The Green Revolution as a process of global transfer: plants, practices and people.

Jonathan Harwood

(University of Manchester & Kings College London)

jonathan.harwood@manchester.ac.uk

Abstract: The ‘Green Revolution’ is usually portrayed as an agricultural development programme in which crop varieties, cultivation practices and expertise were transferred essentially from North to South. In this paper, however, I will argue that this picture is highly misleading. Many varieties, practices and people important for the Green Revolution in fact originated in the South, and transfer took place in several directions. A case in point are the short-stemmed wheat varieties which provided the starting material in Mexico. Although these varieties were brought from the U.S., they arrived there in 1946 from Japan where they had been discovered by farmers in the 1870s. As historians of colonial science have emphasised, however, the circulation of personnel, knowledge and materials in colonial empires did not take place solely between the European ‘centre’ and the southern ‘periphery’. The movement of people and things also occurred within the southern hemisphere itself. In the Green Revolution, for example, improved rice cultivation practices moved in the 1950s from Japan to India, and the wheat and maize varieties which India planted in the 1960s came from Mexico. In view of these patterns of circulation, therefore, the Green Revolution was less a ‘heroic’ achievement of northern expertise than a collaborative undertaking which drew upon the resources of both South and North.