

Basis for action

130. Agriculture occupies one third of the land surface of the Earth, and is the central activity for much of the world's population. Rural activities take place in close contact with nature, adding value to it by producing renewable resources, while at the same time, becoming vulnerable to overexploitation and improper management.

131. The rural household, indigenous people and their communities, and the family farmer, a substantial number of whom are women, have been the stewards of much of the Earth's resources. Farmers must conserve their physical environment as they depend on it for their sustenance. Over the past 20 years there has been impressive increase in aggregate agricultural production. Yet, in some regions, this increase has been outstripped by population growth or international debt or falling commodity prices. Further, the natural resources that sustain farming activity need proper care, and there is a growing concern about the sustainability of agricultural production systems.

132. A farmer-centred approach is the key to the attainment of sustainability in both developed and developing countries and many of the programme areas in Agenda 21 address this objective. A significant number of the rural population in developing countries depend primarily upon small-scale, subsistence-oriented agriculture based on family labour. However, they have limited access to resources, technology, alternative livelihood and means of production. As a result, they are engaged in the overexploitation of natural resources, including marginal lands.

133. The sustainable development of people in marginal and fragile ecosystems is also addressed in Agenda 21. The key to the successful implementation of these programmes lies in the motivation and attitudes of individual farmers and government policies that would provide incentives to farmers to manage their natural resources efficiently and in a sustainable way. Farmers, particularly women, face a high degree of economic, legal and institutional uncertainties when investing in their land and other resources. The decentralization of decision-making towards local and community organizations is the key in changing people's behaviour and implementing sustainable farming strategies. This programme area deals with activities which can contribute to this end.

Objectives

134. The following objectives are proposed:

(a) To encourage a decentralized decision-making process through the creation and strengthening of local and village organizations that would delegate power and responsibility to primary users of natural resources;

(b) To support and enhance the legal capacity of women and vulnerable groups with regard to access, use and tenure of land;