

Are existing food and agricultural policies supportive to local sustainable food systems?¹

In October 2015, on the occasion of the [Milano EXPO 2015](#), around one hundred mayors of major cities throughout the world signed the [Milan Urban Food Policy Pact](#). Through this pact, these mayors commit to “*work to develop sustainable food systems that are inclusive, resilient, safe and diverse, that provide healthy and affordable food to all people in a human rights-based framework, that minimise waste and conserve biodiversity while adapting to and mitigating impacts of climate change*”. This has been the most visible recent expression of a movement that has developed in recent years to make cities, which group around half of world population, major actors of the emergence of more sustainable food systems. It is also part of a larger movement that has been aiming at developing local sustainable food systems.



Why promote local sustainable food systems?

Because there are increasingly convincing signs that our food systems are not sustainable and that developing sustainable local food systems will contribute to increase global sustainability. And this, in two major ways:

¹ Based on a paper presented at the [Conference on Global Sustainability and Local Foods](#) organised by the American University of Rome on 2 October 2015.

- By being sustainable, i.e. economically viable, socially just and based on the use of environment-friendly technologies;
- By being local, i.e. based on short food chains that offer better remuneration to producers and affordable prices for consumers, with stronger linkages between producers and consumers, and reduced consumption of fossil energy for transport, and that is less prone to wastage because of the proximity between producers and consumers.

The two concepts of ‘sustainability’ and ‘local’ are synergetic, but do not overlap perfectly:

- Sustainable food production is not necessarily local: links among producers and consumers may be tenuous and production sites may be distant from consumption centres as illustrated by the development of bio-industrial agriculture on large organic farms with lowly paid workers that sends its organic food to urban supermarkets, and
- Local food production is not necessarily sustainable: it may be based on the use of unsustainable production technologies as is the often case of pesticide-intensive peri-urban horticulture.

While it is clear that the development of local sustainable food systems can contribute to global sustainability, it is also obvious that while food production, in general, could be made entirely “sustainable” (e.g. food prices reflect the actual cost of food, including externalities; all operators are remunerated fairly along value chains and enjoy adequate working conditions; technologies used are environment-friendly, etc.), it cannot be made entirely “local” (part of the production will need to be obtained from locations relatively far away from consumption centres because of increasing urbanisation that is estimated to reach 70% by 2050²).

A contrasted situation in different parts of the world

From a worldwide perspective, the situation and trends with respect to local sustainable food systems are quite different in different places:

- In highly urbanised and rich countries (industrial countries of the ‘North’), highly subsidised industrialised agriculture based on complex value chains is dominating and local food production has become marginal, although it has been the object of a renewed interest in recent years;
- In more rural and poor countries (non-industrial countries of the ‘South’), traditional family farming produces the bulk of food production (i.e. 80% in Asia) and there have been continuous efforts, over the last decades, to develop a more industrialised agriculture that relies on increasingly sophisticated value chains, a carbon-copy of the system dominant in the ‘North’.

In both cases, policies have been important drivers of change and, in general, they tend to be rather unfavourable to local sustainable food systems.

² Instead of 50% today.

In urbanised rich industrial countries

Three main reasons may explain the renewed interest for local sustainable food systems that has been observed over recent years:

- In complex value chains dominated by large distribution chains (hyper- and super-markets) and in an economic environment that has traditionally been aiming at making food available to consumers at low prices, farmers are price takers and consequently are poorly remunerated for their work, and they tend to react by trying to establish shorter food supply chains (direct road-side sales, on-farm sales, direct contracts with consumers, etc.) in order to get better prices for their products;
- There has been a decreasing trust of consumers in existing complex industrial food value chains. Repeated food scandals have demonstrated that these chains are poorly regulated. Budget cuts have resulted in a continuous reduction of means available for food control. Awareness has increased that poor quality food can have devastating effects on health. As a reaction, a growing number of consumers take part in short supply chains, either through direct contacts (and contracts) with producers or through associations. They look for more transparency and some even take part in participatory guarantee systems. A minority, who find time and have access to land, have even started to produce directly part of their food;
- The increased consciousness of the reality of climate change and of food production-related environmental degradation has contributed to the emergence of the opinion that food needs to be produced in a more sustainable way, that it must be made safer for consumers, that food wastage needs to diminish, that production needs to be organised so as to preserve the natural resource base and that greenhouse gases emitted by the food system need to be reduced by decreasing the reliance on fossil energy (e.g. fuel, fertilizer, pesticides)³.

In the field, there is some evidence of a growing number of initiatives that have attempted to meet with these concerns and interests. They can be categorised in two main types that often overlap:

- Urban and peri-urban agriculture, which includes all attempts to use available space in urban and peri-urban areas for food production, whether undertaken by individuals, communities or groups;
- Short food supply chains such as consumer/producer agreements (e.g. Teikei in Japan, AMAP in France and community-supported agriculture in anglo-saxon countries) or roadside sales which aim at re-creating stronger links between producers and consumers living in neighbouring areas, maintaining or gaining back independence from large distribution firms and improving farm level income.

In both cases, they increasingly adopt, in their majority but not exclusively, environment-friendly agricultural technologies (low input agriculture, ecological agriculture or organic farming).

³ The food system uses up to 30% of the total human consumption of energy and generates 30% of greenhouse gas emitted by human activities. Moreover, 30% of the food produced is being wasted.

There is little recent data available on the actual weight of these initiatives, but it is likely that their importance is limited (e.g. in France some available data show that in 2005 short food chains represented around 7% of fruits and vegetables sold and were participated by more than 15% of farmers). They are often promoted and staffed mostly by activists. Participating consumers are mostly middle or upper class, with relatively high income and a good level of education.



Even though the perspectives of this emerging movement are promising and it can be expected that it will grow further, encouraged by likely future food scandals and better information on the conditions under which food is being produced in the agro-industrial sector, it is unlikely that it will ever represent more than a limited proportion of food production (most likely less than 25%), if the current environment in which it develops remains unchanged. The constraints impinging its development are too considerable, among which figure prominently the food and agricultural policies in place that put local food systems at a disadvantage compared to the industrial food system:

- Land: in highly urbanised countries, it is difficult to find space to grow food within a short distance of large consumer centres. In most cities, constructions (residential, administrative, industrial and commercial) and recreational areas are occupying a growing part of space and only few of the existing buildings are adapted to accommodating food production on their roofs, balconies or even along their walls. Moreover, land in urban and peri-urban areas is extremely costly because of pressure exercised on the land market by housing, industrial and commercial areas: this makes food production in such places very expensive to run. Most land use plans in urban and peri-urban zones leave little space for agriculture, and housing schemes usually do not consider, in their design, the option of producing food in residential areas (on buildings or in small adjacent vegetable gardens, etc.). It can however be hoped that if more cities implement the [Milan Urban Food Policy Pact](#), this situation could be eased;

- Finance: many of the local food schemes or farms are not eligible for existing agricultural support or credit schemes as they do not satisfy the criteria set to qualify (size of units, level of training/diploma of producers, collateral, etc.). In many cases, farmers – particularly young farmers who are trying to establish themselves - have to rely on new informal funding mechanisms (e.g. micro-credit, crowdfunding) that are not very well adapted for agriculture, in order to mobilise the capital they need to create or develop their farms;
- Subsidies: there are no, or only very limited financial provisions in the food and agricultural policies in place to support local or even sustainable food production. In contrary, incentives provided are more in favour of large industrial producers, which puts local farming at a disadvantage from the competitiveness point of view. The recent reform of the EU Common Agricultural Policy or the [last US Farm Bill](#) illustrate how difficult it is to reshape existing policies to make them more favourable to local and sustainable food production;
- Technological development: agricultural research is prominently in the hands of large private multinational corporations that, for obvious reasons, seek to develop technologies that can be embodied in farm inputs or machinery that they can sell with profit. These private research outfits have no interest in developing low-input knowledge-based technologies that would be more natural resources-friendly. Public research has suffered from violent budget cuts and tends to become increasingly influenced by private companies through co-funding and other forms of cooperation.
- Training: poor access to further training is a major constraint for small producers participating in local sustainable food schemes, first because available training in sustainable agriculture is limited, and second because training programmes are in the hands of large farmer unions who have, so far, been supporting industrial agriculture and only provide lip service to the development of local food systems;
- Regulations and control: existing regulations on seed production and marketing, on the creation of new production units, on produce sales and marketing, etc. are generally unfavourable to those who want to create local food production units or schemes, and these schemes are often targeted by inspectors;
- Policy process: farmers and consumers members of local food schemes are usually not (well) represented in working groups involved in the food and agricultural policy process, as representation is mostly in the hand of dominant farmer unions, supporting industrial agriculture, and consumer organisations whose main objective is still to maintain food prices low, even though in recent years the concern over [food quality and safety](#) has increased;
- Intrinsic characteristics of sustainable local food systems that puts them at a disadvantage compared to the globalised industrial food system:
 - o Lack of diversity of products and seasonality reduces the attractiveness for consumers of local food marketing schemes;
 - o Short food supply chains are very demanding in labour, investments (transport and storage facilities) and their activities are particularly prone to seasonality;
 - o Because of a low volume of activity, farmer groups usually have difficulties in participating in bids to provide food to collective catering (e.g. schools, cafeterias, etc.).

As a result, most of the existing local food initiatives remain rather marginal and basically only involve highly motivated producers and consumers: producers who are

willing to accept low income levels or consumers who are ready to pay a higher price to purchase local food, on the ground that they consider this as their contribution to a more sustainable economy. Only in rare cases, has it been able to capture the participation of the mass of 'normal' producers or consumers.

These considerations show that there is a need to bring fundamental changes to food and agricultural policies so as to make them more local sustainable food-friendly, if the aim really is to increase sustainability of the food system.

In poor largely rural non-industrial countries

For decades, efforts to develop food production in poor countries have been based on the promotion of the model of input-intensive monoculture (water, fertiliser, pesticides, mechanisation) which has underpinned the green revolution. In Asia, this model has been remarkably successful in boosting agricultural production. But its high costs have included environmental degradation (soils, water, agricultural biodiversity), marginalisation of hundreds of millions of smallholders and persistence of a very high number of chronically undernourished people, the larger part of whom being farmers.



Efforts to replicate a similar 'success' have failed in Africa so far: many farmers in Africa rely on so-called 'traditional' complex low-input cropping systems where crop associations coexist with trees. Others have adopted 'modern' technology (i.e. monoculture) but without having access to all the inputs required by the green revolution technology, for lack of money or access to credit: this has resulted in low yields, loss of biodiversity and soil degradation. 'Traditional' systems have demonstrated their limits in terms of carrying capacity and sustainability as population grows. Little research or efforts have been made to try and make them evolve. In many parts of the continent, food systems have remained largely local as poor transport infrastructure has contributed to isolating large areas from global and even national markets.

The responsibility for the failure to achieve ‘success’ in adopting green revolution technology is often put on the account of governments and their alleged inability to assist efficiently and effectively small farmers. Small farmers, themselves, often illiterate, have been discarded by many analysts and even by the World Bank who believe that they cannot be part of the future of African agriculture and should be given the option of either becoming agricultural labourers on large estates or migrate to cities. [\[read here\]](#) The logical consequence of this diagnosis has been to turn to the private sector with hope that it would solve the production problem. This view has been reinforced by the fact that today governments have been obliged to adopt a policy of austerity that reduces considerably their possibilities of action.

A number of programmes have been launched in the region in order to replace at least in part family farming by private sector-led industrial production units integrated in “modern” value chains, or by integrating ‘emerging’ farmers into these value chains through contract farming or similar arrangements. This integration usually implies that farmers have to respect a set of norms that require them adopt non sustainable input-intensive technologies that rely mainly on monoculture and use a limited number of crop species and varieties. In a way, these countries and their farmers are encouraged to adopt approaches that are now being criticised in rich countries for being non sustainable.

Even though many of these private sector-based programmes claim that they will contribute to reduce poverty and hunger, it is good to remember that the objective of private companies is first and foremost to make profits in order to be able to pay dividends to their shareholders.

Activities undertaken in the framework of the [G8’s New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition](#) are emblematic of what is proposed, and they comprise – or are supported – by fundamental policy changes:

- Land demarcation and registration leading to the delivery of individual land titles and the creation of open land and land-lease markets, with the consequence that land can now be purchased or leased by ‘outsiders’, whereas traditionally land rights were those of communities;
- New governance rules for forest concessions that give more space to private interests;
- New seed legislation to impose the recognition of intellectual property rights for improved seeds released by the seed industry and limit the selection, reutilisation and sales of their own seeds by producers. This legislation seeks to create seed catalogues on the model of those existing in rich countries; [\[read here\]](#)
- Reformed fiscal and trade policies including tax holidays or rebates for private investors and liberalisation of external trade of agricultural products;
- Change in patterns of public funding:
 - o An increasing share of Official Development Assistance is used to support external investors (e.g. EU’s blending policy, [USAID’s Global Development Lab](#));
 - o Diversion of national public funding to support private investors (e.g. infrastructure, extension, etc.);

- o An increasing share of national public expenditure for agriculture is being spent on subsidies on agricultural inputs that benefit to those farmers adopting input-intensive agricultural technologies. [[read here](#)]

Despite official declarations that these programmes are participatory, the evidence is that they are not, producers and civil society representatives being mostly excluded from meeting where key discussions are held.

In some cases, this approach is a source of violent eviction of farmers. For example, in the the State of Taraba, West of Nigeria (near the Cameroonian border), farmers are threatened to be evicted by the authorities who want to give 30,000 hectares of irrigated rice fields to the Kenya branch of US-based [Dominion Farms](#). This project is supported by the G8's New Alliance. The land involved is part of a public irrigation scheme and provides their livelihood to thousands of families. Justification provided by the government for the project is that it will bring "*increase of production [...] and [...] contribute to food security of the country*". This statement forgets to account for the dramatic consequences the project will have on tens of thousands rural people who live in the concerned area. In this case, like in many others, the so-called 'consultation of the population' has been limited to consulting the local elites but not the mass of small farmers.

These policies will support further appropriation of land by private enterprises. It is estimated that between 2000 and 2010, more than 80 million hectares (almost three times the agricultural area of France) have thus been appropriated in poor countries, mostly in Africa (two thirds of the total), but also in Asia and Latin America. [[read here](#)] Let it be mentioned here that this process also occurs in rich countries, including in Europe, where farms are being increasingly purchased or invested (through financial participation) by financial institutions such as pension funds.

Like in rich countries, several countries of the 'South' have regulations that constrain the development of urban or peri-urban agriculture, and that give priority on land to sectors other than agriculture. A recent example is that of India where the government intends to "*review some illogical provisions*" in the Land Acquisition Act (LAA - in full: The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act) that came into effect only one year ago. Proposed changes are aimed at "*complicated procedures*" that make it "*almost impossible*" to acquire land for building private hospitals or schools and other projects in priority sectors. The targeted procedures include those that make it compulsory to obtain approval of 80% of the people whose land is being used for private projects, and 70% of land owners in the case of private-public partnerships. Changes envisaged are likely to include toning down these conditions and extending the list of sectors for which there are exemptions in order to fast-track projects for defense and defense production, rural infrastructure (including electrification), housing for poor (including affordable housing), industrial corridors and infrastructure projects (including projects taken up under the public-private partnership mode). They would imply faster processing of land acquisition and cancelation of compulsory social impact assessment.

As can be seen from these examples, policies in place or envisaged in poor countries tend to undermine existing local food systems and certainly do not help the emergence of sustainable local food systems.

The need for policy reform

If there has to be a serious effort of promotion of local sustainable food systems, this will require an in-depth reform of current food and agricultural policies, both in rich as well as in poor countries.

It is unfortunate to see that most of the people involved in local sustainable food systems, particularly in countries of the 'North', do not want to see that their approach will remain marginal as long as policies that define the economic and institutional environment in which they operate will be unfavourable. Lack of trust in political leaders and a general 'anti-system' posture, a consequence of disillusionment resulting from prior negative experience, largely explains this point of view.

Changing the policy environment will not be an easy task as it will go against major economic interests that have power. But unless modified policies address constraints that hamper the development of local sustainable food systems and eliminate existing arrangements and programmes that threaten them, these systems will remain marginal. In particular, there will be a need to reverse the current incentive framework that is in favour to unsustainable food systems, establish a conducive regulatory framework and ensure that appropriate resources are earmarked for research in the improvement of environment-friendly agricultural technologies and their adoption.

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October 2015

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Earlier articles on hungerexplained.org related to the topic:

- [*Seven principles for ending hunger sustainably*](#), 2013
- [*Hunger, markets and good feelings: how hunger feeds profits of multinationals*](#), 2013
- [*A first analysis of the implementation of the G8's New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition confirms worries about this initiative*](#), 2013