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coalition contre la faim

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Sustainable food systems in the South

Obstacles and avenues to meet the challenge





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Introduction

Reports¹ demonstrating the environmental and social limits of the current food system have never been so numerous. While it is important to carry on exposing these limits, it is equally fundamental to consider the outlines of a new food system that respects human beings and the environment. The Coalition Contre la Faim² (Coalition Against Hunger), a group of NGOs active in international solidarity, has been examining how the transition towards sustainable food systems can be supported in the countries of the Global South for several years. This report is the result of this process. It is based on a number of studies, discussions with partners and seminars, and brings together Belgian NGOs active in agriculture and food around a shared vision of support for sustainable food systems in the countries of the South.

For the Coalition Contre la Faim, as for many other organisations, networks and farmers' associations, the transition towards sustainable food systems is a fundamental challenge to which all the players involved in food systems must commit, "from the spade to the plate", and development cooperation also has a role to play.

Although we are among the civil society organisations in favour of agroecology as the priority route for building sustainable food systems, we are well aware that the path is complex and that agroecology is far removed from the priorities of public policy (agriculture, trade, environment and cooperation). There are many ways of supporting the various components of sustainable food systems (production, marketing, consumption, political action), but it is important to recognise the difficulties encountered when providing this support and to identify the levers for overcoming them.

Initially, we will develop the general principles underlying our vision of a sustainable food system. We will then look in detail at the different building blocks of a sustainable food system. These include the characteristics of a sustainable mode of agricultural production and the levers for promoting them, the means of reinforcing and encouraging marketing and processing channels that promote local markets and healthy, responsible modes of consumption, and how to build a legal framework and public policies favourable to sustainable food systems. Finally, we will emphasise two fundamental dimensions that relate to all aspects of sustainable food systems: the evolution of orientations in scientific agricultural research and the integration of the gender perspective.

¹ Such as "International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (2009). Agriculture at a Crossroads" or "FAO (2017). Food Security and Nutrition around the World"

² Coalition Contre la Faim provides a forum for discussion between Belgian development cooperation agencies about support for sustainable family farming in the countries of the South, drawing on the views and approaches of farming organisations and promoting all the different dimensions of food sovereignty.



1 / Vision of a sustainable food system

For the Coalition Contre la Faim, “A sustainable food system guarantees the right to food³ and respects the principles of food sovereignty⁴. 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.”

1.1 / APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT TO FOOD SYSTEMS

Sustainable development requires us to go beyond the economic dimension alone and also consider the environmental and social dimensions of development. A sustainable food system must thus give equal if not more emphasis to social and environmental questions, which encompass a number of aspects.

In social terms, these include the autonomy of food producers, their independence and their access to resources, land, decent revenues and fair prices. They also include the participation of food producers, communities, farmers' associations and movements in decision-making and defining food systems. The system must also respect agriculture in all its diversity: it must leave room for fishermen, shepherds and indigenous peoples.

In environmental terms, the food system must respect the limits of the planet. It must respect biodiversity and conserve ecosystems, soil, groundwater, watercourses and the oceans. Particular attention must be paid to the use of soil, and specifically the fight against deforestation. It must contribute to recycling nutrients and reduce the use of natural resources, including limiting the use of fossil fuels, water, nitrogen and phosphorus. Finally, it must stop emitting greenhouse gases and become more resilient to climate change.

Many organisations considering the transition towards sustainable food systems also consider it necessary to integrate two further dimensions: the cultural dimension and the nutritional and health dimension. Whether these questions are considered to be part of the social dimension – alongside fairness, gender, autonomy and the opportunity to take part in decision-making – or whether they constitute separate dimensions, these questions are particularly important. The cultural dimension is often given too little consideration, though it plays a fundamental role: food systems must reflect the cultural choices of populations and be a valued part of their way of life. This essential dimension must be approached without idealism⁵. The nutritional and health dimension is also important. Food security involves access to and the availability of food of sufficient quantity but also quality: food must be healthy and nourishing. The current food system, focused on the production of calories, is characterised by nutritional deficiencies and obesity⁶, afflictions that strike the most vulnerable and constitute a major health issue. Taking the nutritional dimension of food systems into account is a serious investment in public health.

As long as they integrate the gender perspective, diversified agroecological systems have clearly proven social and environmental impacts and, moreover, are culturally adapted while preventing malnutrition and improving food quality and diversity. This is why the Coalition Contre la Faim believes that agroecology is the best approach for building and supporting sustainable food systems.

3 The right to food is the right of every human to be protected from hunger and to have access to enough food to be able to live with dignity.

4 The right to food sovereignty is the right of populations to healthy food that respects their culture, produced using sustainable, environmentally-respectful methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems without diminishing the rights of other populations.

5 The goal is neither to put traditional culture, which would be by definition sustainable, respectful of human rights and emancipatory, on a pedestal, nor to promote cultural choices based on the paradigm of one-way progress fueled by advertising. Culture is not immutable or impermeable, but it plays an essential role that must be taken into account in the construction of food systems.

6 1.9 billion people in the world are overweight, while 650 million among them are obese.



1.2 / ADOPTING AGROECOLOGY AS A GUIDING PRINCIPLE

“Often confused with organic agriculture, permaculture, natural agriculture, simplified cultivation techniques or biodynamic agriculture, agroecology cannot be reduced simply to sustainable agricultural practices. A holistic concept, it tends rather to encompass them – when it does not differ from them – while adding a social and political dimension. While it pursues sociopolitical objectives, agroecology presents itself first and foremost as an applied science at the crossroads of several fields of knowledge and as a set of concrete agricultural practices”⁷ based on principles⁸. Agroecology allows us to reconsider agriculture by valuing ecological processes while rethinking all food systems to make them more sustainable.

Initially, agroecology was defined primarily on the scale of a cultivated plot, before being widened to larger scales and finally examining the food system as a whole⁹.

- Agroecology as a practice for sustainable agroecosystems. Initially, agroecology was identified as an agronomic attempt to integrate the principles of ecology into a redefinition of agricultural practices that did not respect the environment. The aim was to design agricultural systems based on valuing ecological processes.
- Agroecology as a scientific discipline. Agroecology is also an evolving scientific discipline, resulting from the fusion of agronomy and ecology but also incorporating dimensions from the humanities (sociology, political science, economics etc.). It lies at the crossroads of multiple areas of scientific and farming knowledge and questions the relations between science and society through new relationships between researchers and the public.

- Agroecology as a social movement for sustainable agri-food systems. The productive dimension was then combined with the organisation of processing, trade and consumption, making it possible to incorporate the socioeconomic and political dimensions of agroecology. To allow sustainable production and consumption practices to penetrate, discussion and change, driven by a social movement, must take place throughout the food system, from the spade to the plate. Moving beyond the vision of productivism, agroecology also involves an ambition to change the development paradigm. Agroecology is thus also a social movement, driven by farmers' associations and civil society.

For the Coalition Contre la Faim, the holistic approach of agroecology appears best able to contribute to food sovereignty and the emergence of sustainable food systems; it is particularly well suited to the environmental and socioeconomic realities of family farming in the countries of the Global South.

1.3 / REDEFINING THE MEASUREMENT OF PERFORMANCE IN FOOD SYSTEMS

When we evaluate the performance of food systems, it is essential for the indicators we use to go beyond simple concepts of yield – performance and efficiency indicators must cover all the dimensions of sustainability listed above. Trying to compare the efficiency of systems on a purely economic basis suffers from a lack of relevance: the performance of a sustainable food system goes much further than that¹⁰.

Many indicators can contribute to this evaluation: value added per hectare¹¹, improvement in quality of life, environmental impacts (carbon footprint, biodiversity

7 Delcourt, L (2014). Agroécologie - enjeux et perspectives. Alternatives Sud, Vol XXI(3).

8 The principles of agroecology can be summarised as follows: optimising and balancing flows of nutrients, preserving natural resources, favouring specific and genetic diversity in space and time, promoting ecological services, contributing to local food systems, minimising the use of sensitive resources and promoting system resilience. Source: <http://www.osez-agroecologie.org/l-agroecologie>

9 Based on the article “L’agroécologie : trajectoire et potentiel pour une transition vers des systèmes alimentaires durables”, P M Stassart, Baret P, Grégoire J-C, Hance T, Mormont M, Reheul D, Stilmant D, Vanloqueren G, Visser M.

10 It should be noted that comparisons between different production systems in the countries of the South often forget that the best land is systematically used for conventional agro-industrial projects. Comparisons of agricultural production systems thus often involve starting conditions that are unfavourable for the agroecological practices used by small producers due to their unequal access to land and other production factors, including access to water.

11 While yield (quantity of produce harvested from a cultivated area) is the indicator most used by agronomists and producers to evaluate performance, achieving higher yields often involves expenditure on inputs (improved seeds, fertilisers, pesticides). Improved yields thus do not always mean improved added value or benefits for producers, since the spending can be significant. We therefore think it is more appropriate to talk about value added per hectare rather than yield.

etc.), ecosystem services¹² provided across a region, climate and economic resilience, job creation, working conditions and arduousness, respect for human rights, producer autonomy, fair relations between economic players, nutritional quality, the prevention of public health problems etc. Strengthening the methods and capacity for evaluating the economic, social and environmental impact of systems is a major challenge. Scientific research has an important role to play in measuring these impacts and highlighting the results of agroecology. Measures of health, socioeconomic and agro-environmental performance that take sociocultural criteria into account must thus be developed and strengthened.

These distinctive evaluation criteria are necessary to support practitioners but also to convince decision-makers.

1.4 / ALIGN THE CONVINCED AND THE UNCONVINCED

While questions about the dominant agricultural model are growing louder, the message of those raising the questions is often seen from a dualist standpoint, in which there is a desirable reality and an undesirable reality. The systematic comparison between conventional agriculture and alternative agriculture is a view built on labels that are often far removed from the reality of farming operations. While these labels may have their benefits in increasing the scale of awareness of the current food system's limits, the reality is more of a chronological continuum: there is not just a good model on one side and a bad one on the other; there is a broad diversity of agricultural models and practices. We therefore propose to consider a process of transition towards consideration for the social and environmental aspects of agricultural practices, a process that will be integrated at their own pace by different farms, to a greater or lesser degree, and that will evolve over time.

To move the transition forward, we need to think about how we can align the convinced and the unconvinced, rather than pitting them against one another – without, however, underestimating the power relations and conflicting interests that prevent change.

¹² "Ecosystem services are defined as the benefits that humans derive from the functioning of ecosystems"(excerpt from Ecosystem Services Rendered by forests: heritage or producer of economic value? Ana Poletto), "for example by providing nutritious food and clean water, regulating diseases and climate, while contributing to crop pollination and soil formation and providing recreational, cultural and spiritual benefits "(FAO).



2 / Sustainable production

According to the Coalition Contre la Faim, a “sustainable” mode of production is a mode of production inspired by the principles of agroecology and based on family farming¹³, which helps to strengthen the autonomy of food producers and manage natural resources sustainably.

To achieve sustainable production, enabling farmers to live decently from their work while respecting the environment and adapting to the effects of climate change, agroecological practices have proven their worth¹⁴. Family farming, which accounts for 500 million farms across the globe and produces approximately 80% of the world’s food¹⁵, is characterised by the diversity of its production and its interest in preserving resources. A combination of agroecology and family farming is necessary to achieve sustainable modes of production.

2.1 / PROMOTING AND SUPPORTING AGROECOLOGICAL PRACTICES IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

As agroecology is a combination of knowledge and practices, it is important to contribute to their promotion. However, conventional top-down methods of knowledge transfer should be avoided in promoting and supporting agroecology.

Agroecological solutions are based on the multiple biological interactions within the ecosystem and the social, economic and cultural conditions of the farmers; all these conditions are highly variable. There is thus no single model for building sustainable production methods; each system needs to be considered and constructed on the basis of the context. Consequently, unlike the green revolution model, we cannot harmonise and/or standardise agroecology. There is no predefined universal solution: agroecology is a set of principles

from which practices are derived according to specific sociocultural and environmental contexts.

Including food producers is fundamental: farmers, and particularly women farmers, are central to the process of agroecological thinking and innovation. Agroecological production systems can only function by mobilising skills that are already widespread among farmers and various other actors. These skills are not concentrated among researchers and outreach programmes. To promote agroecology in the countries of the Global South, it is thus fundamental to refresh the approaches to supporting farmers, moving from linear dissemination to a change management model. Production systems should be designed in a participatory way; support approaches should be strengthened by the sharing of knowledge between farmers (farmers’ schools, peer-to-peer programmes) to build collective knowledge and the people responsible for technical training should become facilitators of exchanges of multidisciplinary knowledge and skills. Adoption and innovation will emerge from the deconstruction and reconstruction of the proposed systems.

While farmers’ knowledge is central to the agroecological approach, it is important not to idealise the notion of the omniscient farmer: farmers do not know everything, and their knowledge must be combined with scientific knowledge about the ecosystem. This makes it necessary to construct a constant exchange between scientific knowledge and farmers’ knowledge, particularly by encouraging participatory action-research processes.

¹³ “Family farming includes all family-based agricultural activities, and it is linked to several areas of rural development. Family farming is a means of organizing agricultural, forestry, fisheries, pastoral and aquaculture production which is managed and operated by a family and predominantly reliant on family labour, including both women’s and men’s.” (FAO definition)

¹⁴ As demonstrated by the IPES-Food report “From uniformity to diversity”

¹⁵ FAO (2014). State of food and agriculture: innovation in family farming.

2.2 / OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TO THE ADOPTION OF AGROECOLOGICAL PRACTICES BY PRODUCERS IN THE SOUTH

It is important to understand clearly the obstacles to the adoption of agroecological practices by producers in the Global South and identify ways of overcoming them.

2.2.1 / *The modernity paradigm*

The ideological dimension of development, which sometimes underlies the rejection of agroecological practices, should not be underestimated. It would be wrong to think that agroecology responds to strong expectations of farmers in the South, and that change is inevitable: populations are not necessarily convinced that agroecology is the best path to follow. Dreams of modernity, mechanisation and inputs that would help them achieve a western lifestyle are very present. So-called modern technologies are assumed to be superior. As Ibrahima Coulibaly of the CNOP farmers' network in Mali points out, "Here we think the western model is the one to follow."¹⁶

Olivier De Schutter emphasises that agroecology "will not emerge spontaneously, just because it has all these advantages... it is up against entrenched prejudices, inherited from a conception of agriculture that sees its future in increasingly advanced industrialisation – a vision that is out of date, but continues to predominate in people's minds."¹⁷ Leaving this paradigm of modernity behind is one of the first obstacles to overcome.

Faced with this significant hurdle, it is essential to demonstrate the positive results and impacts of agroecology in the lives of farmers. In terms of nutrition, finance, health, autonomy with regard to inputs and resilience to an increasingly unstable climate, the adoption of agroecological production methods presents important advantages that need to be highlighted with information and awareness campaigns in the context of a constructive dialogue with farmers. This work should be considered over the long term – it is a process that takes time.

It is vital to move beyond the idea that agroecology involves returning to the agriculture of the past. Though agroecology is based on traditional knowledge, it combines

it with modern scientific techniques that can increase the efficiency of production systems and reduce their arduousness while respecting the ecosystem. Agroecology is thus a resolutely modern, knowledge-intensive and efficient form of agriculture.

Demonstrating that there are alternatives to western agricultural modernisation, and that these alternatives work and improve the living conditions of food producers, is thus a powerful lever for attracting farmers to agroecological practices.

2.2.2 / *The transition period*

For food producing families who make only marginal use of synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, there are hurdles associated with the lack of access to information, the lack of a vision of the farm's potential, the traditional distribution of tasks and the lack of support. However, introducing agroecological practices into these producers' operations can result in increased production and improved results fairly quickly. On the other hand, for farming families who have adopted the systematic use of synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, the situation is more complex and the period of transition towards agroecological practices is a significant obstacle: as this period is often less productive, and the quantity of work required is higher, most farmers prefer to retain their initial production methods, despite the direct financial benefit of reducing purchases of inputs.

For forms of agriculture based on the significant use of inputs, the return on investment is deferred: agroecological production methods take time to bear fruit. Meanwhile, farmers are often faced with the need to respond quickly to their nutritional and financial needs, especially when they are in an extremely vulnerable situation.

It should also be noted that farmers may legitimately fear change: questioning their production methods is a major risk. This risk comes on top of all the other risks the farmer already faces, and it concerns their source of income – it is not a decision to be taken lightly.

For all these reasons, it is important that these farmers receive specific support to assist them through the transition period. Agricultural policies and cooperation play a role

¹⁶ Coulibaly, I (12 October 2017). Seminar: Systèmes alimentaires durables, pas si simple !, Brussels.
¹⁷ Delcourt, L (2014). Agroécologie - enjeux et perspectives. Alternatives Sud, Vol XXI(3)

here in subsidising the transition and supporting projects in the long term. At the level of an individual farm, it is important that the practices supported respond both to the farmers' short-term goals (food, revenue generation) and longer-term objectives (improving fertility) or the public interest.

During this period of transition towards agroecology, external contributions to the farm are also often necessary to enable soil to become fertile again, especially in situations where water and organic matter are scarce resources. To facilitate the transition, it is important to make inputs available that are suited to agroecological practices. There are several strategies for this, from self-production on the farm over the inclusion of "bio-inputs" in national agricultural support programmes (which often subsidise chemical inputs) to shared production by cooperatives.

2.2.3 / Labour-intensive and knowledge-intensive practices

Agroecological practices require a high level of intensity of human effort, both physical and intellectual, at least during the transition period and often into the longer term: these practices demand particular care of the crops, which means learning techniques, significant efforts of observation and planning of the production system and finally considerable physical labour in the fields.

Although globally we subscribe to the idea that it is beneficial for employment opportunities to be created in the agricultural sector – in contrast to the extreme concentration of this sector in developed countries – the question of how physically demanding this work is requires our full attention. Reducing the arduousness of the work and offering attractive jobs for young people are fundamental challenges for the development of agroecology. A revaluing of the status of farmers within society, and of rural employment in general, will also be decisive.

It is vital to encourage production plans that limit the arduousness of the work, plans in which the supported practices are supplemented by synergistic effects to reduce farmers' workloads.

Developing specific agricultural mechanisation is another important lever for the development of agroecological production methods: agricultural machinery is often ill-suited to agroecological practices. Appropriate specific equipment could reduce the arduousness of agricultural work. Developing small-scale mechanisation is thus an important issue, which would also allow the creation of new engineering jobs. This is an avenue for scientific research and development cooperation to explore.

2.2.4 / Access to land

One difficulty in adopting agroecological practices is caused by inadequate access to land: when a farmer's land does not belong to him or her and can be withdrawn, there is a great risk in adopting and investing in agroecological practices for the producer.

As the advantages of agroecology unfold over the long term, its strengthening goes hand in hand with fair land distribution, strengthening farmers' land rights and especially those of women farmers, and easier access to natural resources in general.

We generally observe that access to land is particularly limited for women farmers, who are often the ones with a special interest in agroecology and its role in nurturing and protecting the land. Women's land tenure insecurity is thus an important obstacle to their empowerment and improvements in their quality of life; it is also an obstacle to the development of agroecology.

2.2.5 / An unfavourable environment for change

The transformation of the food system overturns established interests. But many players have no interest in seeing the food system transformed, and employ considerable resources to prevent change¹⁸. While this reality has a strong influence in the international context and on national policy decisions, it also has an impact at a level closer to family farmers.

18 See Lock-in 8: Concentration of Power, page 57 of IPES-Food (67). From uniformity to diversity: a paradigm shift from industrial agriculture to diversified agroecological systems. Retrieved from <http://www.ipes-food.org/17>

In most contexts, public support for agriculture is very low, and the only people giving advice to farmers are often vendors of seeds, fertilisers and plant protection products. They promote a model based on the large-scale use of external inputs. When public policies enable agricultural outreach services to function effectively, they often operate from a viewpoint that pushes farmers towards the technology package of the green revolution.

In some regions, this unfavourable climate can be responsible for a large-scale disappearance of traditional knowledge and farmers' seeds, which constitute an essential basis for food sovereignty and building agroecological practices. Similarly, this climate can prevent these practices from bearing fruit: for instance, natural predators of pests, essential for controlling them through biological means, may no longer be present due to previous practices or the techniques used on neighbouring farms.

Strengthening and transforming agricultural technical advice are important means of overcoming these obstacles.

As well as policy solutions, a multi-player approach and work on the scale of the territory, supplementing work on individual plots, should be promoted to amplify the positive impacts of agroecological production methods.



3 / Processing, marketing, consumption

A sustainable food system implies the development of marketing channels that give priority to local markets. Self-consumption and the nutrition and revenues of producers are guaranteed while reinforcing supplies for city-dwellers, who are well-informed about healthy, sustainable food. Special efforts must be made to reorganise local and regional marketing channels.

3.1 / THE REVENUES OF FAMILY FARMERS

To encourage the development of sustainable production methods as mentioned in the previous point, it is essential to enable farming families to earn a living and meet their own needs. It is not possible to suggest to farmers who may be living in extreme poverty that they cultivate healthy food and improve their health without also improving their revenues. It is thus essential to pay close attention to the economic viability of the promoted food systems.

As explained above, the transition period can be costly, and the transition is all the more complex when the soil is not very fertile. Specific support during this period is vital: if it does not exist, and sustainable modes of production do not represent an economic opportunity for farming families, they will remain a minority pursuit. The environmental services and all the positive impacts delivered by agroecological producers to society must be paid for by the very same society.

Going beyond revenue, self-consumption of diverse, healthy, nutritious produce should be encouraged. The revenue of a farming family thus does not tell the whole story: even without a significant rise in revenue, nutrition, food security and health can be greatly improved in a diversified agroecological system. Similarly, going beyond revenue, the economic resilience of farming families can also be improved by agroecology. This brings us back to the need for differentiated performance measurements.

3.2 / PROCESSING AND MARKETING: EMERGENCE OF NEW VALUE CHAINS

It is vital to support the emergence of new agroecological value chains for sustainable food systems. These value chains must make the most out of products from agroecological sources and enable them to be marketed locally. Priority should be given to short, local chains and relationships between urban consumers and producers in neighbouring rural areas¹⁹.

Recognition for agroecological products is fundamentally important in Southern countries. Appropriate storage and processing enable this recognition, together with the creation of added value. It is thus important to contribute to the emergence of these new value chains.

Relocating food systems is an opportunity both to recognise products from sustainable production methods and to create jobs both upstream and downstream of production itself. At a time when few young people imagine a future in agriculture, local food value chains can strengthen a local economic fabric that creates jobs²⁰.

Close attention must be paid to ensuring that the added value is divided equitably between production, processing and marketing, that it remains as close as possible to the area from which the products come and that these value chains do not diminish farmers' autonomy.

Social enterprises and farmers' cooperatives should be encouraged and supported to process and market agricultural products from agroecological sources. The

¹⁹ United Nations General Assembly (24 January 2014). Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter: The transformative potential of the right to food. Human Rights Council See the point on rebuilding local food systems, page 15.

²⁰ In Africa, the age pyramid brings millions of young people into the jobs market every year. Local food value chains provide opportunities to absorb this workforce upstream from production, in agriculture, processing and marketing.

fabric of microbusinesses and SMEs should be prioritised over corporations with strong concentrations of capital and power, including multinationals.

Developing these new value chains and marketing agroecological products is not easy: the diversification of production and the isolation and small size of farms make market access very difficult. Wholesalers and processors have to be able to provide continuous supplies, which can be difficult for producing families to achieve.

Strengthening the associativity of producers should thus be encouraged to facilitate the marketing of agroecological products. Significant investment in rural public infrastructure to build connections between territories and link them to neighbouring towns also deserves major attention from public authorities and development cooperation.

3.3 / PARTICIPATORY GUARANTEE SYSTEMS (PGS)

Certification and labelling are not the only way of giving agroecology its rightful place in the market. We believe that it is essential, more generally, to internalise the positive and negative impacts of different modes of production in the product price. However, certification, and particularly participatory guarantee systems (PGS), are very promising avenues for promoting agroecological products to consumers.

PGS emerged in organic agriculture networks to address the absence of official certification and the prohibitive cost of third-party certification – small producers on their own cannot afford the prices of this certification.

“Participatory Guarantee Systems are locally anchored quality assurance systems. They certify producers based on active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks and exchange of knowledge.”²¹ These innovative systems give groups of producers the opportunity to have their produce certified collectively, making their marketing easier and providing a guarantee for consumers looking for organic and agroecological products. They enable producers either to benefit from opportunities in differentiated markets or just to access local markets for their products more easily. PGS thus enables more inclusive, participatory marketing that respects agricultural and cultural diversity. These

certification systems are particularly well suited to local markets, short supply chains and small, diversified farms. Despite their many advantages, these systems have a cost and are currently strongly dependent on external finance. The sustainability of these systems will depend on their ability to maintain their funding in the long term through support from states and/or contributions from beneficiaries. State support should be advocated, because these systems guarantee healthy products, and the remuneration of agricultural producers and modes of production with positive environmental externalities. Going beyond state support, it is also important to conduct information and awareness campaigns targeting consumers and to support the position of PGS in local markets and with processors, retailers and the catering industry. PGS must be backed by a broad social movement in which producers and consumers defend their common interests.

3.4 / SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

The consumer clearly has an important role to play in developing sustainable food systems.

Agroecological production is insufficiently valued in the countries of the South and consumer awareness is low. To achieve fairer remuneration that will enable agroecology to be more broadly adopted by farmers, demand must evolve through greater consumer awareness.

Indeed, important efforts for public awareness raising on sustainable food systems are also needed in the South. Faced with increasing food imports, the explosion of the problems of overweight and obesity and the sharp rise in demand for meat products, it is essential to educate consumers about the importance of supporting local sustainable agriculture. These considerations must also reach the minds of consumers in the South, including the urban middle classes.

Beyond the question of price and fair pay for producers, symbolic elements should also not be underestimated: the fact that city-dwellers value the products of a local farmer is very important for the producer. Apart from the purely economic rationale, the symbolic dimension plays a role in valuing farmers and promoting a model of rural well-being.

21 PGS definition according to IFOAM, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements



4 / Political and social conditions

We have already mentioned several times the importance of collective action and the public authorities in nurturing and supporting sustainable food systems. This is indeed a key factor for change. To ensure that sustainable food systems are promoted and supported, a favourable policy environment is essential. Without overall structural changes, agroecology will remain marginal.

4.1 / THE IMPORTANCE OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS: NOT PLACING THE FULL BURDEN OF THE TRANSITION ON FARMERS

The many discussions about sustainable food systems and agroecology too often focus on farmers and their farms. The burden of the transition and its changes is placed too much on the shoulders of farmers, and not enough on those of other players in the system. We cannot concentrate solely on what farmers must change; we must also look at how other players and society as a whole should intervene.

In the debate on sustainable food systems, huge emphasis is placed on yield and on the comparison between prices of agroecological food and prices of other food, but are the prices defined by the market really the sole benchmark around which our thinking should revolve? As we have already mentioned, we must work to internalise the social and environmental costs of different agricultural systems.

Collective financial tools must help guide the agricultural model: the general taxation system should account better for the positive and negative externalities of different production systems. One very significant obstacle to the emergence of sustainable food systems is the competition between agroecological products and conventional agricultural products, which are facilitated and subsidised and externalise their social and environmental costs²² – this competition is thus unfair. A framework favourable to the emergence of sustainable food systems should discourage agricultural and food practices that generate

negative externalities and reward workers who adopt agricultural practices that generate positive externalities. The framework must, however, remain attentive to the food security of vulnerable consumers, particularly in cities²³.

To promote the emergence of this framework, considerable emphasis should be placed on awareness and political lobbying to encourage society as a whole to take responsibility for its role in the transition towards sustainable food systems.

4.2 / ABSENCE OF A FAVOURABLE FRAMEWORK IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

4.2.1 / *No answer from the state*

Although the agricultural sector is a major contributor to GDP in many countries of the Global South, public investment in the agricultural sector remains extremely low. Since the 1980s and its structural adjustment programmes, there has been a widespread withdrawal of state investment from agriculture. In spite of a sudden burst of international financial efforts following the food crises of 2007 and 2008, the commitment of public resources to agriculture is still extremely low today.

The countries of the South often prioritise private finance for agricultural development, which favours an agricultural model poles apart from sustainable agriculture. This dependence on private investment traps them in a particular form of agriculture and prevents change.

²² As described by Olivier de Schutter, low-cost food is actually very expensive: <http://www.lalibre.be/debats/opinions/l-alimentation-low-cost-coute-tres-cher-opinion-5a15b469cd707514e8df47e4>

²³ While the great majority of people suffering from hunger and poverty live in rural areas and are occupied by agriculture, and their revenues need to be improved, we must remain vigilant to ensure that the urban poor, who depend on very low-cost food to survive, do not find themselves marginalised by policies that can affect the prices of foods.

4.2.2 / State action that does not promote sustainable food systems

Beyond just choosing an agricultural model, the countries of the Global South often adapt their agricultural policies to suit opportunities for external funding, which explains why these policies are sometimes inconsistent or even contradictory.

However, the policy framework in many countries is still underpinned by the paradigm of the green revolution and agricultural modernisation, and is thus rarely favourable to the agroecological transition. Some countries are seeing slow progress, but many governments are simply not convinced that agroecology can feed the world.

The sizeable national funds allocated to agriculture go against the promotion of agroecology: public policy is oriented towards subsidies for chemical inputs, agricultural outreach systems prioritise short-term benefits and qualified agricultural staff are not trained in agroecology.

4.3 / CONCRETE POLICY MEASURES

While certain policy measures have already been mentioned, we should summarise the main areas in which policy measures are needed to support and promote sustainable food systems. In the North, development cooperation policies and other policies with an impact on development in Southern countries (including trade, agriculture, climate and energy policies) have a role to play.

4.3.1 / Access to land

Land tenure insecurity remains a major problem in many countries in the South, while farmers need to think in the long term to commit to sustainable production systems. Land tenure security and guarantees against land grabbing are prerequisites for the development of sustainable food systems. Strengthening and securing access to land for farmers is an important challenge.

4.3.2 / Favourable trade policies

As we have already mentioned, supportive trade policies and guaranteed profitable prices contribute to agroecological intensification. This brings us to a fundamental point that goes against the grain of currently accepted international free trade policies: to guarantee the emergence of sustainable food systems and local marketing channels, the countries of the South (and the North) must be able to protect their production against low-cost food imports, which often constitute economic, social and environmental dumping. Food is a right before being a commodity and agriculture is fundamentally multifunctional: these sectors cannot be governed by the prices defined in the international markets, which take no account of the externalities of production systems, ignore the diversity of agro-environmental realities and demonstrate observable distortions of competition (including agricultural subsidies in developed countries). Sustainable food systems can thus only be promoted and consolidated within the framework of policies favourable to food sovereignty that guarantee the multifunctional nature of agriculture and food democracy.

4.3.3 / Financing agricultural practices and the transition to impact measurement

Public reinvestment in agriculture is essential. However, the question is not just how much should be invested but, more importantly, how the investment should take place: which type of agriculture should be supported and prioritised? Public policies oriented towards subsidies for chemical inputs, public-private partnerships and agro-industrial mega-projects leave no room for the emergence of sustainable food systems. Public policies must prevent unfair competition based on the externalisation of costs and the grabbing of public subsidies by industrial production.

Collective financial tools must therefore help guide the agricultural model and integrate the positive and negative externalities of different production systems. Public subsidies should be used to remunerate farmers who offer ecosystem services and preserve public goods.

Policies should also be encouraged to support and facilitate the agroecological transition period, which is a difficult time. NGOs and civil society organisations certainly have a role to play, but cannot work on a large enough scale. Public policy and cooperation are thus vitally important in supporting this transition.

4.3.4 / Supporting agroecological production methods

Political decision-makers must provide a special allocation to recognise and support farmers' seed systems. Government departments must also support seed saving so that farmers can continue to produce high-quality seeds and preserve their independence. Farmers should also be allowed to sell these seeds to earn revenue.

Support for the development of small-scale mechanisation is another important issue for public policy, development cooperation and scientific research. As we have said, developing specific agricultural machinery is an important lever for the development of sustainable production methods.

4.3.5 / Supporting the marketing of sustainable products

Supporting local marketing channels is also an objective that requires political will.

Significant investment in rural public infrastructure is needed to open up the countryside. Public authorities can also support the processing and marketing of agricultural products from agroecology by strengthening producers' associations. Political power should prioritise social enterprise and producers' cooperatives and ensure the fabric of microbusinesses and small and medium-sized enterprises are favoured over transnational corporations. Finally, participatory guarantee systems should be supported by the political authorities, because these systems guarantee healthy products, remuneration for agricultural producers and modes of production with positive environmental externalities.

4.4 / DEVELOPING A SOCIAL MOVEMENT

To influence a policy framework, it is important to strengthen social and farming movements that promote family farming and agroecology. Civil society needs to reinforce its lobbying of states so that they listen to voices other than those of Bill Gates and the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa. We must continue to denounce the economic, social, environmental, cultural and health impacts of conventional agriculture and reject the ideological image of agroecological practices as obsolete and romantic when they are, on the contrary, innovative, modern and rich in knowledge.

The 2015 Nyeleni Forum was a high point of networking efforts and lobbying for agroecology: representatives of farmers' movements from all over the world took part in a reflection on the promotion of sustainable family farming. The forum led to a unanimous conclusion: agroecology must be prioritised to support the emergence of sustainable food systems²⁴.

To enable social movements to emerge and grow stronger, it is important to support lobbying and awareness raising by local organisations. Strengthening agricultural organisations is a fundamental part of amplifying agroecology, because they can give farmers the opportunity to express themselves and defend their rights and can create a public movement able to influence minds and policies. NGOs, meanwhile, must develop a more political view of agricultural development while leaving space and supporting other players to enable an expansion of civil society.

This social movement must facilitate the introduction of agroecology into policy frameworks via a bottom-up process. Establishing a dialogue with local and national authorities on ways of supporting agroecology as an instrument to combat hunger, poverty and environmental degradation can prove very effective.

²⁴ Final declaration: <https://www.foodsovereignty.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/EN-DECLARATION-OF-THE-INTERNATIONAL-FORUM-FOR-AGROECOLOGY-2015.pdf>



4.5 / THE ROLE OF BELGIAN DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

With regard to Belgium's development cooperation, it clearly has a role to play in encouraging sustainable food systems in partner countries of the cooperation by contributing to the various areas of support described in this document. The Belgian NGOs represented by the Coalition Contre la Faim invite the Belgian cooperation sector to become a leader in promoting agroecology as a way 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.

While cooperation agencies in several countries are already fully committed to supporting sustainable food systems²⁵, Belgium has not yet made the area a priority. The new "agriculture and food security" strategy note represents a change of viewpoint: from family farming to agricultural entrepreneurship, the new orientation does not encourage the emergence and support of sustainable food systems in the countries of the South²⁶ and does not mention the principle of the transition. However, there are several opportunities which can be seized: the note mentions sustainable agriculture, the notion of inclusiveness, nutrition and links with research and innovation. These constitute levers that can be used to promote sustainable food systems.

²⁵ For example, the Agence Française de Développement, the French development agency, has made agroecology one of its priorities: <https://www.afd.fr/fr/salon-de-lagriculture-2018-lagro-ecologie-recolte-les-bons-points>

²⁶ For more on this subject, see the open letter published by the Coalition Contre la Faim: https://www.rtb.be/info/opinions/detail_l-esprit-d-entreprise-comme-premier-outil-de-developpement-agricole-en-afrique-les-ong-sont-sceptiques?id=9600675

5 / 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 integrate the gender perspective.

5.1 / MAKING RESEARCH EVOLVE

One important opportunity to support and promote sustainable food systems involves partnering with research to demonstrate together with universities and civil society in the South and the North and objectively what agroecology can contribute to food systems. It is necessary to move on from niche concept to an institutionalised concept by involving universities, research and organisations providing support to producers in participatory research processes.

5.1.1 / *An agronomic model moving up the agenda*

Questions about the conventional model of agriculture have been raised on the international stage more and more often in recent years. While this is not new – there have been adversarial debates on certain aspects of the green revolution in the past – the criticism is becoming increasingly powerful. The challenge is now coming from agronomists themselves and published in scientific journals. The conventional agronomic model is being debated more and more often, both in the scientific world and in society at large. This opportunity to influence mentalities and practices must be seized.

5.1.2 / *Obstacles to the development of agroecology as a field of research*

However, there are obstacles to research taking agroecology into account. Research is often too isolated and generally studies very specific areas: scientific thought is compartmentalised, while agroecology demands a systemic, holistic approach, in which the so-called exact sciences and the social sciences must be brought together.

In addition to this, public-private partnerships generally tend to orient research away from agroecology. These partnerships have huge consequences for the types of research conducted: research financed in this way now only focuses on fields where the private sector has identified clear prospects of future profits, which is not the case with agroecological research. More independent research will focus as much on societal benefits as the benefits for the agricultural sector, family-based or industrial. Today, public funds are mostly invested in the private sector's priorities, and there is a real shortage of funding for agroecological research.

5.1.3 / *Placing research at the service of sustainable food systems*

Research funding must be rebalanced in favour of agroecology: an equitable breakdown would allocate the same resources to agroecological research and to biotechnology. Today, resources are unequal and disproportionate.

While research must take agroecology into account, it must also change to allow an exchange of knowledge and lessons learned, placing farmers at the centre of research. As we have already mentioned, agroecology is based on principles that must be adapted to the specific context of each farm. Research must therefore come out of the laboratory, intensify its discussions with the farming world and better support farm-based research.

It is also essential to strengthen capacity in systemic analysis and train interdisciplinary researchers who can break down the barriers between fields of knowledge and deal with complexity.



5.2 / INTEGRATING THE GENDER PERSPECTIVE

5.2.1 / Role and situation of women in agriculture²⁷

Women occupy a key role in food security and sovereignty and are important players in family farming. Many studies have highlighted the dominant role of women in the household economy and family health and nutrition.

Despite this, women's work is often under-recognised and undervalued. Their roles and contributions receive little consideration, and even when they are strategically important they are seen as falling solely within the sphere of domestic work. Women farmers and rural women are scarcely involved, if at all, in decisions taken by families or communities. In agriculture, they have access to less fertile land and unprofitable plot sizes in more degraded areas. Their access to and control of land and natural resources is precarious and unequal. In general, they are subject to discrimination in access to the means of production (land, water, credit, training, technology) and to food.

Moreover, women experience sociocultural, economic and training difficulties that hold them back and place them in an unfavourable position from the start, with fewer opportunities (and sometimes rights) than men. Various structural mechanisms, including patriarchal systems, maintain these gender inequalities, which have consequences for women's food security: we are seeing a real feminisation of countrysides and poverty.

5.2.2 / Agroecology: women in the front line

Women are generally in charge of subsistence agriculture or food crops all over the world. They take care of selecting seeds, harvesting vegetables and choosing and selling products at local markets. With their knowledge of native seeds, their traditional knowledge of agriculture, their ways of managing biodiversity and water, their ability to care for animals and their commercial initiatives at local

markets, women have many strengths in the practice of agroecology and in energising production and the local economy. In various ways, women play a fundamental role in preserving agricultural biodiversity by maintaining traditional input-free practices. They are thus key players in agroecology.

As women constitute an important source of agroecological knowledge, valuing and promoting this knowledge should be at the heart of any strategy that aims to promote diversified agroecological systems.

5.2.3 / Agroecology as a means of empowering women

Agroecology stands out as an accessible, sustainable route for women, enabling them to access economic independence while providing better nutrition for their family.

Supporting and valuing women's agroecological practices also provides recognition for women's work and a more valued position in the eyes of men, which sometimes results in empowerment in socio-organisational terms.

Women farmers brought together by shared agroecological projects can be more organised when working together and formulate their demands in terms of participation and decision-making. Agroecology is thus a lever for women farmers' collective empowerment.

5.2.4 / Integrating the gender perspective in agroecology

However, the opportunities and benefits that agroecology can provide in terms of gender equality are not automatic, and gender must be taken into account in support for agroecological practices.

It is important to consider the effects of agroecological practices on women's workloads – choices made about the production system have significant repercussions for women's work, and these need to be analysed. Vigilance

²⁷ For more on this subject, see the opinion by the Conseil Consultatif Genre et Développement (Belgium's consultative committee on gender and development) dated 13 December 2017: opinion for the 62nd session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women on the priority theme "Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls". http://www.argo-ccgd.be/sites/default/files/171213_ccgd_avis_csw62_thematique_fr_0.pdf

is required to avoid increasing the arduousness and volume of the work done by women and to ensure that agroecological practices contribute to improving their situation rather than worsening it. It is thus important to be attentive to how tasks are allocated by gender and to ask questions about domestic and productive roles and tasks within the family and society.

One obstacle to consider is the violence that affects women, prevents their expression, isolates them and diminishes their self-esteem.

An integrated approach at household level, defined and managed jointly by the woman and the man, should be promoted to support sustainable agriculture, which can have an emancipating effect for all the members of the family, men, women, girls and boys.

Support and strengthening of social movements defending women's rights and fighting for fair access to land and the means of production should also be emphasised.

6 / 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.

We should remember that the member states of the United Nations have pledged to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture (Goal 2 of the Sustainable Development Goals). This goal includes a commitment, by 2030, to ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding and other disasters and that progressively improve land and soil quality (Target 4). The orientations and solutions described in this report thus contribute clearly to the goals set by the international community.

Although the emergence of sustainable food systems will not be easy, and will require changes in the current power relations, the agroecological approach, which places farmers at its centre, has promising prospects and shows that alternatives exist. These alternatives, which are now being tested successfully by growing numbers of producers, benefit from an increasingly solid scientific foundation and a rise in institutional recognition. The Second International Symposium on Agroecology hosted by the FAO illustrates this new international awareness: “We need to put forward sustainable food systems [...] and also preserve the environment: agroecology can offer several contributions to this process.”²⁸

Constraints and obstacles exist and hinder the emergence of sustainable food systems in the countries of the Global South, but a number of levers can help overcome them. The development of sustainable food systems is thus perfectly realistic.

In concluding this report, it is important to underline that scaling up agroecological practices and the emergence of new food systems will inevitably involve establishing a favourable institutional and policy environment, in both the North and the South. Various concrete policy measures have been identified, with various ways of achieving them, including strengthening the social movement in favour of sustainable food systems.

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 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.

²⁸ Declaration by José Graziano da Silva, Director General of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) during the opening session of the symposium on 3 April 2018.

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