

UK Food Group comments on agriculture, environment, trade and labour rights

DFID White Paper consultation 'Eliminating World Poverty'

The UK Food Group¹ has been closely involved in previous consultations on DFID's agricultural development and related policies. Our members also participated in the activities of the Commission on Intellectual Property Rights, resulting from one of the recommendations in the previous White Paper. The UK Food Group is also the focal point in the UK for the international campaign for More and Better aid to agriculture². In this context, we would like to make a few observations on the proposed new White Paper on the areas of agriculture, the environment, trade and labour rights.

We welcome the opportunity to participate in the process to deliver a new White Paper this year to the extent that it will build upon and strengthen the initiatives and policies proposed in the previous two White Papers. Our support is also qualified by the extent to which the new White Paper will signal a decisive shift in the manner of development assistance towards an inclusive, deliberative process of inclusion of poor women and men and their representative organisations in decision making about, and actions resulting from, aid policies and programmes.

Our concerns are especially focused on the deteriorating physical environment and the lives and livelihoods of poor rural and urban food producers and consumers whose plight has increased over recent years, often due to poor policy, unfettered liberalisation and the concentration of productive inputs and assets, as well as the concentration of trade and retail chains into the hands of ever fewer corporations.

The poor, the undisputed intended beneficiaries of aid policy, deserve better from an enlarged Aid budget that should be increasingly directed towards strengthening their capacities to effect beneficial changes within a protected physical, economic, social and political environment.

Agriculture

With respect to agricultural development policy, we would direct you to our, and our members', correspondence and comments concerning the recently adopted DFID Agriculture Policy. We anticipate that the new White Paper will support aspects of the Agriculture Policy and would further welcome it if the focus of the White paper's endorsement of it were to be on strengthening the social movements of farmers, livestock keepers and fisherfolk and other small-scale food producers whose views need to be taken into account in all relevant policy dialogues.

At the launch of the DFID Agriculture Policy, apart from criticising the waste of Aid monies on developing GM crops in and for poor countries (something that clearly diverts research resources and effort from developing sustainable agricultural

¹ The UK Food Group is the network of 37 leading national and international organisations working on food and agriculture issues. Its broad membership includes farming, development, consumer and environment Civil Society Organisations who share a common concern for global food security.

² For the principles and activities of the campaign for More and Better aid to agriculture see www.moreandbetter.org

technologies), among other things, the UK Food Group Chairman welcomed para 137 of the policy paper, which committed DFID to:

Creating a supportive policy framework

137. We will support developing country governments to:

- create a long-term vision for agriculture and to reflect this within their poverty reduction strategies;
- ensure the participation of representatives of the rural poor in shaping agricultural policies;
- strengthen and, if appropriate, reform public sector institutions so they can deliver important functions which support agricultural development;
- ensure that agricultural development strategies provide incentives for the sustainable use of natural resources and environmental services; and
- meet internationally agreed labour standards.

We would like to see this enshrined in the new White Paper, outlining the modalities and timeframe for achieving this, and with an indication of the resources that will be provided for realising these important outcomes. We intend to monitor the implementation of this new policy and measure it against both DFID's own criteria and also the principles for Better Aid as adopted by the campaign for More and Better aid to agriculture.

Environment

With respect to environmental and related issues concerning genetic resources and agricultural biodiversity (including those mediated by CBD and FAO), we are concerned that DFID has very limited capacity to support progressive policy development in these areas – something that needs to be righted in the new White Paper. One clear result has been the absence of sufficient follow-up to the report of the Commission on Intellectual Property Rights, one of the most important outcomes of the previous White Paper. It would be clearly undesirable if this pattern of response were to be repeated after the adoption of the new White Paper. Indeed, if the new White Paper is not able to ensure the implementation of outstanding commitments and outcomes related to previous White Papers then its utility will be questionable. The importance of reducing dependence on harmful pesticides which undermines livelihoods needs to be recognised by supporting agroecological production for small scale farming communities. Furthermore, new commitments on Climate Change, which do not address some of these fundamental underlying issues of access to and control over productive natural resources, will be gravely flawed.

Trade

The White Paper crucially provides an opportunity to strengthen the trading position of small-scale food producers. Our concern on agricultural trade is that there is fairness in trading within and between local areas, countries and regions. This in turn reduces food miles, improving nutritional quality as well as stimulating farming economies. There should be evidence of local decision-making in the types of food systems adopted in any area. Our view is that the closer the relationship between, and proximity of, producer/worker and consumer, the better and also the greater the proportion of the retail price that is remitted to the producer/worker, the better. We support further investment in regional trade as a priority. Further, we would insist that the UK and EU policy rapidly eliminates direct and indirect export subsidies on foods and redirects internal subsidies away from industrial agricultural production towards small-scale agroecological production and responsible harvesting of food both on land and from the sea.

In these ways local food economies in the UK and Europe will be strengthened for those foods that can be produced locally. Similar policies enacted in other countries and regions would similarly strengthen their food economies. Trade of excess production should be facilitated especially by reducing tariffs on imported goods produced by small-scale food producers that cannot be provided from within the importing country.

The distorting and contaminating impacts of food aid should be removed and aid monies invested as a matter of last resort solely in local sourcing of foods desired by intended recipients. More upstream investment in agriculture and the protection of markets and food stores would clearly be preferable.

The White Paper should reflect these priorities, we believe, many of which are enshrined in the food sovereignty policy framework.

Labour standards

The White paper should address the role of the government will take in regulating overseas operations of UK owned multi-national companies. If trade is to benefit the poor, it has to be balanced by at least minimum labour standards. Most countries have signed up to the ILO Conventions, but only a minority of them actually enforce the standards these embody. Key to these Conventions are rights to form trade unions, to have freedom of association and to carry out collective bargaining. The UK government could act in two ways to ensure that these and other rights, embodied in the ILO Conventions are supported by: (1.) Making it illegal for retailers, selling within the UK, to sell goods from countries which regularly fail to comply with these internationally agreed standards (2.) Targeting more financial support towards the development or empowerment of national labour inspectorates, systems of advocacy for supporting labour rights, and other initiatives geared towards boosting the enforcement of ILO Conventions in producer countries.

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