



Wednesday 27 May 2020, 15:00-17:00

Informal discussion #3 on Agroecological and Other Innovative Approaches
(including relevant tools such as digitalization)

Rapporteur's Summary

Item 1 - Introduction by the Rapporteur

Rapporteur, H.E. Mohammad Hossein Emadi (Iran) summarized previous informal group discussions with the following main elements: 1) lack of uniform solutions for improving the sustainability of food systems; 2) assessments of the sustainability of food systems must be the starting point.

The Rapporteur introduced the background document and its four guiding questions were presented.

Item 2 - Exchange of feedback by CFS stakeholders on:

Discussion on questions (1, 2, 3 and 4)

- 1. Do you agree with the HLPE report's two broad categories of innovative approaches: i) agroecological approaches and ii) sustainable intensification approaches?*
- 2. Do you agree with the HLPE report's finding that agroecological and related approaches are more focused on transforming food systems, while sustainable intensification and related approaches are more focused on input use efficiency?*
- 3. Are there any tools or technologies, for example digitalization, that could contribute to both of these approaches, and if so under what conditions?*
- 4. Digital technologies are clearly here to stay but are not without their risks and challenges. What should be the focus of any possible recommendation(s) on digitalization in relation to sustainable food systems that enhance food security and nutrition*

The open floor discussion produced the following points. Each bullet point, below, represents the view of one stakeholder on one specific topic. No attempt is made to reconcile different views so that the full diversity of views expressed by CFS stakeholders during the informal discussion could be captured.

- Suggestion for the background document to better reflect the different views on monitoring and assessment frameworks and indicators and metrics, which should not go beyond the scope of this process.

- Support for incorporating all innovative approaches rather than focusing on only one of them, or on making choices over which one is better. The richness and complementarity that may exist between them must be addressed.
- Support for providing a toolbox to strengthen the sustainability of agriculture and food systems in its three dimensions. For example, the Zero Draft has a recommendation on rural employment, focusing only on agroecology and this should be adjusted.
- Support for the two categories presented in the HLPE report, as it helps divide approaches in terms of their contribution (or not) to sustainable food systems.
- Support for the HLPE report findings in relation to agroecology that is more focused on transforming food systems. Agroecology shows long-term efficiency through circular economy and recycling while sustainable intensification approaches focus on increasing productivity.
- COVID-19 crisis has highlighted which approach is best able to effectively respond to the current pandemic/crisis: agroecology. While a sustainable intensification approach is identified with environmental damage and some studies link it to the pandemic, agroecology has at its core the principle of human-ecological health balance, helping prevent pandemics and ensures resilience of food systems in all their dimensions. Hence, the view that agroecology effectively contributes to reaching many public policy objectives: solidarity and social relations, ensuring that no one is left behind in times of crisis.
- Concern on the Zero Draft focusing on innovations in general, ignoring agroecology thus not considering the HLPE report's findings. The recommendations proposed in the Zero Draft fail to provide guidance to countries that want to pursue agroecology and fail to distinguish between competing and conflicting impacts of different innovative approaches. The HLPE report clearly differentiates between approaches and characterizes them as either transformative or incremental. Incremental approaches may undermine transformative approaches, in some cases.
- Support for highlighting the need to transform food systems toward greater sustainability; the HLPE Principles as well as FAO's "Ten Elements of Agroecology" are useful in this regard. This transformational change will only be achieved through food producers having more agency to become active guarantors of food security.
- Need to recognize that some debates confuse sustainable intensification with unsustainable intensification witnessed over the past years.
- Highlighted that question 1 and 2 may not be helpful in the discussion. The HLPE report affirms that agroecology is not a clear set of practices; practices can be classified along a

spectrum, as noted in the HLPE report. FAO's "Ten Elements of Agroecology" can be applied to all approaches. Some stakeholders are enthusiastic about agroecology because it gives more emphasis to social and rights aspects, but it needs to be considered that the other approaches do not totally miss these aspects (e.g. SFA). Therefore, these categories are unhelpful because they overlap.

- Need to recall that CFS 44 asked HLPE to look at all innovative approaches. In line with this concept, an axis of innovative approaches (not their respective definitions) was recognized to be more useful.
- Need to provide a balanced and equitable analysis as to how the recommendations address innovative approaches. Agroecology is one approach among many. Need to distinguish between agroforestry, organic, biotech, digitalization and ecosystem restoration. The balance of approaches is crucial because the different technologies provide a valuable toolbox for all contexts, that farmers can choose from. Para 5 of Zero Draft mentions this, but it could be strengthened.
- Need to include all the tools in the toolbox. False dichotomy should be avoided, and blended approaches should be considered.
- Suggestion to highlight how the two categories can be complementary and not in opposition to each other. They both aim at transforming food systems in all three sustainability dimensions. Some sustainable intensification principles are also used in agroecology.
- Recognized that it is not helpful to have two categories, and that the First Draft should be more balanced in how agroecology and other innovative approaches are mentioned. Numerous innovative approaches, concepts, practices, and techniques exist and they should all be used and each may be more or less relevant in a given context.
- Support for keeping the two categories. In particular, recognized the importance of the right to food to agroecology without distinction between the relative importance between human and ecosystem health, which makes agroecology innovative.
- Recognized that the agroecological approach is broader in its scope, health, biodiversity, as well as being older, which makes it more robust and time-tested. Smallholders developed it before the Principles existed.
- Need to consider that some innovative approaches may be hostile to the right to food, and while there is less research on the links between right to food and digitalization for example, there is ample research on agroecology and right to food.
- Support for keeping the HLPE report's two categories and its five levels of transition. The two categories are not put in opposition, and were structured based on several criteria, not defining which is better, but specifying that under the same criteria, one

approach could be broader than others and this is useful to countries. It is important to highlight that the goal is not imposing one or another approach.

- Suggestion to include in the recommendations ways to reconcile and clarify the links between the different approaches.
- Suggestion to underline the importance of the ability of farmers to use and access approaches. Giving farmers choices increases the viability of small and large farms. A false dichotomy is not helpful for countries.
- Suggestion to refrain from describing some approaches as “not” or “less” transformative than others. This raises the question on the meaning of transformation, and also ignores the synergies between different approaches, e.g. organic with precision agriculture.
- Need to focus on the principles and outcomes we want to achieve. There is no dichotomy. The HLPE reports that agricultural practices can be understood along a spectrum, or a continuum of approaches, and that there is no clear line between what is agroecological and what is not.
- Need to consider targets and outcomes of the various approaches and whether the focus should be on production or whole food systems, or also on ecological and social factors.
- Need to re-balance investments, which are currently more in favour of sustainable intensification rather than on agroecological approaches. Need a better balance of available approaches.
- Need to bring the concepts of sustainable intensification or agroecology from the HLPE report to the First Draft of the policy recommendations.
- There are two different ways to look at improving sustainability: Sustainable intensification looks at conventional production systems and how to improve their sustainability, ecological optimization; agroecological approaches are broader, not only related to reducing impacts on the environment, but also about using ecological processes and services to provide ecosystem services for food production. Therefore, there are two approaches, but they are complementary.
- Need to keep the distinction between the two categories and the HLPE report has a great deal of evidence that should be taken into account. While agroecology goes much further in multi-functionality and whole food systems, sustainable intensification looks mostly at lower levels of transition.
- Need to give more emphasis to agroecology. The lack of balance is visible in policies, research and aid funding. Agroecological approaches are far more broad, and have potential for transformation.

- Need for a clearer distinction between innovative approaches, innovations and technologies, bearing in mind that innovations are not only technological but also organizational, for instance.
- Need to be acknowledge that there is little analysis about how other innovative approaches (other than agroecology) can help to achieve sustainable food systems for food security and nutrition.
- Support for considering the possible co-existence of the two approaches. Recognized that agroecology is more focused on transformation, but also contribute to efficiency, just as sustainable intensification can contribute to transforming food systems. Therefore, both approaches can contribute to both objectives (level 1 and level 5), as per Page 10 of summary and recommendations of the HLPE report: *“These approaches foster transformation, etc.”*
- While the title shows that agroecology has a special place in our work, other approaches should still be considered.
- Digitalization as a tool could contribute to all approaches for achieving sustainable agriculture, however there is a need for making digital technologies more affordable, accessible and adapted to local conditions, avoiding locking food producers and citizens into asymmetrical power relations with large companies.
- Need to consider not to include biotechnology in this workstream, including it as a footnote in relation to national laws.
- Need to consider all of the previous the work that has been carried out so far, such as FAO’s SFA five pillars and IFAD’s work on smallholders. The target is smallholders. Little drops of water make the ocean of our food system. If we do more for smallholders some of these debates will not persist.
- Need to recall the importance of making policy recommendations that address the global level, with implementation at local level, based on norms and traditions of different countries.
- Recognized that the concept of digitalization did not seem well defined in the Zero Draft, and it should be clarified. For instance, the HLPE reports talks about precision agriculture, etc., each of them offering different opportunities to farmers. Governments should make these technologies accessible to farmers.
- Digitalization is mentioned more often than other relevant approaches. Digitalization describes digital technologies, services, products and skills and is not an innovative approach, which includes not just technological innovations but also social and organizational ones.

- Digitalization has the potential to play an increasingly important role in agriculture if such technology is available, accessible and affordable to all, and that appropriate capacity building takes place for all types of stakeholders. Digitalization can support smallholders in market access, resource management and competitiveness. It can lead to stronger inclusion of rural youth by creating more appealing jobs in rural areas and preventing migration. However, it can also create risks, particularly for the vast majority of farmers who are smallholders, therefore strong regulatory policy framework is necessary to address the risks, to provide appropriate safeguards, training and to ensure a safe and level playing field for the sector.
- Need to consider the gap between smallholders and large farms in relation to digital tools.
- Need for governments to incentivize the use of digital tools and focus on smallholders' needs. The latter needs technical information and assistance to use digital technologies.
- Need to recognize the great potential of digital technologies, but also to take into account that they are technologies and as such, they can support sustainable or unsustainable approaches.
- Need to highlight the role of regulatory framework and appropriate safeguards (responsible governance is part of the “Ten Elements of Agroecology” in ensuring that digital technologies also benefit smallholders.
- Digitalization is a dimension, not an approach or a paradigm. Therefore, its use needs to be assessed in relation to any innovative approach with respect to outcomes that we are seeking.
- Support for focusing on smallholders' needs: digitalization should arise from the needs of smallholders and benefit them. CFS should focus on human rights and marginalized people and small-scale farmers.
- Importance of governance mechanisms to address concerns with regards to privatization of data, particularly on peasant knowledge.
- Digitalization can be useful to any system, but it is not environmentally neutral (rare metals and high energy use).
- Fostering digitalization in agri-food and forestry sector and rural areas can reduce barriers leading to a fairer food system as well as to re-population of rural areas by making them more attractive and by generating quality jobs.
- Suggestion for the recommendation to: narrow digital divide between rural and urban areas but also small and large companies, aiming all parties to be connected; foster data use; boost business development and new business models; clarify how new digital tools



CFS Policy convergence Process on Agroecological and Other Innovative Approaches for Sustainable Food Systems that ensure Food Security and Nutrition

can become more accessible to low income farmers, populations and regions worldwide; increase responsible investments from governments and the private sector, and provide formal and informal training, including farmers, herders and women and youth (vulnerable groups); support farmers to adapt to digitalization, and show how to apply agroecology to low-income populations.

- Support for putting the right to food at the centre of CFS policy processes.
- Support for the Draft Zero and for the importance of digitalization with its potential to play increasing role in global food security. However, recognized its benefits and risks, which should be addressed, such as access.
- Support for including recommendations that encourage rural communities and smallholders to access these technologies.
- Support for including recommendations focusing on the importance of participatory approach when developing digital tools, and local knowledge and practice. Data ownership, access and use is very important. The FAO Digital Council and a Swiss Charter could be linked in the policy recommendations.

Item 3) Wrap-up and closing remarks by the Rapporteur

The Rapporteur highlighted the complexity of the theme under discussion, the different positions of stakeholders, as well as the underlying lack of clarity about the jargon and definitions of concepts. He also highlighted the difference between “other innovations” and “technologies”. However, the Rapporteur emphasized the importance of these informal discussions to identify convergences, divergences, as well as to provide a learning process.

The Rapporteur thanked all stakeholders for their continued engagement, participation, and for allowing a fruitful discussion.