The trend towards sustainable food systems calls for a change in scientific research rationale

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This is a guest blog from Nicolas Bricas, Director of the UNESCO World Food Systems Chair. Nicolas is a co-investigator with Prof. Michelle Holdsworth, Dr Rebecca Pradeilles and Dr Paula Griffiths on a SHD-funded research project on changing urban diets in Africa.

Food issues have become complex in the sustainable development setting. Food no longer solely has to meet our biological needs, give us pleasure, contribute to social interactions and build our identities—the way we feed ourselves and how our foods are produced, processed and marketed have a high impact on the viability and future of the planet. The NGO GRAIN (2015) considers that around half of global greenhouse gas emissions are due to land-use changes closely associated with agricultural development, agricultural production and the series of operations that generate cooked foods from agricultural raw materials and then convey them to consumers. In terms of biodiversity loss, intensive agriculture also has a heavy impact in terms of nitrogen and pesticide pollution, predation on fossil resources, such as mined phosphorus, etc. The global adoption of food systems mirroring those of industrialized countries has given rise—as we all know—to a serious problem of sustainability. Global resources will not suffice. A shift towards more ecological and environment-friendly systems is essential to cope with these issues.

This transition cannot be based solely on environmental criteria. Inequalities generated by the prevailing economic system are currently so substantial that they are a real threat to social stability in many countries. Although economic inequalities are tending to decrease between countries, they are increasing within countries. Food insecurity is no longer monopolized by the poorest countries in the world, it is also rising in rich countries. For instance, food insecurity is currently estimated to be affecting around 2 million people in France and 35 million in USA. With the increased application of robotics and artificial intelligence, job prospects point towards a rise in unemployment and further impoverishment of the population. This pattern will have major health impacts, with a high incidental cost to society, i.e. the poorest people are most affected by diseases related to a poor diet. It also has impacts in terms of public security as the prospects of social integration of youth via work dwindle—a situation which could contribute to promoting religious or political radicalization movements. A transition towards more equitable and integrative economic systems is also essential. The food system bears considerable economic weight in countries where a large share of the population is involved in agriculture. Agriculture and food businesses are major sources of employment for youth entering the labour market in high numbers every year. The closer
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