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T20 POLICY BRIEF

Task Force 01

FIGHTING INEQUALITIES, POVERTY, AND HUNGER

Equitable Pathways to Sustainable and Healthy Food Systems

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Abstract

Ensuring pathways to sustainable food systems are equitable is a moral and existential imperative. Food systems are sustainable when they promote responsible use of natural resources, protect biodiversity, and mitigate the environmental impact of production, distribution, and consumption. They are equitable when they create a just and inclusive environment where everyone can enjoy healthy and sustainably produced food. Equity and sustainability are deeply intertwined and cannot be dealt with separately. This Policy Brief offers a roadmap to equitable and sustainable food systems that draws on a body of work produced by an international network of researchers, via their partnership in the Food Equity Centre. It recommends action at local, national, and international levels that addresses four dimensions of justice: (1) recognition and support of groups marginalised from different aspects of food systems; (2) their meaningful representation in decision-making processes and spaces (3) redistribution of resources and opportunities to rebalance and restructure food systems, and (4) reparation of harm caused to people and nature, by restoring biological and socio-cultural diversity. The time is right for the G20 to champion the food system transformation required to address the dual challenges of equity and sustainability.

Keywords: food systems, equity, sustainability, justice, pathways, food system transformation.

Diagnosis of the Issue

Food systems are not only unsustainable, but they are also inequitable. The global food system is estimated to contribute to one-third of greenhouse gas emissions and drive deforestation (Crippa et al. 2021). Unsustainable production, trade, and consumption practices, which result in overabundance and waste for some and deprivation and scarcity for others, cannot be maintained. The rise in food availability has not guaranteed healthy and sustainable food for all. The growing incidence of obesity in low-income households within G20 countries (Tanumihardjo et al. 2007) illustrates the paradox. While significant food losses and waste are recorded (Alexander et al. 2017), hunger still afflicts a vast number of people worldwide – between 691 and 783 million in 2022 (FAO et al. 2023) – and famines continue to recur. Furthermore, a recent report by the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE-FSN 2023) highlighted that the majority of those experiencing food insecurity are food systems workers. It noted that there are insufficient labour market protections, particularly for migrants and agency labour, and that bonded slavery remains a reality. The concentration of wealth and power in the system is untenable. Only 3% of global land is held by the poorest 50% of the rural population (Anseeuw and Baldinelli 2020). Smallholders are disadvantaged in their access to public and private finance, and this is harder for women and other groups experiencing discrimination. A small number of large corporations dominate agrifood markets, with more than half of the world's seeds controlled by four corporations headquartered in G20 countries (Shield 2021).

Inequities, as well as unsustainable food system practices, are deeply rooted in history. Colonialism and patterns of farm industrialisation enclosed common lands and established an extractive model that remains a dominant feature in much of the world. The Green Revolution and the post-war subsidy regimes of many regions of the world, including in the US and the EU, consolidated industrial agriculture that has, over half a century, eroded the diversity of farming, with uneven implications for rural livelihoods, diets, and the environment (Stone 2022).

The harmful impacts of unsustainable practices hit the most vulnerable and marginalised the hardest, and inequities drive unsustainable food systems and unhealthy diets. Climate-related land degradation adversely affects food security and agricultural livelihoods and can trigger migration and conflict (Olsson et al. 2019). Industrial agriculture depletes the environment and drives peasants and family farmers out of productive farmland. In cities, people with low purchasing power and living in ‘food deserts and swamps’ rely on cheap ultra-processed foods (Stowers et al. 2020). Large swathes of communities cannot afford a healthy diet: in Eastern, Middle, and Western Africa, more than 85% of the population is unable to afford a healthy diet, and in Southern Asia, 70% (FAO et al. 2022). In the US, food insecurity is structured along intersectional lines of exclusion, with more than double the rate of food insecurity experienced by black and Hispanic populations compared to their white counterparts (HLPE-FSN 2023). This pattern repeats across contexts: in Vietnam, ethnic minorities experience far higher levels of malnutrition than majority groups, which can be traced back to lower access to services and higher rates of poverty (Harris et al. 2021).

Unsustainable food system practices are also linked to inequities between countries and their territories. Soybean monoculture that drives deforestation and violence in the Brazilian Cerrado feeds the production of cheap, low-quality meat that is

exported to be consumed by low-income populations in places like Ghana, South Africa, and the UK (May et al. 2022). Many pesticides produced in Europe, where they are banned because they are hazardous to the environment and human health, are exported to countries in the Global South where they are still legal (Devereux 2024). The ways in which inequities in the food system are globally interconnected require international concerted action.

Public policy has favoured remedial and disjointed action over system-wide transformation. Policy interventions tend to focus on the symptoms rather than the root causes of inequity and unsustainability. Food security, nutrition and social protection policies promote access to food and safety nets but do not deal with the broader food environment and the social and economic determinants of insecurity, vulnerability and marginalisation.

Recommendations

G20 countries have considerable weight in the global food system as world leading producers and traders of food and agricultural commodities, and the headquarters of many large agrifood companies. Representing two-thirds of the world population, it is right for hunger, poverty, and inequalities to be at the top of the G20 governments' agenda. Their joint action can have a massive impact, and the establishment of the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty signals that the G20 is exercising the responsibilities inherent in wielding power. These actions must be explicitly sensitive to equity.

The G20 must work together to enable equitable pathways to sustainable food systems. This is an existential and moral imperative, considering both the planetary boundaries and the minimum requirements for wellbeing that define the 'safe and just space' for humanity (Raworth 2017). Equity and sustainability are deeply intertwined and cannot be dealt with separately (Leach et al. 2018).

Our proposed equitable pathways are guided by four dimensions of justice (Wang and Lo 2021): recognising the circumstances, knowledge, and values of those experiencing injustices through exclusion, discrimination, and violence; giving voice to disadvantaged and marginalised groups through meaningful representation in decision-making processes; redistributing resources and capabilities to correct inequities of wealth and power; and repairing the harm caused to people and nature by unsustainable food system practices.

Equitable pathways to sustainable food systems entail addressing injustices at multiple scales and rebalancing power while adopting sustainable food system solutions (Leach et al., 2020). We specify how recommendations apply at the local, national, and international scales. Across these dimensions of justice and scales, it is crucial that actions

are adjusted to the diverse needs of different population groups (there is no one-size-fits-all) and that these actions are sustained over time.

Recommendation 1. Enable equitable pathways through recognition of which population groups are marginalised from different aspects of food systems, and how and why.

- Locally, recognition can be supported through dialogue and action-research with communities on historical forms of injustice. Civil society actors and networks are well placed to help identify and understand marginalised groups in socially inclusive ways. This can entail, for example, working with marginalised groups to safeguard their food heritage and diverse knowledge systems, which may relate to seeds, farming, ways of being with nature, dietary traditions, and gastronomic culture.
- Nationally, governments should work to acknowledge which population groups have been marginalised from aspects of food systems, and to identify the structures and institutions which perpetuate this situation and could be transformed. These might include policies that limit rights or citizenship for certain population groups, rules that mandate that individuals perform different roles based on their gender, race, caste, or religion, or assumptions that embed differences in access to justice or resources between groups.
- Internationally, there is a need to continue to build broad coalitions of support between groups already active in food system justice (indigenous and peasant groups, youth, migrant rights groups, etc). This can be supported through funding directed to fostering international exchanges between these groups in the spirit of mutual learning and solidarity.

Recommendation 2. Enable equitable pathways through representation of marginalised groups in food system decision-making processes and spaces on an equal footing.

- Locally, meaningful representation can be promoted by supporting collective organisation of marginalised groups (through unions, alliances, and networks) that enables them to negotiate for better terms and conditions with other food system actors. Existing collectivities should be supported in their experimentation with alternative modes of local food system governance. Capacities needed to drive change with a growing degree of autonomy need to be strengthened. Local authorities are well placed to provide the support needed and create conducive environments for local innovation.

- Nationally, G20 governments should commit to reforming food governance spaces so that marginalised groups can genuinely participate in decision-making. Existing National Food Policy Councils within the G20 (including in Brazil and Canada) should be strengthened, and lessons learned from their experiences must be shared internationally. There is scope for establishing a G20 mutual learning platform on participatory food system governance.

- Internationally, G20 leaders can support stronger representation of marginalised groups in relevant global policy fora (related to food as well as climate and biodiversity, such as the UN Climate and Biodiversity conferences), through the provision of resources that enable these groups to participate on an equal footing.

Recommendation 3. Enable equitable pathways through redistribution of resources and opportunities to rebalance and restructure food systems.

- Locally, governments must support the development of territorialised food networks that attend to the needs of disadvantaged producers and consumers by offering secure markets to small producers excluded from conventional markets and access to healthy and sustainable food to poor consumers living in food deserts/swamps. Across the G20, there is scope for creating more inclusive, affordable, and dignified access to healthy, sustainable foods.

- Nationally, and concerning policies related to food systems, G20 governments need to safeguard and valorise the rights, diverse knowledge, and heritage of marginalised groups, including historical and communal land rights; labour rights for small farmers, farmworkers, including for seasonal and casual labour, and food system workers more broadly and their right to decent remuneration for food security; indigenous and traditional knowledge, common goods and heritage associated with food. National governments should also work to create safeguards for the rights of farmers, indigenous peoples, traditional communities, and urban farmers regarding the free use of biodiversity and associated knowledge.

- National governments should also encourage and support holistic, intersectoral policies that connect different spheres of action and goals. In Brazil, links established between the National School Meal Programme and the Food Acquisition Programme illustrate the benefits of combining food and nutrition security with strengthening family farming objectives. Public purchases of family farming products through simplified procedures have boosted local food production, guaranteed the marketing of a wide variety of products, and promoted local food cultures. Lately, these programmes have

simplified access to institutional food markets by indigenous and traditional communities. Efforts to introduce an emphasis on agroecological farming into these programmes indicate the potential to tackle sustainability goals as well.

- Governments should also commit to address imbalances in subsidy regimes and allocate an equitable proportion of public funding to small and peasant farmers, indigenous communities, and other marginalised land custodians. New development finance to support transitions to more sustainable food system practices – including funding related to the bioeconomy, climate-smart, regenerative and natural farming – should specifically target historically marginalised groups to ensure that transitions to sustainability are guided by equity and justice principles.

- Internationally, the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty provides an opportunity to showcase distributive food policies and mobilise finance and knowledge that enable the implementation of those policies within the G20 and beyond. There is scope for cooperation between the G20 and other countries to share knowledge and strengthen capacities for policy development and inclusive decision-making.

Recommendation 4. Enable equitable pathways through reparation of harm caused to people and nature by industrialised food systems.

- Locally, restorative efforts should include all stakeholders affected by industrialised food systems in the process of identifying and addressing harms, including farm workers, peasant and small-scale farmers, and other marginalised groups, including minoritised and racialised populations in urban and rural areas. The recovery of forgotten crops and documentation of experiential knowledge and food heritage associated with

marginalised groups should be supported as part of restoring the diversity of biological, social and cultural systems.

- Nationally, G20 leaders can strengthen accountability mechanisms to both identify and enable sanctions to hold powerful food system actors responsible for the social, health and environmental consequences of their actions.
- Internationally, the G20 should support global movements for food justice, such as food sovereignty and agroecology, to ensure a rebalancing of power relations in favour of marginalised groups.

Balancing Trade-Offs Equitably

Failure to address food system inequities will further compromise the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Within the G20, persisting inequities will not only exacerbate suffering and undermine sustainable human development but may drive social discontent, polarisation, and instability.

Adding an equity lens to all policies for sustainable food systems is centrally about considering trade-offs, and winners and losers of interventions. Food system policies that do not address trade-offs risk further deepening inequities, within or between countries (Caleffi, Hawkes, and Walton 2023). For example, measures to promote alternative protein sources as environmentally sustainable may drive deforestation and further land inequality if they increase global demand for soybean and palm oil to produce plant-based proteins (Herrero et al. 2021).

Balancing trade-offs equitably can be best achieved by (1) favouring holistic policy interventions and local social innovations that tackle multiple goals in an integrated fashion; (2) enhancing the capacities and bargaining power of marginalised groups so that the distributional implications of policies are adequately understood and negotiated; and (3) democratising knowledge systems to empower diverse worldviews based on the lived experiences of marginalised groups that bring to light policy trade-offs not perceived by decision-makers.

The G20 is home to some of the wealthiest and some of the world's poorest and most deprived populations. It has the resources and capabilities as well as diverse experiences of deprivation and marginalisation. G20 leaders are well placed and have the duty to enable the equitable pathways outlined in this paper.

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