

# LISTEN TO THE PEOPLE

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**W**hat would a family farmer from Cornwall and small farmers in India have in common to talk about if they met? Quite a lot, in fact, as I found out when I went there earlier this month as a witness to a *prajateerpu*, or citizen's jury, on the proposed plan for agriculture in the state of Andhra Pradesh.

Vision 2020, as the American consultants who have drawn up the plan call it, aims to modernise and mechanise agriculture, through the use of GM crops and intensive monocultural farming systems, including intensive dairy and poultry production. Much of this production will be carried out on a contract-farming basis and much of the produce will be exported. As a result as many as 20 million farmers and their families will be moved off the land as farm size is increased and mechanisation takes place. What exactly the 20 million displaced farmers are going to do instead is not addressed other than through vague references to

"employment in the service sector". This Vision 2020 is supported by a number of aid agencies, including the UK Government through the Department for International Development (DFID)<sup>1</sup>.

To a UK farmer like myself, it all sounds rather familiar. We too have been told that the demands of an increasingly globalized market require a drive for efficiency, more mechanisation and larger farms. We too have been told that every year yet more of us will have to leave the land. While I was in India another farmer near to my own farm has decided to give up the battle to stay farming. His farm has been taken over by another in an attempt to survive by becoming bigger and more intensive. I am beginning to lose count of the number of farmers who have given up in the last 18 months in a 2-mile radius of my farm. I too should have given up if I'd used my business sense rather than my heart and my addiction to farming and the countryside when looking to the future.



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*Ph Dr Matt Smith*

When I began to listen and talk to the Andhra Pradesh farmers I found that they face much the same everyday problems as I and my neighbours in Cornwall. There is the weather and pests of course. But like us they also receive very low prices for produce, which are often, like ours below the cost of production, due to market place power in a few hands at the other end of the food chain. Like us they are also facing a mounting burden of debt as they try to survive. UK farming's large debt to the banks has helped to fund the UK's cheap food policy.

And as in the British farming community, there is an increasing problem of "rural stress": and of farmers leaving the land for an unknown future and a feeling of having no value in the eyes of society, and farmers suicides.

A further complaint from the Indian farmers, which again resonated with my own situation, was that they were not being listened to. Several of them complained about the current aid packages. They said, they were not what they most needed to help them; far more useful to them would be advice and support for watershed management, water harvesting and irrigation, or help restoring local seed banks and grants or loans to buy buffalo. Or for small scale processing such as the crushing mill producing neem oil I saw in one village. If I could pick up these reactions in a visit of ten days, how is it that the US consultants, not to mention the numerous Aid Agencies, are failing to?

I became increasingly aware that like here decisions were being made about how they should farm and about their futures by people who had no grass roots contact with or understanding of agriculture.

Could it be because they are not farmers and don't ask the right questions? Or may be its because the small schemes are not grand enough for politicians to brag about?

We too are not listened to, many environmental, wildlife and animal welfare organisations are producing their visions for UK farming without talking to grassroots farmers. All of them are failing to address the real problem in UK farming, that the farmers share of the retail pound spent is too low and this is causing farmers to intensify production just to break even. And that if food and agriculture are to be part of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) then many of their visions are not compatible with the rules of that free trade.

A similar lack of understanding on the part of the decision-makers is now threatening to steer farming in Andhra Pradesh towards the very methods of production that we in the UK now claim we don't want: intensive monocultures, factory farming of animals and damage to people, the environment, wildlife and the landscape.

In fact there is a more than a note of hypocrisy in the northern aid agency's support of Vision 2020. In the UK, we are starting to move in the opposite direction: the environment and the health of the countryside are now judged to be more important than food production, not least because as a rich nation we can afford to import food from poorer countries. This week Margaret Beckett outlined the UK's government's view on food, farming and the environment. It is quite clear that the minister and the government, along with many others have still not grasped the fact that you cannot have a farming system that produces a healthy environment, high animal welfare and pretty landscape and is competitive on a world market.

The government's view is to switch more support for niche farming - organic etc which is all well and good but this alone will not stop the mass exodus from the land of our small family farmers - it will support a minority not the vast numbers of farms that fall - we will see maybe 30% of the food we need produced in the UK and the remaining 70% mass-produced imported food. That way can have the best of both worlds - good quality food, a fine environment and wonderful landscape to look at. We will of course ignore the collective environmental consequences of transporting that food around the globe; the environmental and social costs of increasing production in the countries from which we buy that food. And these countries will of course be advised by us to use the very systems of intensive farming we wish to stop using. Looking at the vision proposed for Andhra Pradesh, I got the impression that the UK government, having finally grasped that there is a problem with the industrial model of agriculture in England, has decided to export the problem to countries like India.

One of the points made by the citizen's jury in their verdict was that " foreign aid (from white people) should respect our vision and benefit the poorest." I have no doubt that DFID and the other aid agencies will claim that this is also their aim, but I wonder whether they have ever really consulted the people who will be affected by Vision 2020. From what I saw, it looked more like a case of "we know best and our very expensive consultants agree with us".

We all have to wake up to the fact that food and those who produce it are vital for our very survival, and that it is far more important to us than the profits of a few big corporations. None of us will survive very long by eating money and living in a badly damaged environment. Governments and others around the world have to be prepared to listen, learn and make decisions for a truly sustainable world food production, which does not exploit rural people and the environment for the financial gain of the few.

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**Michael Hart**

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<sup>1</sup> see LANDMARK 41  
pp 10, 11. ED