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iPES FOOD
INTERNATIONAL PANEL OF EXPERTS ON SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS

INTERNATIONAL ROUNDTABLE: INVESTMENTS IN AGROECOLOGICAL RESEARCH FOR DEVELOPMENT—WHERE DO WE STAND?

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Agroecology is gaining momentum as a means of transforming food systems towards sustainability and resilience while simultaneously changing top-down reductionist research paradigms and empowering communities. In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), the potential for agroecology is particularly pronounced, as most SSA countries have not yet fully adopted large-scale industrialized agriculture. This notwithstanding, agricultural research in SSA suffers from a lack of investment in human and financial resources and a lack of direction. The inadequacy of research funding has been identified as a key barrier to bringing agroecology to scale. The "Advocacy for Agroecology" project, implemented by the Biovision Foundation and IPES-Food, in collaboration with the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), aims to assess the state of play in terms of where agricultural research and development funding is flowing – and why.

The international roundtable on investments in agroecological research for development brought together 51 participants from the donor, research and civil society communities from different continents and aimed at discussing pathways for transforming agricultural research agenda towards more sustainability. During the roundtable, the main findings on the analysis of funding flows of major institutions and how they shape food and farming pathways in sub-Saharan Africa were presented. Interactive discussions between participants focussed on recommendations to overcome the current deadlocks that prevent the transformation of food systems to sustainability and to promote greater investments in research on agroecological and similar practices.

Highlights from the presentations

Dr. Hans R. Herren, president of the Biovision Foundation and IPES-Food panel member, opened the day insisting on the urgency of transforming food systems, which also required a transformation of research systems and its funding structure. Understanding funding flows is also about understanding power relations.

Dr. Emile Frison, IPES-Food panel member, emphasized some of the current main challenges of food systems, including the triple burden of malnutrition, social inequities, neglect of cultural values, or the concentration of power due to market concentration of agribusinesses. Food systems affect health through multiple, interconnected pathways, generating huge human and economic costs. Diversified agroecological systems require a change of paradigm and, contrary to widespread assumption, they can improve economic performance from 15% to 110%.

Dr. Rachel Bezner Kerr, Professor of Development Sociology at Cornell University, presented inspiring examples of transdisciplinary and participatory agroecological research projects on legume diversification, adaptation to climate change and farmer-to-farmers approaches. Those projects inherently focus on the co-creation of knowledge, the integration of alternative farming practices with other societal challenges (health, gender empowerment, or climate change resilience) and the development of locally relevant solutions. Some of the most striking results on the multidimensional positive effects of agroecological approaches on ecosystems and livelihoods occurred 10 years after the initiation of the project. In sum, agroecological research is long term, working through transdisciplinary partnerships, locally relevant and participatory, iterative as questions change over time, holistic by examining environmental, social, health

dimensions alongside issues related to food production, and various research methods are used at different scales.

The team from the Institute of Development Studies, with Dr. Imogen Bellwood-Howard and Dr. Santiago Ripoll, presented a conceptual framework on how research trajectories are formed, reinforced and opened up, drawn from a series of interviews with key actors and literature review. The drivers that steer and shape the research performed in a given regime include commercial interest, ideologies, national political objectives, reaction to perceived crisis, institutional and individual interests. In addition, lock-in mechanisms tend to reinforce and consolidate these directions, entrenching a given trajectory and precluding alternative pathways of research. Those include partnerships, alliances and coalitions, champions and brokers, institutional consolidation, disciplinary methodologies, and individual career development. Finally, openings can act as breaks in a research trajectory, such as international consensuses, perceived crises as well as institutional strategy review and researcher agency. The team presented entry points where advocates for agroecology might be able to find common ground, or at least a common language, with adherents of alternative models of agricultural development.

Funding flows and political economy of AgR4D were presented for three case studies: Switzerland as a public donor (presented by Dr. Matthias Geck), the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF, presented by Sinan Hatik) as a philanthropic donor, and Kenya as a recipient and implementing country in SSA (presented by Dr. Charles Odhong). The majority of funding still goes to industrial, high external input agriculture. Most of the funded research is not addressing agroecology or only partially, focussing on incremental rather than transformative changes of the food system. In both the Kenyan and the BMGF case study, around two-thirds of the projects do not address agroecology or only partially integrate agroecology to a maximum of Level 2. In contrast, in the Swiss case, 50% of the projects promote a redesign of agroecosystems. There is a considerable number of projects funded by Swiss public donors and the BMGF that address some socio-economic or political elements of agroecology (Levels 4 and 5). While these "enabling factors" have little direct impact on making production systems more sustainable, they are fundamentally important for building a more just and equitable food system. African research institutions are very rarely in the lead in the analysed AgR4D projects. For instance, in just 9% of the analysed AgR4D projects funded by BMGF is the main recipient an African research institute. Likewise, in just 10% of the AgR4D projects funded by Swiss public donors is the main recipient based in SSA, although these African-led projects performed the best in the assessment, particularly strongly supporting ecologically systemic and socially inclusive approaches. The multiplicity of definitions of agroecology causes risks but also creates opportunities. For different actors, there are different entry points for promoting agroecological research.

7 Recommendations were finally presented and discussed in break-out groups:

1. The narrative for agroecology needs to be adapted to different stakeholders and dogmatism is counterproductive…

2. …but a difficult balance needs to be struck between avoiding co-optation and allowing for step-wise change

3. Re-designing the relationship between formal scientific research and local knowledge requires enhanced recognition and support for agents of change for co-creation of knowledge

4. More long-term funding is needed for systemic, inter- and transdisciplinary research and training

5. There is a need for different metrics and success measures in research, especially to provide incentives for young researchers

6. Reconsider the principles and modalities underlying North-South research partnerships in order to give primacy to African research institutions

7. Working with and through individual stakeholders in key positions is pivotal also for influencing donors indirectly

Key messages from the discussions

Avenues for achieving the needed transformation of food systems that would ensure sustainability and equity:

- One of the key factors is to create an enabling environment that makes the transformation possible. There is not a single scenario, we need to work on changing the conditions for sustainable food systems on different fronts (research, market, subsidies and general public budgeting, training and extension, responsible governance, access to innovations, gender empowerment).
- For instance, it is important to create new conditions for markets that enable farmers to take risks or to address poorly-targeted subsidies. New indicators for sustainable food systems could be used as a basis for awarding support and subsidies to farmers.
- Seize windows of opportunity created by crises (e.g. economically devastated rural areas in the USA, climate crisis), by consensus (e.g. HLPE report, the realisation that business-as-usual is not an option) and by external pressure (e.g. consumer demand, public health concerns).

Engaging with new actors and pivotal decision-makers

- Enrol prestigious champions in agroecological alliances among researchers and donors. Champions and inspiring examples speak for themselves. For instance a) Researchers

within R&D organizations supporting change from inside, and b) prominent/senior personalities bridging ideas to funding bodies, advising across organisations at a higher level.

- Bridge divides between agricultural paradigms by emphasizing common drivers to depolarize the debate.
- Develop various convincing and simple narratives on agroecology adapted to different actors. For instance, focusing on the macroeconomic costs and health impacts of industrial agriculture, on the systemic benefits of agroecology, or on labor opportunities created by holistic agroecological approaches.
- Present agroecology as a problem-solving approach, responding to local/national needs, as something positive rather than something opposed against another model.
- The terminology used to introduce agroecology does not always matter (for instance at the local level, "legume diversification" might be more acceptable than "agroecology"). An important point to avoid the co-optation of the term "agroecology" would be to explicit the principles behind the concept (e.g. be clear it is not just focusing on increasing efficiency).

Incentivize researchers to conduct agroecological projects

- Early sensitization of researchers about systemic and transdisciplinary thinking.
- Break down institutional silos on a structural and strategic level in order to embed interdisciplinarity in the DNA of research and training institutes. That is, in strategies, departmental structures and curricula outdated separations between disciplines should be eliminated.
- Establish Agroecology Academy /Centre of Excellence; provide training for researchers and extension service providers about agroecology concepts and practices, reskill researchers.
- Option–by-context approach (OxC): R&D should support locally relevant innovation, new way of supporting innovation that address the real-world heterogeneity of farmer circumstances.

Incentivize donors to fund agroecological projects

- Donor organizations should go beyond funding individual projects and consider supporting research networks and collaboration among them. Further, donors could support meetings between multiple stakeholders to shape the research agenda.
- Provide grants for project development phases. Best practices like that of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) Project Preparation Grants (PPG) ought to be mainstreamed. Such grants allow for the integration of multi-stakeholder processes and participatory approaches already in the design phase of a project; something that is otherwise often not possible, as a full proposal needs to be submitted before funding is available.
- Donors should support centres of excellence in the South and invest in training local researchers.

There is a need for different metrics and success measures in research, especially to provide incentives for young researchers

- Initiate an agroecology alliance to formulate R4D principles aligned with agroecology.
- Align new metrics with the SDGs, in particular, demonstrate the coherence of a project intervention across all SDGs.
- Define measures of success on the modalities of research, not just on the content (e.g. make multi-stakeholder approaches mandatory); metrics should reward inclusion and legitimacy.

More long-term funding is needed for systemic, inter- and transdisciplinary research and training

- Institutional rules of donors should allow enhanced flexibility in programme planning and funding (e.g. eliminate rules preventing long-term commitments and foster funding for several subsequent phases of the same project or programme).
- Donor alliances with overlapping funding/financial periods can be helpful for providing stability to long-term programmes.
- By adjusting research questions to the policy environment and strategic priorities of donors, research institutes can achieve greater planning certainty for long-term programmes.