Introduction

For close to a century rural development policies and practice have taken the view that farmers mismanages soil and water. Farmers have been advised, lectured at, paid and forced to adopt new soil and water conservation measures and practices. Many have done so, and some environments and economies seem to have benefitted for a time. But critical internal contradictions have often undermined these efforts. Financial and legal incentives bring only short-lived conservation, and farmers soon revert to their own practices. Many efforts have thus been remarkably unsuccessful, frequently resulting in more erosion (Pretty and Shah, 1994).

For soil and water conservation to be successful and sustained these contradictions must be avoided. Projects must see farmers as the solution rather than the problem, and so put local knowledge and skills at the core of programmes. They must reinforce local organisations through participatory planning, an interactive and empowering approach to participation. Recent evidence is indicating that these new encounters between professionals and farmers are producing considerable productive and sustainable benefits. There are a growing number of mostly small-scale project that are sufficiently successful to suggest the need for application on a much wider scale. A collaborative study coordinated by the Sustainable Agriculture Programme of IIED and partner institutions in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Australia from 1992 to 1994 provided detailed case studies of the processes and impacts of 22 participatory watershed development projects. This paper summaries the findings of New Horizons: The economic, social and environmental impacts of participatory watershed development, and discusses implications for the future of watershed development and policy.