Food and Nutrition Security for All through Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems

Note from the United Nations System High Level Task Force on Global Food Security

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Executive Summary
1. Ending hunger and malnutrition is an essential part of sustainable development. It is a goal that can be achieved. To do so, policies and investments for food and nutrition security should have the following characteristics:
   a. Encouraging the production of more food while — at the same time — protecting natural resources and supporting inclusive rural development;
   b. Reducing waste and losses along the food value chain from producer to consumer;
   c. Enabling all people to secure year-round access to the varieties of food required for good nutrition, including through stable, open, well-functioning markets and food supply systems;
   d. Ensuring that households — and all individuals within them — are able to purchase, access and use the food they need through benefiting from:
      • Adequate productive resources
      • Decent work
      • Well-designed social protection and food assistance programmes, with safety nets that protect the food security and productive potential of the most vulnerable
      • Knowledge and understanding on nutrition and care, especially needs in pregnancy and childhood

2. Sustainable agriculture, rural development and social protection are key building blocks for economies to become greener and to thrive. The adoption of climate-smart agriculture and strategies to help small-scale producers (often women) to connect to markets can help all farmers become more resilient to climate shocks. They also support policies for green growth and agricultural practices that are sustainable and environmentally friendly while reducing the negative impacts of agriculture on the environment.

3. These building blocks can also guide objectives for integrated responses in crisis and post-crisis situations: ensuring vulnerable people’s access to immediate assistance and affected populations’ capacity for rapid recovery is combined with a focus on sustainable food and nutrition security and resilient livelihoods.

4. Agriculture and food systems are being transformed in ways that reflect all these characteristics: increasingly, the transformations are based on respect for human rights (including the right to food), on attention to smallholder agriculture, on scaling up nutrition and on the principle that people should participate in decisions that affect their lives. They are best pursued through multi-stakeholder partnerships.

5. The full economic, social and environmental benefits of sustainable agriculture are best realized if policies are devised and implemented with the full participation of all stakeholders, including women, small-scale farmers, agri-food entrepreneurs and their organizations.

6. Comprehensive economic and social analyses, reflecting the full costs and benefits of natural resource use in food value chains, can help governments, farmers, businesses, consumers and others to evaluate options, identify synergies and make better choices. A combination of participatory processes and sound analyses is needed to establish the policies, prices and incentives to encourage sustainable agriculture and food systems.
Food and Nutrition Security

The world’s governments can end hunger and malnutrition, enabling all people to attain food and nutrition security and enjoy their right to food. Achieving this goal involves an increase in the availability of nutritious food, through intensified production of food for human use, and reducing waste. It also means ensuring that people have better (and equitable) access to food through decent jobs, increased purchasing power and well-functioning local and regional markets. Demand for food rises as populations grow. Types of food consumed change as people’s incomes increase. To meet these demands, farmers seek to produce more crops, livestock and fish. The productivity of smallholders in poor countries is typically much less than it could be. Efforts to increase productivity have led, in some cases, to pressure on natural resources (water, land, energy, biodiversity and ecosystem services) and to environmental damage, especially in parts of the world with fragile ecosystems. Hence the absolute need for policies that combine sustainable intensification of food production and equitable distribution so that all people have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food at all times.

Food production and security can be increased in ways that make sustainable use of resources and give people greater social protection when needed. Such strategies reduce risks associated with food price volatility and encourage more equitable growth. They are more likely to succeed if, besides responding to immediate food security and nutrition needs, they contribute to long-term resilience by providing improved production systems, risk protection, better nutrition and safety nets. They should contribute to the realization of the right to food. Success also depends on all stakeholders – especially the least resilient – being able to influence the policy choices that affect their livelihoods. To this end, it is important to strengthen the capacities of producer organizations (including cooperatives) and increase their access to markets and services.

Social protection schemes and safety nets are vital given the stresses regularly faced by smallholders, laborers and other marginalized groups. These groups are vulnerable to the impact of market shocks, climate change, political instability and lack of employment as rural economies transform. Well-designed social protection systems help households sustain their resilience to shocks – whether natural or man-made. They ensure that even the poor and most vulnerable people – including children, refugees and the elderly – are able to meet their basic needs such as a nutritious diet at all times. Safety nets – including school meals, work- or asset-creation programmes and risk-insurance schemes – empower poor communities. They are especially valuable when linked to sustainable smallholder production. They can provide a springboard for overcoming poverty.
Agriculture and the Green Economy

Sustainable agriculture and food systems are key elements for a thriving Green Economy. Investments in agriculture, food production and food systems in general will contribute to sustainability if correct choices are made. The right decisions can have positive impacts on the environment, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and increase both carbon sequestration and biodiversity. They can have a positive impact on human and social well-being, poverty reduction and equity.

Sustainability in agriculture and food systems means improving the ways resources are used and distributed. That involves continuous striving to increase efficiency and reduce waste through all stages of food production, processing and consumption while also seeking to ensure equitable access to nutrition.

National goals for reducing hunger and improving nutrition should be grounded in this approach and could also include (a) ensuring consistent availability and accessibility of sustainably produced, nutritious and safe food in local markets, (b) preventing deforestation, (c) reducing, and even eliminating, losses and waste in food production, processing and consumption, (d) universal access to safety nets, and (e) an end to chronic malnutrition (stunting and anemia) without increasing the risk of nutrition-related chronic disease.

Strategic options for sustainability apply along the length of food value chains. They include changes in agricultural production patterns, integrated management of access to natural resources and rewarding sustainability in food production systems and markets.

Implementation of sustainable practices is encouraged through incentives. But such incentives only work if markets and trading systems function fairly and efficiently. They depend on institutional arrangements that protect and enforce property rights and market mechanisms that ensure prices reflect the opportunity costs of environmental damage or resource exploitation. For example, if prices and labels reflect the true cost of unsustainable production, the adoption of sustainable practices will be encouraged. Incentives should only be used if they effectively encourage sustainable strategic choices. Targeted measures — supporting people’s access to sustainably produced nutritious food — can be implemented as needed.

Open and distortion-free agricultural trade will contribute to the objective of sustainable agricultural development by promoting an efficient allocation of the world’s scarce natural resources as well as improving access to food. Protectionist policies should be resisted when national measures to mitigate and adapt to global environmental challenges are designed.
There is no single blueprint for sustainable agriculture and food security, and no one set of policies is globally applicable. Policy choices are best informed through economic analyses that take account of the local environmental and social realities. Implementation should be scaled up in ways that take account of local conditions and national priorities. Strategies for sustainable implementation will vary between landscapes, social contexts, climates and ecosystems. Hence the need for local communities to participate in identifying and implementing the strategies and to help establish the right incentives.

Farmers and ecosystems can become more resilient and resources can be used more efficiently through climate-smart agricultural strategies when there are appropriate incentives for their adoption. Sustainable intensification of agricultural production and food systems must go hand in hand with climate-change adaptation and mitigation, especially when access to natural resources is compromised as a result of climate change.
Smallholder agriculture and small-scale production systems are at the heart of the Green Economy

Smallholder agriculture has a central role to play in increasing agricultural production sustainably and in reducing poverty. Small-scale farmers and enterprises, many of them led by women, produce most of the world’s food and should therefore be at the center of policies on food and nutrition security. Efforts to connect smallholder farmers to markets — for example, through food procurement operations in the context of governmental stockholding for food security purposes or for global food assistance — contribute to farmer productivity. The well-being of smallholders depends on their maintaining access to natural, financial and technical resources. This needs to be fully protected. It is essential that any dealings involving governments, smallholders and large-scale businesses are conducted in the full respect for human rights. Sustainable development of rural communities is also vital in moving towards a Green Economy.

People’s access to the food they need depends on food markets functioning well at local, national, regional and global levels, and on their ability to pay for food. Open markets, together with rules and regulations that foster fair trade and the respect of human rights all contribute to more equitable access. Recourse to trade-distorting support policies and protectionism should be avoided. In light of the existing intergovernmental commitments, humanitarian food purchases should be exempted from export restrictions and extraordinary taxes. Sustainable food value chains — from production, through processing, transport and trade, to consumers — increase the availability of food, generate income, and help create and maintain decent green jobs.
Supporting sustainable agricultural practices

Sustainable agriculture requires integrated systems that link decisions and practices on resource use, food production, processing and distribution. It also calls for the intensive application of knowledge in making such systems function sustainably and in the best interests of everyone, from producer to user. In practice, this means appreciating the diverse ways in which food is produced (and the traditional knowledge involved), and support for the testing and, if appropriate, adoption of modern science and technologies in local settings. It means careful and limited use of inorganic fertilizer and pesticides, making the most efficient use of water, conserving soil, combining forestry, crops and livestock production, and of course minimizing waste at all stages. It requires safe and sustainable livestock production, so that adequate amounts of safe animal source products are available, without generating new health risks.

Progress demands the fullest possible sharing of knowledge and experience between all nations and stakeholders through wider partnerships such as North-South and South-South cooperation. Developing countries which have succeeded in expanding food production, preserving natural resources and fighting hunger have valuable experiences to share. Indeed, most recent advances in tropical agriculture originate in developing countries.
Integrated resource management is critical to sustainable agriculture and food systems. Factoring in the cost of sustainability can help households, businesses and policy makers make informed decisions on the synergies and trade-offs associated with different ways of using and managing the natural resources on which they depend. This is best done in an inclusive fashion, with all members of communities empowered to participate in decisions that affect their access to natural resources. Regulatory and public policy measures play an important role in creating incentives and promoting choices on sustainable production, use of resources and provision of environmental services. It is essential that integrated resource management is linked with other policy processes.
Nutrition is the cornerstone of equitable development

Attention to nutrition outcomes, especially between the start of pregnancy and a child’s second birthday, is critical for ensuring the development of human capital and enabling current and future generations to attain their full physical and cognitive potential. Healthy diets help to minimize the risk of disease in children and adults. Ensuring that sufficient nutritious foods are available to all people, and that they can both access these foods at all times, and pay for what they need, are critical elements of all people’s economic and social development. Achieving this is possible if national policies take account of the nutritional needs of all members of society, as well as the costs of achieving them. Policies must also take account of the challenges faced by caregivers in ensuring good nutrition for their households. They need to be empowered with knowledge on adequate care and feeding for infants and young children.

Policies that enable all people to enjoy good nutrition are referred to as “nutrition-sensitive.” Sustainable, nutrition-sensitive agriculture and food security policies help improve the availability and accessibility of nutritious food, and promote healthy and sustainable diets and prosperity in rural areas. Access to nutritious food depends first on the functioning of food markets at local, national, regional and global levels and second on the extent of social protection that enables all people to obtain sufficient nutritious food for a healthy, productive life through transfers of income, food or other assets.

Nutrition is the cornerstone of equitable development
Transformation for equity and sustainability

Transformational approaches are required for equitable food and nutrition security as part of sustainable development. Business, civil society and governments are agreeing on ways to use natural resources more sustainably so as to achieve food and nutrition security for all in full respect of the environment. Multi-stakeholder partnerships can be scaled up. They work best when they function within sound regulatory frameworks, are based on agreed principles, are operated in ways that safeguard the human rights of all groups, and are geared towards the achievement of one overarching goal – food and nutritional security for all through sustainable agriculture and food systems.