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FARMING MATTERS

Small-scale agriculture for a sustainable society

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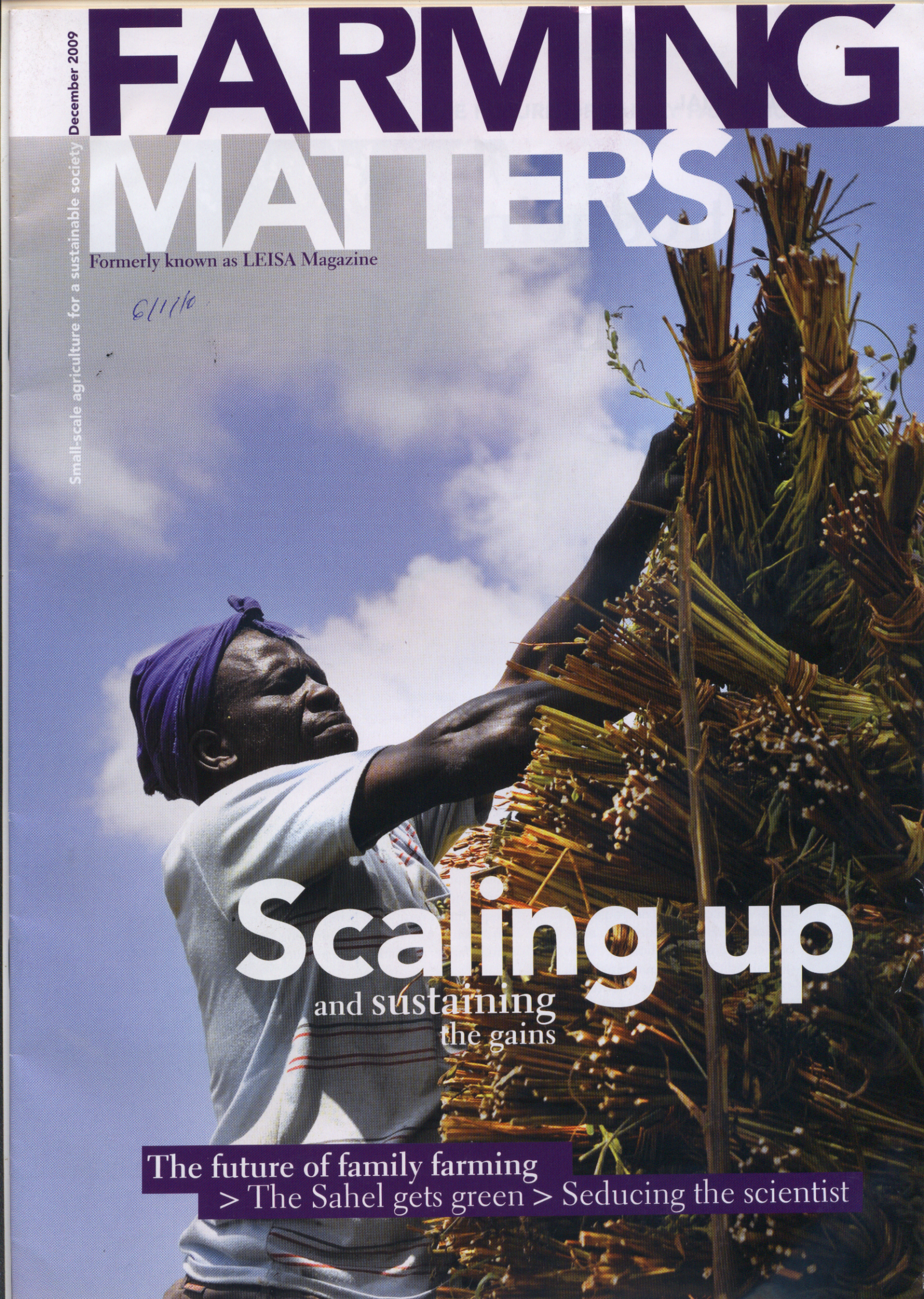

Scaling up

and sustaining the gains

The future of family farming
> The Sahel gets green > Seducing the scientist

Seduce the scientist

There is worldwide indifference among formal and institutional scientists about local knowledge and people's ability to solve problems. This indifference has only increased by the use of short cut methods of learning, like Rapid Rural Appraisals, that have gained currency worldwide. This gave an easy legitimacy to scientists that they could learn about people's needs and knowledge in a few hours or days only, through various rituals mostly irrelevant to the real concerns of knowledge rich but economically poor people. But that is not the only reason for indifference. The criteria for technological choices, priorities and legitimacy also create problems. I am not suggesting that local communities or innovators can solve all kinds of problems on their own. But then what about the problems which have been solved by grassroots innovators, even if not always optimally? Why can these not be validated so that formal financial and other institutions support them?

Let me illustrate. One will find thousands of ideas and innovations and outstanding traditional knowledge practices at www.sristi.org and www.nifindia.org. Recently I was asked to look into the problem of farmers who had committed suicide in India. When I asked in a village whether they knew of any low cost or non-monetary technology for reducing the costs of controlling pests in cotton – since that is what pushes farmers to abandon any hope of getting out of debt – the answer was a loud and repeated "No". Ironically, farmers from another district of Maharashtra had shared a traditional practice of planting lady's finger (okra) as border crop, acting as trap crop. Lady's finger belongs to the same family as cotton and flowers earlier than cotton. How many experiments have been done to prove it wrong? Another farmer, Indu Bhai Barot, read about spraying jaggery, the unrefined sugar from palm sap, on cotton. He tried it and found it very effective. The ants controlled the pest. *Honey Bee* wrote about this method in 1999. By now this should have been tried widely, but it hasn't.

Innovators will have to strengthen their own networks so that they can diffuse their knowledge. Scientists can be seduced by good examples when found on a large scale. We also need to work within global platforms to spread knowledge and experiences, and shame other institutions for neglecting local technologies. But to convince the scientist to look at local innovations and give farmers the credit they deserve, may still require other seduction techniques.

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