

Virtual Thematic Review on “Ending hunger and achieving food security for all”

Comments submitted by Stefano Prato, Society for International Development (SID)

Introduction

The background note that introduces the guiding questions (and maybe the HLPF Session) features a number of assumptions and conceptual limitations that need to be challenged. In particular:

- The implicit/explicit assumption that the world is confronted with the challenge to scale-up food production (first para of the executive summary). Not only this assumption is biased on many grounds, including the hard reality of one-third of food currently produced being wasted, but it generates the false impression that the pursuit of food security depends from the lack of availability of food rather than structural socio-economic determinants. This needs to be rectified in the document;
- The notion of ‘food systems’ that underpins the background note is sharply inadequate. Food systems are defined in very conventional terms, by simply extending the obsolete and inadequate value chain approach to the entire set of steps within production, trade and consumption. This misses the fundamental and transformational value of the food system approach which is rather centred on the multifunctionality of food and the multiplicity of public objectives that food systems serve and support. Hence, the food system approach re-claims the public nature of food systems versus the exclusively private approach of value-chains, and exposes the limitations – from an SDG perspective – of the exclusive reliance on the market-based mechanisms;
- In the COVID context, it is incorrect to state (third para of the executive summary) the “near breakdown of food supply chains in many developing countries and the sharp increase in people suffering from acute food insecurity”. This formulation evokes the idea that local food systems were inadequate on many developing countries, diverting attention from the fact that the real breakdown was in global value chains, while it is local food production that is currently saving the day;
- There is a very simplistic analysis of livestock and its implications, one that does not recognise the existence of fundamentally different livestock production systems. It is the divorce between livestock and crop production that has generated the profound aberrations – in terms of animal health and rights, ecological and climate impact, antimicrobial resistance, and counting – of large-scale industrial livestock productions, while the centrality of livestock within small/medium-scale mixed systems, with its critical impact in terms of soil fertility, and the importance of pastoralism in ecosystem regeneration is completely absent from the narrative;
- Lastly, but maybe most importantly from an SDG perspective, the mix of these biased assumptions leads to the false conclusion that there are trade-offs between the various objectives to be pursued. Reclaiming food as a fundamental human right and embracing a holistic/systemic approach to food system transformation, such as the approach enshrined in the agroecological transformation promoted by small-scale food producers, can allow us to simultaneously and synergically tackle the whole spectrum of priorities of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;
- The paradox is that this requires very limited financial resources: by only stopping the massive subsidies (in different forms) to industrial agriculture and global value chains, there will possibly be change left in public pockets. The real challenge is with entrenched interests and political economies.

Key Messages towards “Ending hunger and achieving food security for all”:

1. The action agenda needs to tackle the structural drivers and root causes of hunger and malnutrition in all its forms, which is best done by recognising the multidimensionality of food and the multiplicity of public objectives that food systems serve. This exposes the value of food systems as transversally interlinking multiple SDGs, highlighting the power of the Agroecological Transformation to meet multiple public objectives with no or minimal trade-offs;
2. The COVID crisis exposed the critical role of local food systems and the failure of global value chains and international trade. The food system transformation should therefore place its centre of gravity on dynamic and inclusive local food systems, centred on the agency of small/medium scale food producers and diverse and vibrant territorial markets;
3. Given the fundamentally public nature of multidimensional food systems and their contribution to multiple SDGs, the democratic governance of food systems is critical to their transformation agenda, therefore contrasting current trends towards multistakeholderism and reclaiming the centrality of legitimate public spaces, at all levels, with robust safeguards to protect them against conflict of interest.

Responses to Guiding Questions

1. **Which areas and socio-economic groups** are especially vulnerable to poor nutrition and food insecurity and what are ways to ensure that food systems transformations leave no one behind?
 - The COVID crisis has exposed, once again, the depth of structural inequalities within and between countries and the extent of fragility and vulnerability of significant segments of the population, both within so-called developing countries and even within so-called developed ones. Beyond the dramatic figures exposed by SOFI 2019, the crisis demonstrated widely that the real extent of vulnerability is much broader than expected, given the number of children one-school meal away from hunger and the number of people that live hand-to-mouth. This reconfirms that addressing food insecurity can only happen if the socio-economic determinants of discrimination and marginalization are truly tackled. Multidimensional inequality analyses show that, in any country, the same social groups are found at the bottom of any socio-economic and political domain, hence the importance of the intersectionality between gender, ethnicity, class, and geographic location, among others. This is why tackling inequalities is fundamentally a governance issue, rather than a socio-economic catch-up one, and requires firm grounding into the human-rights framework;
 - In this context, one greatest paradox remains underexposed and unaddressed: small-scale food producers are the primary contributors to food security, yet they remain extremely vulnerable and food insecure, being marginalized and discriminated by current policy inclinations (grand narratives aside) and increasingly squeezed in resource access, policy support and market access by the over-promotion of industrial agriculture. Yet, they continue to feed the majority of the world population, with the importance of peasant production to the most vulnerable people in their most vulnerable times (as exposed by COVID) outweighing by far any calculation of their ‘caloric’ contribution;
 - The current crisis has also, once again, magnified the extent of gender inequalities, given the multi-layered burden on women and the stress it generated precisely on all social roles where women are over-represented and underpaid, from social reproduction to care, from daily

wage earners to small business owners, from food workers and to those engaging in food distribution. And considering that women also make up 70 per cent of frontline workers in the health and social sector, like nurses, midwives, cleaners and laundry workers. The crisis has also exposed the harsh reality of gender-based violence and the extent of yet-unresolved power dynamics within households, which heavily impact on women's levels of vulnerability, discrimination and food insecurity;

- Another critical divide is represented by the rural-urban interface. The 2030 Agenda features a significant urban bias and marked underestimation of the critical importance of the rural space in its own merits and dimensions, rather than framing it into an excessive vertical subordination to the urban one. Re-affirming and re-envisioning the inherent importance of rurality and rural populations is therefore essential to tackle the roots determinants of marginalization and food insecurity;
- Considering the extent of structural inequalities, food system transformation requires truly democratic governance at all levels and robust safeguards to protect public policy spaces against corporate capture and conflicts of interest.

2. **What fundamental changes are needed** to make our food systems an engine for inclusive growth and contribute to accelerating progress towards ending hunger and achieving food security for all in the Decade of Action?

- a) How could they be designed and implemented to generate synergies and strengthen existing ones with other Goals and Targets?
 - b) What are some of the possible trade-offs from these changes and how can they be mitigated?
- Based on the responses to the first guiding question, real transformation of food systems needs to build upon and be centred on the agency of small-scale food producers, with a very critical focus on women's rights and gender equality. But it also requires a new holistic and systemic food system paradigm, based on the multidimensionality of food and the multiplicity of public objectives served by food systems, ranging from livelihoods to health, ecology, social development, cultural heritage and knowledge systems;
 - Furthermore, food system transformation is critical to tackle structural inequalities, as these requires significant socio-economic transformation, shifting the centre of gravity of governmental policies towards the domestic economy and challenging the global division of labour that imposes the continued extraction of resources, commodities and wealth from the Global South. Inequalities within countries are clearly trapped by inequalities between countries. The transformation of food systems is therefore the cornerstone of socio-economic transformation in developing economies and needs to be supported by the democratization of global economic governance in order to remove the structural and systemic macro-economic obstacles to such a transformation;
 - All these elements constitute the core of an Agroecological Transformation anchored in Food Sovereignty. Agroecology is based on a holistic approach and system-thinking. It has technical, social, economic, cultural, spiritual and political dimensions. It combines scientific ecological principles with centuries of peasant knowledge and experience and applies them to the design and management of holistic agroecosystems. Its practices are locally adapted, and diversify farms and farming landscapes, increase biodiversity, nurture soil health, and

stimulate interactions between different species, such that the farm provides for its own soil organic matter, pest regulation and weed control, without resort to external chemical inputs. Agroecology has consistently proven capable of sustainably increasing productivity, ensuring adequate nutrition through diverse diets and has far greater potential for fighting hunger and poverty. Evidence is particularly strong on its ability to deliver strong and stable yields by building environmental and climate resilience;

- Importantly, food sovereignty and agroecology promote more localised food systems centred on the agency of local food producers, therefore offering a concrete alternative to the industrial food and agriculture system that is largely dominated by corporations. While agroecology draws on social, biological and agricultural sciences, peasants' knowledge, experiences and practices are the bedrock of agroecology as a science. Agroecology techniques are therefore not delivered top-down as has been the mainstay of past agricultural technologies but are instead developed on the basis of peasants' knowledge and experimentation, and through farmer-researcher participatory approaches. Agroecology is therefore not simply about changing agricultural practices and making them more sustainable, although this is important, but is also about creating fundamentally different farming landscapes and livelihoods, and radically reimagining food systems that are diversified, resilient, healthy, equitable and socially just. In this respect, agroecology is a science, a practice and a foundational vision for an inclusive, just and sustainable society;
- Agroecology and food sovereignty therefore offer a truly systemic approach that closely interconnects the various pillars of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in a virtuous and synergic manner, by-passing and overcoming all the claims for possible trade-offs between distinct objectives;
- In this respect, it is essential to reference existing processes within the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) to advance intergovernmental agreements, in consultation with small-scale food producers, Indigenous Peoples and civil society organizations as well as the private sector, on "Guidelines for Food Systems and Nutrition" and "Agroecological and other Innovative Approaches". It would be extremely important to refer to these processes in the document.

3. How might COVID-19 facilitate or complicate the implementation of needed food systems changes?

- a) Will it aggravate and/or reduce vulnerabilities?
 - b) What are the changes in design and implementation of policies affecting food systems which are necessary to prevent and better deal with food security and nutrition impacts of infectious disease outbreaks and pandemics in the future?
 - c) What of the current immediate actions we are seeing will contribute to the long-term resilience of food systems?
- I have already commented extensively on this. The COVID-induced food crisis is not a risk, it is a reality that has already widely impacted significant segments of populations within developing countries and beyond. The crisis has exposed the failures of the over-reliance by many countries on a global food system based on global value chains. Once again, local food systems have provided critical support to their populations, signalling the urgent need to

strengthen public policies and investments to shift the centre of gravity of food systems away from global and promote vibrant and inclusive local food systems. No real resilience can exist without food sovereignty centred on the agency of small/medium-scale food producers and vibrant territorial markets. Along this same line, the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) of Committee on World Food Security has recommended governments “to support local communities and citizens to increase local food production (including home and community gardens) through appropriate stimulus packages (in cash and kind) to enhance food resilience”. Local food systems are the key to our current and future resilience;

- Yet, this is not what is happening in many countries. On the contrary, the COVID-induced crisis has seen an even stronger-than-usual push for the digitalization of food purchases and the promotion of large-scale distribution channels. In many countries, local farmers’ and fish markets have been closed, while supermarkets and other large-scale distribution channels remained open, including by increasing online purchases and deliveries. Many small-scale food producers, including pastoralists and fisher communities, have been confronted with increasing obstacles on how to deliver their produce to families and communities. Some have been subject to lockdowns, at times imposed with brutal means. Seasonal migrant workers have been, once again, subject of marginalization and discrimination; many have also been unable to travel because of the lockdown, while other categories of “business travellers” continue to move across countries. At the same time, food workers within food processing industries continued to perform their duties, despite generalized lockdowns, often in the absence of adequate personal safety equipment. Once again, many central governmental policies have discriminated against small-scale food producers in favour of the industrialized food system. This is in stark contradiction with myriad of local solidarity initiatives and the valuable innovations by small-scale food producers in establishing new platforms to strengthen the local (rural, urban and peri-urban) territorial systems;
- Unfortunately, limited emphasis has been placed on finding adequate ways to ensure local produce, especially fresh fruit and vegetables, local dairy products, fish and other animal sourced food, could be made available through open-air markets, where possible, or new distribution channels, including online sales deliveries. Furthermore, many countries have instigated a sense of unsafety in non-industrial products and open/wet markets, framing safety concern within a significant pro-industrial bias. The immediate consequence of these policies has been a dramatic increase in food waste and plastic.

4. **What knowledge and data gaps need to be filled** for better analyzing current successes and failures in food systems and the trade-offs and synergies, across SDGs, in implementing food systems changes to fix these failures?

- First of all, the widespread focus on knowledge and data gaps is over-represented, particularly in the context of the increased levels of inequalities, vulnerabilities and insecurities well documented even before the COVID crisis. The continued focus on knowledge and data gaps provides the false impression that the lack of progress, and even the retrogression, are due to lack of proper information and analysis, therefore offering a valuable alibi for policy inaction. There is plenty of evidence to support radical shifts in food system trajectories and ensure that food systems are transformed to serve a wide variety of public needs, as previously articulated;

- It is also essential to recognize the knowledge is inherently socially embedded. Hence, there is a concrete risk that the search for data might actually contribute to a reduction of knowledge. Indeed, current 'data' mining emphasis may contribute to the reduction rather than the increase of the direct participation of those primarily affected by development challenges, in blatant contradiction with the centrality that community experiential knowledge should have in designing public policies, investments and interventions. In this context, it is also essential to contract the string bias for so-called scientific knowledge underscoring the potential contribution of different knowledge systems, including Indigenous Peoples' and local communities' knowledge, practices and ways of knowing;
- Of course, this does not mean that knowledge gaps do not exist. For instance, it might be important to develop more adequate metrics to measure the externalities associated with current food systems, without falling into excessive monetization of their immaterial dimensions. It would be equally important to be able to detect and report the widespread violations of human rights, health provisions and environmental safeguards across the entire spread of food systems. And we are just taking very initial steps in a broader understanding on how the human body is an open ecosystem in close and continued interaction with the broader ecological systems – one that would hopefully lead to less anthropocentric and more biocentric view of socio-economic systems, including food systems.

5. **What partnerships and initiatives are needed** to harness synergies and/or reduce trade-offs in food systems?

- a) What are the most critical interventions and partnerships needed over next 2 years, 5 years, 10 years?
 - b) Can these be scaled up or adjusted to fit other contexts?
 - c) How can private sector support investments for sustainable agriculture production and supply reduce food insecurity?
- The most important partnership to be established/strengthened is between governments at all levels and small-scale food producers, recognizing the centrality of their agency, knowledge and visions in food systems transformation. Such a reinvigorated partnership could pursue an ambition agenda to tackle the structural determinants of inequalities and food insecurity, which may include the following concrete reforms:
 - Strengthen the role of producers' organizations, with special attention to women's organization and gender equality, in policy making and build inclusive, interdisciplinary rights-based policy spaces with robust safeguards against conflicts of interest;
 - Ensure agrarian reform including the right to territories (land, water, forests, fishing, foraging, hunting);
 - Restore the right to freely save, plant, exchange, sell and breed seeds and livestock and remove regulations blocking local markets and diversity;
 - Focus public policies and investments on strengthening territorial markets;
 - Reorient public research and development to build on the agency of peasants and respond to their needs;
 - Institute fair and just trade rules, determined by peasant-led policies;

- Establish fair wages and working conditions for food and agricultural workers, also tackling gender discriminations;
- Re-affirm and fulfil women's rights while pursuing gender equality;
- Reclaim healthy and sustainable diets as social contracts and public goods;
- Recognize the centrality of citizens' action and promote food democracy;
- The pursuit of such a reform agenda would, however, require a significant reconsideration of the current understanding of multistakeholderism and multistakeholder partnerships, as well articulated in many of the critiques featured by the recent report on the subject by the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) of Committee on World Food Security. It would be necessary to restore the centrality of public policy spaces, at all levels, with robust safeguards against conflict of interest, in terms of integrity of the policy process, financial independency from private sources, including philanthropy, and trustworthiness of the knowledge and evidence used for policy making. While it would be critical to ensure active contribution by and consultation of multiple societal constituencies, participation should clearly differentiate between rights' holders and third parties, and prevent any possible capture from corporate private interests;
- It is also important to unpack the meaning of private sector, abandoning its almost exclusive identification with the corporate sector. Indeed, the clear separation between small and medium scale economic actors, including those promoting new models within circular economies as well as social solidarity economies, and the transnational corporate sector. Such a distinction in terminologies and modalities of engagement (or non-engagement) would greatly simplify the public policy discourse;
- Lastly, one final word needs to be spent on the centrality of the Committee on World Food Security in global food governance, particularly but not exclusively at times of crisis as the current ones. The CFS was borne out of a crisis and has been established precisely to offer a global inclusive space where to negotiate a global consensus on how to ensure the realization of the human right to adequate food with the active participation of those most affected to malnutrition as well as those primarily contributing to food security. It is therefore essential that the CFS remains the central pillar the international food architecture. It is therefore with significant concern that civil society witnessed the emergence of the so-called Food Systems Summit under significant corporate influence (i.e. World Economic Forum) and leadership (given the affiliation of the selected Special Envoy). It must be crystal clear that no normative outcome should be expected out of such process and that the exclusive authority to take normative decisions on the direction of food systems transformation should rest with UN Member States within legitimate and inclusive policy processes, such as those promoted and facilitated by the CFS.