

Conflict, COVID and Climate Change

A turning point for transitions to sustainable food and farming?

The fragility of food systems in the face of climate change and other shocks was the subject of a COP27 side panel at the Food4Climate Pavilion on Wednesday, November 9th. Organised by Biovision, IFOAM – Organics International, and the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food), the event saw panellists discuss the challenges of moving away from chemical-intensive industrial farming, and debate what policies and practices are needed to transition to more resilient and equitable food systems.

Key messages

- Agroecological intensification and diversification can be key tools in regenerating agricultural land, boosting food production sustainably and making smallholder farmers more resilient against climate change and other shocks.
- Food systems resilience is too often overshadowed in international climate talks and must rise up the political agenda.
- Policy cohesion around food systems resilience is urgently needed, with policy makers using incentives and other tools to lead a transition to nature-based solutions.
- Food systems resilience requires a systemic, multi-stakeholder approach that empowers groups like smallholder farmers and women, and tailors solutions around their social, economic and environmental circumstances.



The panel was moderated by Professor Mamadou Goïta from IPES, who opened by describing how a “perfect storm” of conflict, COVID-19 and climate change had exposed vulnerabilities in food systems in recent years. His questions to panellists focused on what shape a food systems transition should take and what practical steps are needed to achieve it.

Here is a summary of panellists’ responses:

His Excellency Hailemariam Desalegn, board member and chairperson of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) and former Prime Minister of Ethiopia, called for innovative solutions to protect smallholder farmers against the impacts of climate change. These should be aimed at creating social, economic and ecosystem resilience, he argued. AGRA historically focused its efforts on supplying smallholder farmers with climate-resistant, drought-tolerant seeds. However, it now takes a more systemic, value-chain approach, including helping governments formulate policies that give producers access to better functioning input and output markets, extension services and finance, he explained.

He also noted that food insecurity in Africa pre-existed the Ukrainian crisis, meaning a long-term solution is still required rather than an opportunistic quick fix. “We need to come together on how to transit to a sustainable, nature-based solution for our agricultural systems, especially for our smallholder farmers,” he stressed. This would help regenerate and intensify production from Africa’s plentiful – but heavily degraded – agricultural land and help avoid further encroachment on forestland, he argued.

Karen Mapusua, president of IFOAM – Organics International and director of the Land Resources Division of the Pacific Community based in Fiji, argued that climate-related debates around food systems should focus as much on adaptation as emissions reduction – and argued that nature-based agricultural approaches could help achieve this. She noted that Tuvalu recently declared its second drought emergency of the year and said that even if global warming is capped at 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels, disruptions to agriculture, fisheries and economies will be huge.

Mapusua called for consumers, scientists, farmers and the holders of indigenous knowledge to work together to create a more holistic food system that is equipped to cope with climate change. “We need a system that supports and rebuilds what we’ve lost as far as pollinators go... that rebuilds biology in the soil... that supports clean water... that allows us to be resilient to climate shocks,” she added.

She agreed that building policy coherence is critical, and flagged IFOAM Organics International’s work with Biovision on the Food Policy Forum for Change, which provides an opportunity for policymakers to share best practices.

Veronica Ndetu, coordinator of the Climate Change unit in Kenya’s Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries and Cooperatives, outlined the country’s numerous policies and programmes aimed at creating resilient food systems. She also summarised its key priority areas, ranging from combating the impacts of climate change by adopting innovative storage and distribution technologies and processes to producing more diverse and nutritious food.

She stressed, however, that no one agricultural approach or technology is suitable for every country, community or actor. Instead, solutions aimed at building food systems resilience must be tailored to fit specific social, economic and environmental circumstances. This requires a multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approach, with smooth information flow and coordination between consumers, civil society, all types of food value chain actors and multiple levels of government, she argued.



Dr Susan Chomba, director of Vital Landscapes for Africa at the World Resources Institute, argued that agroecological intensification – including diversification – could provide more long-term resilience for African agriculture. Applied to rice production in Vietnam, for example, it has resulted in a 35% drop in pesticide use, a 65% decrease in use of synthetic fertiliser and a three-fold increase in income. Diversification will become even more critical as a risk mitigator as an increasing array of shocks – such as pandemics and war – are added to the existing threat of climate change, she argued.

Policy makers should develop incentives for agroecological production, such as working with financial institutions to prioritise lending to farmers that reduce the use of synthetic inputs, Chomba proposed. She also called for “knee-jerk” agricultural incentives in Africa to be redirected towards agroecological intensification and for more investments to be targeted at women.

And while she acknowledged the importance of global trade, such as for countries that export food for foreign exchange, she suggested that value chains for food could be shortened. Smallholder farmers need more support – for example with access to markets through aggregation – to ensure they benefit from initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), she added.