discussion at ETH Zurich. The Rio+20 Earth Summit in June offers the opportunity to bring about a fundamental change of course in the global agricultural and food system. “The main focus in Rio must be on implementing sustainable farming methods and linking science and policy more closely,” demanded Hans Rudolf Herren, President of the Biovision foundation and World Food Prize laureate. “This is the only way for the economy to become truly green as well as socially sustainable.”

Developments in recent years have shown that the industrial modernisation of global agriculture leads to a dead end. “This makes the future development of small-scale farming a key component in global efforts to achieve sustainability – and, consequently, in the related concept of a ‘green economy’,” said Professor Urs Wiesmann of CDE. Caroline Morel, Director of SWISSAID, called attention to the risks of the green economy: “Agriculture must not by any means be reduced to a feedstock supplier for an ostensibly green economy. Even now, forests are being cleared, smallholder families are being driven away, and food production is being given up for the sake of biofuels.” A new study co-authored by CDE shows that around half of large-scale land acquisitions worldwide are driven by the biofuel boom.

Already in 2008, a group of 400 agricultural scientists and experts published the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), which calls for a fundamental change of course in agricultural policy and a reorientation of agricultural research. The report advocates a move away from short-term profit maximisation towards ecologically sound farming that strives not for the highest possible, but for the highest sustainable yields, conserves soil and water, and enables smallholders in the global South to find a way out of poverty. These demands are currently under discussion in the preliminary negotiations for Rio+20: Biovision, CDE, and SWISSAID call upon the Swiss delegation to promote concrete measures towards a paradigm shift in agriculture. Social justice and the human right to food must be given the same importance as economic and ecological goals.

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