

REPORT 3

Blind Spots in the Debate on Agri-Food Systems Transformation



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Ploughing fields using traditional methods as part of the Regreening Africa project in Ghana.
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Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Preface | vi |
| Key messages | 1 |
| Introduction | 2 |
| Gaps and blind spots in the agri-food systems transformation debate | |
| 1 Governance systems | 4 |
| The role of multi-level good governance in the agri-food systems transformation | |
| 1.1 Multi-level governance of agri-food systems | 5 |
| 1.2 The bargaining power of transnational corporations drives current agri-food systems governance | 6 |
| 1.3 Techno-science and speculative financialization characterize current agri-food systems..... | 6 |
| 1.4 Governance in the context of multiple crises 4 Cs..... | 8 |
| 1.5 Conclusions and recommendations | 9 |
| 2 Corporate interests | 12 |
| Addressing corporate power and multi-stakeholder pressure | |
| 2.1 Why do corporations need multi-stakeholder governance; what's wrong with it; and what are the alternatives? | 13 |
| 2.2 What is multi-stakeholderism? | 14 |
| 2.3 What are the alternatives? | 15 |
| 2.4 Conclusions and recommendations | 15 |
| 3 Addressing polarisation | 18 |
| Overcoming polarization by bringing everyone to the table to reshape agri-food systems. | |
| 3.1 The status quo | 18 |
| 3.2 Is it possible to navigate beyond the Manichean dualism that fosters extremes and increasingly generates confrontation? | 19 |
| 3.3 Conclusions and recommendations | 21 |
| 4 Human rights-based approach | 24 |
| Approaching agri-food systems transformation from a human rights perspective | |
| 4.1 Normative foundations and substantive aspects of the right to food | 24 |
| 4.2 Progressive realization of the right to food..... | 25 |
| 4.3 A human rights-based approach to agri-food systems transformation | 26 |
| 4.4 Final thoughts..... | 28 |
| 4.5 Conclusions and recommendations | 28 |

| | | |
|----------|---|-----------|
| 5 | Indigenous and traditional systems | 30 |
| | Acknowledging the role of indigenous knowledge and traditional practices | |
| 5.1 | Old wines, new wineskins: Lessons from Indigenous Food Systems | 30 |
| 5.2 | Indigenous Peoples' agri-food systems and their knowledge, territory, and languages | 33 |
| 5.3 | Moral economies and collectivity as weapons of resistance | 34 |
| 5.4 | Resilience in times of crisis and knowledge coproduction | 35 |
| 5.5 | Conclusions and recommendations | 36 |
| 6 | Systems resilience | 38 |
| | Including the resilience of agri-food systems in the transformation discourse | |
| 6.1 | Resilience in the context of agri-food systems transformation | 39 |
| 6.2 | Resilience in the context of the 4 Cs | 40 |
| 6.3 | Conclusions and recommendations | 40 |
| 7 | True Cost Accounting | 44 |
| | Accounting for the cost of externalities across agri-food systems | |
| 7.1 | Accounting for the externalities in the agri-food systems | 45 |
| 7.2 | Food Systems Summit deliberations on True Cost Accounting (TCA) | 45 |
| 7.3 | TCA in the context of the 4 Cs | 47 |
| 7.4 | Conclusions and recommendations | 48 |
| 8 | Food trade dynamics | 50 |
| | The role of international trade arrangements in agri-food system transformation strategies | |
| 8.1 | The changing nature of international trade, its rules, food security, and sustainable agri-food systems | 51 |
| 8.2 | Harnessing and modifying international trade rules in support of agroecological production | 53 |
| 8.3 | Reducing excessive dependence on international trade for food security | 56 |
| 8.4 | Conclusions and recommendations | 57 |
| | Outlook | 60 |
| | References | 62 |

3

Addressing polarization

Overcoming polarization by bringing everyone to the table to reshape agri-food systems.

Food system transformation is a complex yet urgent task that makes it necessary to fulfil multiple international agreements on human rights, food security, sustainable development, and climate change mitigation and adaptation. One of the factors that contributes to this complexity and hinders transformation is the wide variety of actors that claim a stake in the process, who may or may not get a place on the table and an equal say in the discussion. This chapter delves into the issue of bringing all actors to the table in view of the existing polarization of the food system transformation debate. The chapter draws on the author's previous publication as the main source, in addition to referring to other published literature on this topic.

3.1 The status quo

"The need for change!"

There is no longer doubt about the need for a radical transformation of our food systems.^{23, 24, 25} This was the reason for organizing a United Nations Food Systems Summit during the UN General Assembly in New York on 23 September 2021. Because of the strong interactions across sectors (synergies, trade-offs and feedback loops), such a transformation is not only needed to address all forms of malnutrition but also to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. According to the Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the UN Secretary-General,²⁶ food can be considered one of the six entry points to move towards sustainable development. The recent Covid-19 crisis and the war in Ukraine have further complicated the situation while intensifying its urgency. For many years people have identified agriculture as the main culprit for climate change and biodiversity erosion, with strong links to health and social crises.

"Obstacles to change!"

Despite such a consensus and the available scientific evidence on what to do and how to do it, transformation is not happening either at the necessary speed or scale. Despite alerts, the so-called 'dominant' model remains. Reactions complaining about "bla, bla, bla" discourses that maintain procrastination are growing and becoming more and more violent. In this regard, the author notes in his book 'Coexistence and Confrontation of Agricultural and Food Models A New Paradigm of Territorial Development?' that "Opposition between the proponents of local or organic food, who proclaim the need for quality, human and environmental health, and

social justice, and the defenders of economic interests and the efficient organization of supply chains, who raise the spectrum of shortages. The former often demonize the latter, considering them vile poisoners of the planet and humanity. The latter, in return, denigrate the former, calling them irresponsible 'lefties' and 'champagne socialists'. The divides continue to grow between producers and consumers, between rural dwellers and urban ones, between defenders of ecological causes and advocates of economic pragmatism, between localists and globalists, all accentuated by the hyper-mediatization of subjects and the functioning of social networks, without any structured spaces for dialogue."²⁷

3.2 Is it possible to navigate beyond the Manichean dualism that fosters extremes and increasingly generates confrontation?

This duality certainly corresponds to a fruitful stage of political organization of confrontation. However, it would be safe to assume that the polarization promoted by merchants of doubt and exacerbated by the current hyper-mediatization can only lead to two scenarios: a procrastination resulting from power relations or a potentially violent revolution with unpredictable effects. Hence, it is necessary to move beyond dualism in order to overcome both the naivety of a consensus incapable of modifying the status quo and the violence and uncertainty of confrontation.²⁷

As the UN Food System Summit showed, the required transformation is made difficult because of divergent views and misalignment in relation to development models. This can be summed up by the following seven types of controversies or contradictions: (i) the confidence in a technological miracle and the difficulty of connecting the technical and institutional dimensions of innovation to ensure its contribution to public good and sustainable development; (ii) the interaction between scientific and political spheres and the need to move beyond a science posture that knows and prescribes; (iii) the measure of performance and the design of metrics that account for agriculture and food multifunctionality and all dimensions of sustainable development; (iv) the need to provide public frameworks for action in order to shape favourable food environments versus faith in markets to perform such a task; (v) the definition of what common good means to organize and articulate the engagement of different categories of stakeholders and identify and enforce rights; (vi) the implementation of the notion of sovereignty and the identification of scales at which governance and regulation should be reviewed and articulated, including market scales; (vii) the status of diversity, the importance of context specificities and the way coexistence should be politically managed.

Looking more closely at the paradox of the growing divide between the calls for change and the impression that nothing is actually changing, we can observe an increasing number of so-called 'alternative' initiatives. Striking examples include urban food policies, the explosion of 'organic' farming, and new behaviours with respect to the consumption of animal products. However, such initiatives are rarely given credit for their environmental and social benefits and are unable to influence public policies and global frameworks. They tend to remain on the fringes; described as 'radical' by their detractors, they seem incapable of driving structural transformations of agri-food systems at a significant scale.

“The need for dialogue!”

Moving transformation forward thus requires dialogue, as a process to address contradictions and collectively agree on pathways. Choosing a path of negotiation through dialogue means the rejection of the status quo on the one hand, and an uncertain revolution on the other hand. Such a choice may be supported by mediation, i.e. a process by which a mediator uses appropriate methods (e.g., elicitation, reformulation, support to negotiation) to help different stakeholders with divergent views resolve a disagreement and agree on a way forward. It is not by chance that dialogue has been acknowledged as one of the main pillars of the UN Food Systems Summit. This was based on two assumptions. The first is the preference for the permanent coexistence of different stakeholders and their joined contribution to designing and implementing a transformation pathway that is acceptable to all. The second assumption is that the confrontation and articulation of different perspectives may help generate and implement such a hybrid trajectory.

Many dialogues were initiated ahead of the Summit (see <https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit/dialogues>). They demonstrate a desire to characterize the synergistic and contradictory interactions and disagreements that need to be taken into consideration when identifying a transformative pathway. The dialogues also highlighted the need for incentivization, arbitration, regulation and investment mechanisms. Such an orientation has shown that dialogue is a long-term process which requires trust and confidence, appropriate methods to move beyond the incapacity to design agreements and even to listen to each other, safe spaces to organize the dialogue, and specific support to those stakeholders who are not prepared to engage or are in an asymmetric position.

“Articulating change at different scales!”

Since it relies on institutions and stakeholders who are, beyond their divergences, tied to each other by a common destiny, the level of national territory is particularly relevant to develop the agreement needed to implement the transformation pathway. It is also at this level that we can address the problems the world is facing and solve those challenges that the state and the market are both failing to address: climate change, conservation of resources, anticipation of migratory processes, political stability, etc. As Valette *et al.* state, “the territory is more than a mere framework mobilized for innovation. Localized agri-food systems illustrate this capacity of territories to stimulate the emergence of organizational and institutional innovations, to themselves become drivers of change.... Because of the proximities and the forms of social capital that constitute it, the territory is, in fact, a form of organization that permits the internalization of certain transaction costs, the minimizing of economic risks, the facilitation of learning processes, the leveraging of know-how and traditional knowledge, the guaranteeing of the application of quality criteria to a product or a form of production..., all the characteristics that make it an asset that can be mobilized in the processes of production....”²⁸

Acting at the local level is not sufficient. The author notes in his book ‘Coexistence and Confrontation of Agricultural and Food Models A New Paradigm of Territorial Development’ that “A significant transformation at the scale of global challenges cannot be achieved solely by the infinite reproduction of local initiatives. Several decisions that condition the behaviour of actors have to be taken at other scales or in other spaces: legislation, policies, organization of markets, etc. These decisions pertain, in particular, to scales at which public policies are designed and

implemented to stimulate local innovation, resolve tensions and conflicts, regulate processes of differentiation and competition, guarantee respect for rights and justice, and ensure territorial planning and cohesion.”²⁷ This questions the scaling-up paradigm, based on local success stories which would then be replicated to impact at scale. Not only are such success stories usually not reproducible because of natural and institutional specificities, but impact at scale also requires complementary actions at different scales. An agreement built locally to implement a transformation pathway can be exported to other places and to other scales in order to enable a project, a vision of the world, or a process of transformation. Such an agreement can contribute “to the design of appropriate national public policies, whether in supporting local dynamics or making relevant choices and trade-offs. It becomes the basis for a global transformation process to be undertaken by relying on the complementarity of local innovations, territorial dynamics, national policies and international frameworks. As an iconoclastic proposal, we can even suggest that desirable transformations can be initiated by the implementation of mediation processes at the scale at which alliances are possible, before influencing the processes taking place at other scales and coming up against irreducible clashes.”²⁷

3.3 Conclusions and recommendations

The 4 Cs have accelerated awareness of the need for action on agri-food systems. These crises offer an opportunity for change and open new avenues, as most stakeholders are most often inclined to react rather than anticipate. It brings us back to the etymology of the word ‘crisis’, which refers to situations when something must change and when there is an ‘after’ to be designed. A crisis is a detonator. This is not about building back (i.e. returning to *normality* after an exceptional event), but about building differently. It is about inventing new long-term models and pathways and escaping from the trap of short-termism.

This specifically means entering into innovative and innovation arrangements with relevant stakeholders to identify agreements, pathways, solutions, metrics, and to implement monitoring methods and mechanisms to stimulate learning processes. Given the uncertainty and the complexity of the current context and the expansion of fake news and misinformation, foresight exercises are of particular importance, and may rely on a variety of approaches. Rather than looking at trends and projections – which are useful to share alarms and alerts – such approaches must explore both plausible and possible futures, anticipating and assessing transformative pathways and building the required collective intelligence.

If we bring to the same table all actors that have a stake at one or other level, dialogue can take place at different relevant scales, from local to global, to identify transformative pathways that should be articulated consistently across scales. Yet, because of the political configurations, dialogue is not always possible, nor predisposed to be successful. A possible strategy would then be to look for dialogue at the scale where it might help designing a pathway, be it local, national, regional, and then take advantage of this success to convince at other scales through advocacy and confrontation.

Science has an important role to play to support such a process. It is not just invited to design new technology but to think the unthinkable, interacting with policymakers in new ways as suggested by Hainzelin *et al.* (2021): “designing together rather than transferring and applying knowledge, and fostering dialogues, co-learning, and convergence rather than confrontation

and polarization”. According to the authors, this ‘business as un-usual’ approach should rely on the following pillars:

- “Generating actionable knowledge, data, and metrics to move beyond obstacles and address trade-offs and barriers to change, including power asymmetries, path dependency, conflicts of interest, and risk and uncertainty.” This means acknowledging new complex research issues based on their relevance to address problems (e.g., obstacle to change), designing specific open research arrangements, and ensuring trans-disciplinarity.
- “Articulating models, knowledge, and place-based innovation to design, implement, and assess specific transformative pathways: this [also] requires specific arrangements, dialogues, and approaches, including scientific approaches.”
- “Connecting expertise mechanisms to address multisectoral and multiscale processes toward sustainable development; at the international level, the joint mobilization of IPCC, IPBES, and HLPE/CFS is necessary to address the interconnected challenges of climate, environment, and food systems”. The need to create a safe space for this to happen was also highlighted in the report entitled *Everyone at the Table* by the European Commission (Directorate-General for Research and Innovation of the European Commission et al. 2022).^{xv}

xv *Everyone at the table* - Publications Office of the EU ([europa.eu](https://europea.eu)), <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/b3e25405-eb99-11eb-93a8-01aa75ed71a1>

