



coalitie tegen de honger  
coalition contre la faim

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# Sustainable food systems in the South Obstacles and avenues to meet the challenge

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



# Sustainable food systems in the South

## Obstacles and avenues to meet the challenge

*How should the processes in the transition towards sustainable food systems in developing countries be promoted and supported?*

### Executive summary

**How can we outline the contours of a food system that respects human beings and their environment? This report explores different ways of supporting and reinforcing the emergence of sustainable food systems in the countries of the Global South, together with the various levers that will be needed to overcome the obstacles encountered.**

#### WHAT IS A SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEM?

A sustainable food system guarantees the right to food and respects the principles of food sovereignty. It enables everyone, throughout the world, to access a sufficient quantity of healthy food at an affordable price, without compromising the economic, social and environmental foundations required for the food sovereignty of future generations.

Such a system takes into account the economic, social and environmental dimensions of food systems, but also the cultural and nutritional dimensions. The holistic approach of agroecology seems best able to take all these dimensions into account, and is particularly well suited to the realities of family farming in the countries of the Global South. While many studies and capitalisations have proved the performance of these systems, they need to be evaluated according to a variety of impacts, not just the notion of agricultural yield.

As this report explains, a sustainable food system is characterised by a sustainable mode of production, fairer processing and marketing channels, healthy and responsible modes of consumption and a favourable legal

and public policy framework. It also implies an evolution in the orientation of scientific agricultural research across the board, together with consideration for gender relations.

#### SUSTAINABLE MODES OF PRODUCTION

Unlike the technology package of the green revolution, this goal involves promoting a series of principles to be adapted and constructed jointly according to the sociocultural and environmental contexts specific to each situation. These modes of production must therefore be constructed by, for and with farmers, making the most of their skills and knowledge, enriched with scientific understanding in a continuous exchange between farming skills and scientific knowledge.

The transition to a diversified agroecological system is not always easy, and public support is needed to assist farmers through this difficult period. The promoted practices are often intensive in terms of labour and knowledge, so particular attention must be paid to reducing the arduousness of the work. Synergies between practices to reduce this arduousness and the development of specific mechanisation must be encouraged. It should also be

noted that without secure, fair access to land, there are fewer advantages in adopting these practices. Work is therefore to be done to improve access to land, particularly for women. As producers are also confronted with an environment and advisers who promote practices which are very far removed from sustainable modes of production, strengthening and transforming technical agricultural advice are essential. Finally, since the western model based on the paradigm of modernity remains dominant and influential, raising public awareness of the various positive effects of agroecological practices (nutrition, finance, health, autonomy, resilience) is fundamental.

## PROCESSING, MARKETING, CONSUMPTION

Sustainable food systems involve the development of marketing channels that give priority to local markets, self-consumption, nutritional quality and the revenues of producers. Special attention must be paid to the question of revenues: if they do not improve in the systems being promoted, the adoption of these systems by producers will remain marginal.

To achieve this improvement, processing and marketing channels must be developed that are oriented towards local and regional markets and that strengthen urban-rural linkages and divide the added value fairly. Strengthening producers' associativity and investing in public infrastructure in rural areas, opening up the countryside, are avenues to be prioritized. Another course of action is support for participatory guarantee systems, which offer product certification adapted to the economic reality of small family farms in countries of the Global South. Support should also be provided for organisations building sustainable, responsible consumption in the South and promoting the produce of local farmers. Finally, it is vital that the services delivered to society by production systems are remunerated by this very same society, a theme we shall explore further below.

## POLICY AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS

This fundamental point is central to our analysis: a favourable policy environment is essential for the promotion and emergence of sustainable food systems. The negative impacts of current food systems affect the whole of society, and the positive impacts of sustainable food systems would benefit equally the whole of society: it is thus fundamental

that all of society must be involved in the effort to change – the weight of the transition cannot rest solely on the shoulders of farmers. Collective financial tools must help guide the agricultural model, supporting virtuous practices and discouraging practices with negative externalities. This will help to reduce unfair competition between products with different modes of production.

This favourable framework is missing in the countries of the South, where the public sector has mostly withdrawn its investment from the agricultural sector since the 1980s. Where public interventions do exist, they often go against agroecological practices, as they subsidize chemical fertilisers or provide advice and support promoting the technology package of the green revolution.

A series of concrete policy measures can be outlined to promote sustainable food systems. As already mentioned, strengthening and securing access to land and other means of production for everyone is an essential policy condition.

Next, as food is a right before being a commodity, states must be able to protect their agriculture against cheap imports: prices cannot be defined by the international markets, which take no account of the externalities of production systems or the diversity of agro-environmental realities. It is thus vital for public authorities in the South and the North to guarantee food sovereignty.

It is also essential for public funds to be oriented towards sustainable practices and support for the transition period.

Finally, policy measures must support agroecological production methods, such as farmers' seeds and small-scale mechanisation, together with the construction of local marketing channels.

To contribute to this favourable framework, support for the emergence and development of social movements and farmers' associations in Southern countries should be reinforced, while NGOs must develop a more political vision of agricultural development.

Belgian development cooperation clearly has a role to play in contributing to all these measures and policy support initiatives. It would thus be desirable to incorporate this thinking and these recommendations on sustainable food systems into its strategy for agriculture and food security.



## CROSS-CUTTING DIMENSIONS

Two important dimensions cut across the support and promotion of sustainable food systems: the need to reorient and encourage scientific research and the need to take gender relations into account.

### *Making research evolve*

There is a real opportunity to partner with research to advance knowledge and demonstrate, together with universities and the civil society of the South and the North and objectively, what agroecology contributes to food systems. Although current food systems and agronomic models are increasingly subject to debate, there are obstacles that hinder the development of agroecology as a field of research. Firstly, scientific thought is compartmentalised, while agroecology requires systemic thinking and constant exchange between farmers' knowledge and scientific knowledge. Moreover, public-private partnerships in research neglect agroecology: independent public research is needed to develop the field. There is thus a need to transform research and rebalance research funding so that a greater proportion is allocated to agroecology.

### *Taking gender relations into account*

Women's work is often under-acknowledged and undervalued, and women are frequently in vulnerable, unequal situations. And yet women are key players in agroecological practices and holders of traditional knowledge. They should thus be at the heart of strategies aiming to promote and support sustainable food systems. However, agroecological practices do not necessarily lead to equality in gender relations. Vigilance is essential if agroecology is to participate effectively in women's empowerment and improve their specific living conditions and quality of life.

## Conclusion

The social challenges and environmental limits of our planet require us to rethink and rebuild our food systems. The status quo is no longer a realistic option – our food systems must be radically transformed to make them truly sustainable, guarantee the right to food and ensure food sovereignty. The agroecological approach, which places farmers at the heart of the transition, has promising prospects and shows that alternatives exist. This report does not shy away from the difficulties in the emergence of sustainable food systems, but demonstrates that there are many possible ways of overcoming them.

Scaling up agroecological practices and supporting the emergence of new food systems will inevitably require a favourable institutional and policy environment to be put in place, in both the North and the South. The report identifies a number of concrete policy measures, together with resources to facilitate them. Belgian and European policies must acknowledge the importance of the challenge, promote the emergence of sustainable food systems in their development cooperation policies and reinforce the coherence of their policies in favour of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in their agricultural and trade policies.

In particular, Belgian NGOs invite the Belgian development cooperation to become a leader in promoting agroecology as a means of supporting the emergence of sustainable food systems. With its internationally recognised agricultural universities, leading experts who are pioneering this thinking at the international level and the significant experience of many Belgian NGOs in supporting agroecological projects, Belgium disposes of major assets to move in this direction.



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