23.04.2008

Urgent need to reform agriculture policy

Organic agriculture safeguards farmland

Graefelfing – The rise in the cost of food in recent weeks has caused dramatic situations in developing countries. According to a United Nations (UN) report, the current figure of 850 million already suffering from starvation is increasing at a rate of four million a year. The reasons are manifold and are not simply a question of the cultivation methods employed. Absurd export subsidies, barriers to trade, unfair land distribution, speculation on international agricultural commodity markets, human rights abuse and civil wars are just some of the factors which lead to starvation. Other aspects, such as soil depletion, erosion and salinisation caused by mismanagement can mean land lost to food growing. This is where organic agriculture comes in: by combining modern organic science with local experience, it preserves arable land in all parts of the world. "Sustainable treatment of the environment provides long-term guarantees for those areas needed so urgently for food production," comments Hans Honester, chairman of the steering committee of Naturland, Munich. "For this reason we demand a reversal of the current agricultural policy so as to provide truly sustainable solutions, especially for smallholders. The idea propounded by Volker Kauder, the chairman of Germany's conservative alliance, CDU/CSU, this week, that the food crisis can be solved by means of genetic engineering, should not even be countenanced," he adds.

Organic agriculture can increase yields

It is the smallholders who have born the brunt of misguided agricultural policy over the past decades. Over eighty per cent of those suffering from starvation live in rural areas! However, this is where the potential for protest is weak, with not a television camera in sight. "The agricultural reforms so strongly recommended in last week's report by the World Food Council must be implemented immediately. Attention should again be called to the fact that farmers are the backbone of any society. "Without nature, there can be no culture, and without agriculture, no food!" – this was Hans Honester's reaction to the report. The conclusion of the over 400 scientists and development experts involved was that organic and social aspects of agriculture were currently given short shrift and that farmers' traditional knowledge must again be taken seriously. Friedrun Sachs of Naturland's International Department adds, "Advisory services must pick up from the farmers' own experience. Specialised local knowledge should blend with the scientific insights gained in organic research." Depending on initial conditions, organic agriculture can also lead to increased yields. A study by the University of Cardiff as early as 2002 concluded that, by converting to organic agriculture the yields of e.g. maize, potatoes or coffee leads to stable and increased yields. Reasons cited were the build-up of humus, green manuring, mixed cultivation and the improved water absorption and retention capacity of organically farmed soils. Conversion can improve their income situation and the rural population becomes more self-sufficient. On a global level today, 49,000 farmers, mostly in smallholders' co-operatives, are already working to Naturland's standards. According to the figures supplied by IFOAM, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements, over 31 million hectares world-wide are currently under organic cultivation.

Agricultural genetic engineering is leading nowhere

Modern agriculture has no need of genetic engineering. The rejection of this irresponsible and unsustainable technology is a tenet of all legislation on organic agriculture and of the standards of organic associations. Seed manipulated to be resistant to total herbicides, which the farmer has to buy anew every year, leads to new dependencies and the disappearance of traditional knowledge. Bio-diversity is one of the pillars of indigenous, organic agriculture. Besides this, a new study by the University of Kansas shows that genetically engineered soya yields ten per cent less than conventional soya seed. It is comforting to know that the report of the World Food Council does not regard agricultural genetic engineering as a solution, despite the fraught situation on the agricultural market today. It is high time that governments throughout the world curtail the propagation of agricultural genetic engineering. Naturland demands that Horst Seehofer, Germany's Minister for Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection, put a stop to the cultivation of MON810 genetically modified maize in Germany.

Report by the World Food Council (IAASTD-Report): http://www.agassessment.org/
IFOAM's global statistics: http://www.ifoam.org/press/press/Statistics_2008.html

Naturland promotes organic agriculture throughout the world. With its 46,000 farmers, it is one of the major organic farming associations. As befits a forward-looking association, Naturland regards organic competence and social responsibility as interdependent.

Naturland press release ♦contact: Steffen Reese
approx. 4,800 characters♦ publication free of charge ♦ Please send us a specimen copy.
Naturland – Verband für ökologischen Landbau e.V.
Kleinhaderner Weg 1 ♦ 82166 Gräfelfing ♦ Germany ♦☏ +49 89 898082-0 ♦ fax +49 89 898082-90
naturland@naturland.de / www.naturland.de