

**Contribution to e-consultation on the scope of High level Panel of Experts (HLPE) of the Committee on World Food Security report on:**

***'Agroecological approaches and other innovations for sustainable agriculture and food systems that enhance food security and nutrition'***

15 November 2017

The International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) welcomes the initiative to produce a HLPE report on agroecology, and finds the proposed research questions to be valid and relevant.

However, in order to ensure that the report provides meaningful analysis, IPES-Food considers it imperative to avoid reducing agroecology to or equating it with specific technologies/innovations.

Agroecology represents a cohesive, systemic approach and a set of guiding principles for redesigning food and farming systems. It should not, therefore, be compared with stand-alone technologies, techniques or innovations (e.g. crop breeding advances; specific forms of integrated pest management; input reduction techniques). Many of these techniques and technologies have potential to reduce environmental and social impacts of agroecosystems on their own, and merit attention and support. However, they can be applied and often are applied within predominantly industrial systems, i.e. focused on monocultures and the production of uniform commodities for distant markets. In other words, specific technologies may mitigate but not reverse the severe social and environmental impacts of industrial agriculture - impacts that are now being documented and understood worldwide.

By contrast, agroecology represents a system redesign in itself:

*'Agroecology... is a universal logic for redesigning agricultural systems in ways that maximize biodiversity and stimulate interactions between different plants and species, as part of holistic strategies to build long-term fertility, healthy agro-ecosystems and secure livelihoods. Put simply, it is the opposite of monocultures and their reliance on chemical inputs. It is therefore a broad landing space that can be reached via a variety of pathways and entry points, progressively or in more rapid shifts, as farmers free themselves from the structures of industrial agriculture and refocus their farming systems around a new set of principles.'* (IPES Food, 2016, p.7 – see attached document).

Considerable research, investment and discussion is already dedicated to specific agricultural technologies and innovations (e.g. GM crops, precision agriculture techniques). The added value of agroecology, and the added value of a HLPE report on this topic, is to offer an alternative *paradigm* - one in which system redesign and diversification are prerequisites, and changes in knowledge transmission, participation and power relations are as important as shifts in farming practice. Specific technologies and innovations (social and technological) must be considered *within* agroecological systems - i.e., for their compatibility with agroecological principles, not as alternatives to them.

Failing to make this distinction risks reducing this report to a futile debate between agroecology (a holistic food and farming paradigm) and biotechnology (a set of crop breeding technologies), or between agroecology (a holistic food and farming paradigm) and 'climate-smart agriculture' (an umbrella term for various mostly capital-intensive innovations targeting environmental sustainability). In other words, the report's framing must be attuned to the realities of current debates. The ongoing polarization between 'agroecology' and 'biotechnology' has led to unsatisfactory attempts to reconcile differences, e.g. under the umbrella of 'climate-smart agriculture', based on the assumption that different systems can co-exist side-by-side. The all-inclusiveness and compatibility of different approaches should be tested - not assumed from the outset.

IPES-Food therefore recommends i) that the report consider specific innovative approaches, practices and technologies for their potential within and compatibility with systems governed by agroecological principles; ii) that 'agroecological approaches' be used only to refer to systemic approaches (i.e. as a synonym for 'agroecology') and not to a catalogue of itemized practices; iii) that it be clarified what types of innovations would qualify as contributing to food security and sustainable food systems, and on what basis; and iv) that the original contribution of this report be its central focus on agroecology.

With regard to specific research questions, IPES-Food welcomes the attention to a range of sustainability criteria (i.e. resource efficiency, ecological footprint, resilience, social equity, job creation) and recommends inclusion of *dietary diversity* as a key component of sustainable food systems. The benefits of agroecology have already been widely documented (IPES-Food, 2016; De Schutter, 2011; FAO, 2015). The challenge is to build on and update this knowledge base, filling in specific gaps while keeping a view of the holistic and mutually-reinforcing nature of the different benefits. Specific gaps that could be usefully addressed include:

- employment impacts (how to capitalize on the labor-intensive nature of agroecology to foster employment and decent livelihoods);
- impacts specifically on youth employment (how increasing support to agroecology might attract more youth to agriculture and reduce urban migration);

- economic impacts (how food from agroecological systems can be sold at prices that support decent livelihoods);
- gender impacts (how and to what extent agroecology favors women's empowerment); and
- integration - not appropriation - of indigenous, farmers' and local knowledge (particularly around seeds) with scientific knowledge.

IPES-Food also welcomes the focus on addressing obstacles to agroecology, and draws attention to the '8 lock-ins' identified in the panel's 2016 report (attached). In particular, we would underline the need to consider obstacles of a political nature, including the *perceived* lack of productivity of agroecology via dominant narratives about food security; the assumption that agroecology means 'a return to the past' and a rejection of technology; and the general confusion that tends to be propagated around the meaning of agroecology (e.g. movement vs. practices). A further challenge is to reinforce understanding of the global impacts, while zooming in on specific regions and capturing agroecology in its different geographical incarnations. IPES-Food is currently testing the obstacles in a West African context and hopes the results of this study will be of use (IPES-Food, forthcoming – see [concept note](#)).

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De Schutter, O. (2011). *Agroecology and the right to food: Report presented at the 16th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council*. Geneva, Switzerland, United Nations Human Rights Council

FAO (2015). *Agroecology for Food Security and Nutrition Proceedings of the FAO International Symposium*. 18-19 September 2014, Rome, Italy

IPES-Food (2016). *From uniformity to diversity: a paradigm shift from industrial agriculture to diversified agroecological systems*. International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food systems