Rooting for root causes: moving from one-sided labels **towards fruitful dialogues on future agricultures**

Summary of a virtual webinar on 7 July 2021

COVID-19 has exposed weaknesses as well as resilience in global food supply chains. Its consequences are aggravated by previous and ongoing vulnerabilities and bottlenecks. Especially those resulting from conflicts and climate change. To combat these challenges and ultimately achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), debates are being held on the types of agricultural systems that can support these goals.

Over time, new definitions of agricultural systems pop up, older definitions resurface and definitions change over time. With the challenges at hand, the need for food system transformation is more urgent than ever. The 2021 UN Food Systems Summit provides a new platform to discuss how such a transformation should be achieved. Creating a dialogue on agricultural systems and shaping the agricultural development agenda seems more relevant than ever.

The 'Science-Policy Dialogue' on 7 July focussed on key opportunities, challenges and their root causes in order to support the coherence of agricultural development policy. During the webinar it was discussed how the Netherlands could contribute to sustainable food systems in emerging economies and developing countries by addressing several key questions:

- How do policy makers experience the polarised debate on different agricultural systems?
- Are the 13 principles of agroecology HLPE (2019) a useful framework for the Dutch policy overall and for programme development by Embassies in Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs)?
- Should the Dutch have the ambition to build completely new in-country food systems, or is it more realistic to have an incremental approach and increase efficiency and sustainability of agroecosystems related to the local context?

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Wijnand van IJssel (Senior Adviser Food Security - Ministry of Foreign Affairs) moderated the webinar with over 30 participants from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, Dutch embassies in LMICs, Agricultural Counsellors and knowledge institutes. A discussion-paper was shared before the meeting to provide background on the topic at hand.

Perspectives from international policy, science and practice

Kicking off the meeting, several key speakers shared their views on the current debate as well as their own experience on the polarised debate on different agricultural systems.

Hans Brand (Policy coordinator FAO and multilateral cooperation at the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality) shared his perspective on how this debate is taking shape in the international policy arena, with FAO among others. The increased interest in agro-ecology stems from the desire for a holistic food systems approach to realise Sustainable Development Goal 2 (Zero Hunger) and to obtain leverage points to generate food system transformation. The thirteen principles of agroecology (HLPE) illustrate various broad principles that should be adopted to national contexts, applied to context specific solutions and provide points for discussion. The HLPE-report was applauded for its alternative practices, critical analysis and for defining the concept within the local context. After lots of discussion on topics such as the role of modern technology, the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) adopted the policy recommendations of the HLPE.

Providing a scientific perspective, Ken Giller (Professor Plant Production Systems - Wageningen University & Research), shared his reflections on the current enthusiasm for regenerative agriculture. Giller stated that regenerative agriculture is not a new concept and has had fluctuating degrees of interest since the 1980s. In recent years, interest has reemerged among a multitude of organisations such as the FAO, NGOs (e.g. Greenpeace) and MNCs (e.g. Danone and Unilever) who have taken action to frame and drive regenerative agriculture strategically into their work. He emphasised that the prospects of agro-ecology, and for example regenerative agriculture, often go beyond what is possible (e.g. soils cannot store carbon indefinitely). Agro-ecology is an emerging dogma where the principles themselves are broad enough to support the development agendas of many, but must be applied to local needs and local perspectives. This points out that insufficient attention is currently paid to the starting points of specific agro-systems and the local context.

Melle Leenstra (Agricultural Counsellor Egypt and Jordan, Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality), voiced similar experiences. In Jordan, large projects attempted to copy-paste Dutch greenhouse technology, yet the concept of nature inclusiveness and regenerative agriculture pushed for discussion and alternative thoughts. This includes whether the greenhouses were affordable to the farmers; whether there is a fit with their local conditions, needs and climate; and whether it offered a return on investment considering the

market situation? Jeroen Rijniers (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) wondered if it might be better to acknowledge agroecology as a general starting point in any agricultural system, to which other practices, technology and innovations can contribute. As such, sustainable and resilient food systems could be realised.

A dialogue on challenges

In the discussion with participants several challenges were shared, stemming from the experiences they have had in their own roles and engagement in agricultural development.

How to translate concepts into practice, ensure learning by doing, keep the lessons learned?

It begs the question how to (locally) contextualise practices? The first challenge is implementing policies that link practice and learning in practice. Bilateral projects rarely have the opportunity to learn from field experience and co-learn with farmers and influence the major policy debates. The importance of evaluating initiatives should not be overlooked, as it is the best antidote to great stories based on faith. It was suggested to improve cross-embassy-learning to share experience on developing agrifood programmes. Dutch policy is moving from aid to trade or rather to investments with a focus on exporting knowledge instead of products or facilities. It was said that innovative technology should be locally embedded and 'not imposed on us'. In addition, the importance of taking into account local knowledge and experience was stressed.

How to deal with the power and challenges of labels of agricultural development?

A second challenge is visualising the future (system) change and developing inclusive agriculture which engages farmers, industry, research and policymakers to fully support the joint interventions. Agroecology is simply one term that can be used as a stepping stone to look at the horizon. Labels trigger dialogues and discussions, but should not turn into dogmas. On the other hand, one should not underestimate the power of those labels to inspire people. Embassies need inspirational narratives next to inputs, like fertilisers and quality seeds, to improve agriculture at a basic level. Practices must be molded by the needs of the people so they stand behind the envisioned transition. Context specificity may also imply exporting agricultural products e.g. to a water-scarce region. Self-sufficiency is not always the most sustainable system and should in turn not become dogmatic.

Moving the discussion forward

What this first science-policy dialogue has highlighted is the importance of sharing experiences and the need for reflection on how to engage with all different approaches for development in agriculture. Holding such dialogues provides key insights from many on the ground experiences and will support actors to move away from dogmas towards understanding local complexities and realities.