

International Agri-Food Network Perspectives Paper

Future FAO Priorities

The Food and Agriculture Organization is one of the most important UN bodies.

Its original goals remain as relevant today as they were upon the organization's founding:

- *raising the levels of nutrition and standards of living of the peoples under their respective jurisdictions;*
- *securing improvements in the efficiency of the production and distribution of all food and agricultural products;*
- *bettering the condition of rural populations;*
- *and thus contributing toward an expanding world economy and ensuring humanity's freedom from hunger. (source: FAO Constitution Preamble)*

FAO provides essential services to all countries, all forms of agriculture, and should play an active role in advancing agriculture and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. There appears to be a lack of coherence in the way core and voluntary funding is shifting the priorities and resources of FAO. It is timely to consider how the core responsibilities of FAO have been handicapped by flat budgets and short-term, arbitrary resources. Long-term underfunding and human resourcing of the core programs of FAO including statistical data, the IN-FOODS database, plant protection, crop production, livestock, forestry and fisheries remain acute while other programs are growing. In particular, success at the global normative role of FAO underpins the success of smallholder farmers, family farmers, and all food producers.

1. Raising the levels of nutrition and standards of living of the peoples under their respective jurisdictions

Nutrition

Sustainable and resilient food systems must provide consumers adequate and reliable access to diverse, affordable, safe, and nutritious diets. Each of these components is essential in its own right, but no single component is sufficient to overcome food insecurity. Multi-stakeholder approaches can help embed nutrition-specific interventions and nutrition-sensitive policies and programs throughout food systems - from production to consumption. FAO should be helping to leverage them. FAO's work should be particularly supportive of interventions in the first 1000 days and in older persons, as well as other vulnerable groups.

Gender

It is very important that FAO support the advancement of women in agriculture. Women are a vital part of the world's farmers and rural women remain the furthest behind on development goals.

Ensuring proper land tenure, agronomic training, literacy, math skills, business training, access to markets, and finance are key areas.

Engaging, Recruiting, and Retaining Youth in Agriculture

The FAO should be doing more to assist with the issue of recruiting and retaining youth in agriculture. Addressing this issue supports retention of populations in rural areas, improves the future of food production, and is only possible when access to services and the standard of living of farmers and agricultural workers is decent and comparable to that of other professions.

Resilience

As stated in SDG 2.4, resilience is a particular challenge for the food and agriculture sector. FAO should assist members states and global partners to have the locally-relevant tools, evidence and capabilities to help individuals, farmers, households, and communities prepare for, cope, and recover from environmental, economic, and conflict-based shocks. This becomes even more evident in the face of climate change.

2. Securing improvements in the efficiency of the production and distribution of all food and agricultural products

Innovation

FAO should see its role to assist and improve all agricultural systems. Equal attention should be paid to innovations such as biotechnology, agroecology, GIAHS, and climate smart agriculture. More broadly, innovation should be increasingly a focus of FAO's work. Technologies such as digital agriculture, remote sensing, recycling systems, grain storage, and loss and waste prevention are among the areas where there is a vital need to scale up resources. FAO should consider how to better fund, resource, and adopt these approaches as means to improve productivity, environmental sustainability, and responses to climate change in all forms of agriculture. The scale of private sector investment in innovation, along with knowledge and expertise can play a vital role in assisting FAO in this area.

Scientific Advice

Since its creation, FAO has had a vital role in the development of standards that facilitate global agriculture. The provision of this service is a global public good and its reputation is built on scientific and technical rigour. This needs to be revitalized to ensure evidence-based rather than opinion- or speculation-based reports are developed. FAO's scientific capability of discipline experts should be expanded. It is extremely important that the functions of FAO in these areas be adequately funded, particularly the provision of independent scientific advice.

Codex

As the most important international standard-setting body in the area of food safety, the Codex Alimentarius plays a crucial role in protecting the health of the consumers while enabling trade in agricultural products. This activity benefits both farmers and consumers. Enabling Codex to perform its role more effectively and efficiently by addressing current capacity challenges, embracing new scientific and administrative methods of evaluation, and ensuring adequate

resources are available, are essential actions in supporting global food security and trade. Delays in the establishment of MRLs and the resulting lack of national / international harmonization have important consequences for market access, productivity, and farmer livelihoods, contributing to a poorer and hungrier world. <https://agrifood.net/position-papers/217-codex-psm-position-paper/file>

3. Bettering the condition of rural populations

Fostering Investment in Agriculture

Rural areas suffer from the largest proportion of poverty and rural women remain furthest behind on achieving the MDGs and now the SDGs. FAO should be more proactive in calling for and fostering an environment for responsible agricultural investment. Agriculture has been receiving a shrinking proportion of development assistance since the founding of FAO, and this trend needs to be reversed.

Fostering an Environment of Respect for Farmers

The world's farmers are on the front lines of climate change, rural development, and – in a disturbing volume - poverty and hunger. FAO should play a leadership role in fostering respect for all farmers globally, educating the UN system on the vital role they play, and furthering their engagement in decision-making. Farming of all scales, in all regions, contributes to food security and they should be empowered to make decisions that reflect their individual unique situations.

Women and Youth

The particular needs of women and youth to be full participants in the agriculture and food sector should be a priority. This includes entrepreneurship training, working with national governments on policies to foster their recruitment, retention and empowerment.

4. Contributing toward an expanding world economy and ensuring humanity's freedom from hunger

Convening Power

There is a valuable convening role to be played by FAO. As FAO moves forward, it would be useful to more clearly differentiate where the Organization is engaged in thought-development and what are duly-approved, member agreed outcomes. Meeting summaries, initial research, documents by consultants, and advice documents are provided, generally on FAO letterhead, without due consideration to whether they are the formal positions of FAO. FAO's role in facilitating global discussions and exploring issues is very important. In this space, it should consider creating specific rules, and potentially an alternate brand for non-agreed documents and informal meetings such as symposia which are not part of its formal work. This would facilitate more convening powers while retaining the importance of FAO governing bodies.

Cooperation

FAO has the capacity to foster more cooperation. That cooperation can be south-south; south-north; and take the principal of fostering global support for agriculture. More cooperation among

farmers of all sizes, across value chains, and among commodities can be convened. The vital role of regional offices cannot be overstated in this regard.

Private Sector Engagement

Following the approval of the Sustainable Development Goals, there is an important mandate to work with the private sector. FAO does not have a regularized policy to include private sector in its fora or meetings. This process should be normalized across the organization, including in the regions to provide maximum engagement and discourse with private sector actors of all sizes – from big to small. The voice of private sector should follow the principle of equitable participation for all groups.