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Governance, consumer awareness, better income and wealth distribution, and technological, social and institutional innovations will be key in achieving a desirable future, says FAO

Last Friday, 2 December 2022, FAO released its report on “The future of food and agriculture – Drivers and triggers for transformation” (FOFA-DTT)¹, part of a series initiated in 2017 “that portrays long-term analyses of food and agricultural systems within the social and economy-wide context” [[read](#)].

This report “is the culmination of efforts that mobilized hundreds of technical experts in domains related to agrifood systems, both within and outside the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)”. It was prepared in the framework of “a forward-looking effort aimed at identifying possible transformative patterns for agrifood systems towards sustainability and resilience”.



During the launching ceremony of the report, chaired by the FAO Director-General, several speakers emphasized the extreme complexity of the agrifood

¹ Materne Maetz, hungerexplained.org, served as Senior Editorial Advisor on the FOFA-DTT team.

domain. This complexity and the great uncertainty characterizing the future were dealt with in the report through the analysis of trends, interrelations and “weak signals” observed in eighteen drivers of change² and by the construction of four exploratory scenarios of the future³.

The main author of the report, Lorenzo G. Bellù, explained that particular emphasis had been put on aspects such as cross-country interdependencies, epidemics and degradation of ecosystems, market concentration, increasing food prices, science and innovation, capital information intensification of agrifood production processes, big data generation, control and ownership and uncertainties at all levels. A dashboard is also available online with the data used in the report, for researchers who would want to conduct further analyses.

The key messages delivered by the report are summarized below:

- The world is tremendously off track for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) it had committed to reach by 2030.
- Development paths followed by rich countries are neither replicable by poor countries, nor sustainable.
- A change of mindset is required as “More of the same” will lead the world to a point of no return: short-termism, uncertain commitments, quick fixes, and piecemeal approaches are not up to the challenge as they fail to address the root causes of overall unsustainability and lack of resilience of food systems.
- Changes, however, will need to be – and be perceived as – fair and viable, and they have to occur well beyond agrifood sectors to ensure economy-wide income-earning opportunities, effective social protection, protection of savings for capital accumulation and widespread asset ownership.
- A better future will depend on both a more efficient production and a well-informed consumption.
- Technical innovation is one element of the solution – not a panacea –, but it raises the question of dependency and access by a large part of the world. In the process, indigenous peoples’ food and knowledge systems must be preserved as they are at risk of disappearing.
- Disparities in investment are considerable across countries and regions: it attracts new private investors in some locations and activities, while in others it relies on more traditional means, such as small-scale producer self-financing.
- Food prices are likely to increase in the future as production is impacted by natural resources degradation and climate change, and if real production costs (including greenhouse gas emissions causing climate change, loss of

² 1. Population dynamics and urbanization; 2. Economic growth, structural transformation and the macroeconomic outlook; 3. Cross-country interdependencies; 4. Big data generation, control, use and ownership; 5. Geopolitical instability and increasing conflicts; 6. Uncertainties; 7. Rural and urban poverty; 8. Inequalities are widespread and deep-rooted; 9. Food prices; 10. Innovation and science; 11. Public investment in agrifood systems; 12. Capital and information intensity of production; 13. Input and output market concentration; 14. Consumption and nutrition patterns; 15. Scarcity and degradation of natural resources; 16. Epidemics and degradation of ecosystems; 17. Climate change; 18. The “sustainable ocean economies”.

³ More of the same; Adjusted future; Race to the bottom; Trading off for sustainability.

- biodiversity and degradation of natural resources, and health impacts and negative social consequences) are taken into account. Yet, food security can still be achieved if there is a more equitable income and wealth distribution.
- Big data could play a positive role in the transformation of food systems, but it is not free of potential hazards.
 - The rural–urban dichotomy does not appear any more to be an adequate axis for understanding food systems, as borders between rural and urban areas are increasingly blurred and as they become more interdependent.
 - The lessons learned from the COVID–19 pandemic and conflicts reveal fragilities of agrifood systems and they should be used for triggering positive changes.

Many of these messages will not be new or unexpected for readers of hungerexplained.org.

The four scenarios constructed by the FAO to explore possible futures on the basis of the level of achievement of the Organization’s four “betters”⁴, are:

- **“More of the same”** may be assimilated to a “business as usual” scenarios, where current mindset and approaches are maintained in the medium and long run, leading to “deteriorating social and humanitarian outcomes, and a continuous environmental neglect throughout the 2020s and beyond”.
- **“Adjusted future”** is a scenario in which some adjustments are brought to the prevailing development paradigm and limited changes in global governance help address to some extent several of the major challenges. It shows headway in achieving selected SDGs at the last minute, but not sustainably, as systemic governance weaknesses persist at all levels.
- **“Race to the bottom”** is a disaster scenario in which everything goes wrong: power is concentrated in an elite focused on preserving its interests, leading to generalized conflicts, exacerbated inequalities and widespread poverty, famine, massive population movements and accelerated environmental degradation.
- **“Trading off for sustainability”** is a rosy scenario resulting from redistribution of power and a more inclusive governance system, bringing about the adoption of more sustainable technologies and less energy– and natural resource– intensive consumption, paving the way to the achievement of the “four betters”.

From the analysis of these four scenarios, the report points clearly at four major triggers that will be key in realizing a desirable future: improved governance; increased consumer awareness; better income and wealth distribution; widespread technological, social and institutional innovations. The direction food systems will follow in the future will be highly dependent on how these triggers will be engineered and managed.

During the panel discussion that took place at the launch of the report, Prof. Jomo Kwame Sundaram, well known to hungerexplained.org readers, congratulated FAO for a quite comprehensive piece. He regretted, however, that it “did not appear earlier, especially before the Food Systems Summit, last year, because it provides

⁴ FAO’s four “betters”: better production, better nutrition, better environment and better life.

a far superior analysis compared to much of the input which we saw going into that Summit”. He also emphasized the need to address food insecurity not just as a matter of agronomy, but of access, inequality and poverty. He added that nutrient deficiencies and food-related non-communicable diseases should be given more importance in the future.

He also urged FAO to push its work one step further and recognize explicitly the obstacles to overcome on the way towards the realization of the “Trading off for sustainability” scenario. “Can we simply rely on market forces? » he asked. « Can we rely primarily on profit motives to deal with some of these problems? What are the alternatives?” For him, providing answers to these questions will help ensure a proper impact of this FAO report.

At hungerexplained.org, we can only endorse Prof. Sundaram’s views and the remarks made by Alessandra Turco from La Via Campesina regarding the greater role that must be given to civil society in the decision-making process. We do so, although we know that dealing with these issues will take FAO to a political field, where the matter has to do with building coalitions and alliances in order to change the power balance, that it has always been rather reluctant to explore, because of the Organization’s intergovernmental nature.

By failing to do this in now, however, and not utilizing fully the outcome of its analytical work, FAO would further weaken its position as leader for food and agriculture at world level, and leave the field wide open to private profit-driven forces such as those that have led the Food Systems Summit in 2021.

The implications of such a failure to shoulder its responsibility would be incommensurable and disastrous for the future of world food and agriculture.

To know more :

- [FAO, The future of food and agriculture – Drivers and triggers for transformation](#), The Future of Food and Agriculture, no. 3, FAO Rome, 2022.
- [FAO, The future of food and agriculture: Drivers and triggers for transformation, Summary version](#), FAO Rome, 2022.
- [FOFA-DTT Dashboard](#) (on line).
- [The Food Systems Summit](#), Website.

Selection of past articles on hungerexplained.org related to the topic:

- [Agriculture, food and economic development – Is penalizing food and agriculture a sustainable development option?](#) 2022.
- [Governance: united to decide or divided to be ruled?](#) 2022.
- [Private economic power in food systems and its new forms](#), 2022.
- [Investment in agriculture](#), 2022.

- Opinions: A strange Summit by George-André Simon, 2021.
- The digital revolution in food and agriculture – Exciting promises, mixed results and risky bet, 2021.
- The real cost of food – Can the market alone guide our food systems towards more sustainability? 2021.
- Obstacles to transition – Why is it so difficult to make our food system more sustainable and climate-friendly? 2019.
- What future for our food? Three scenarios picture quite different perspectives, 2018.
- What are the challenges to be met in order to secure a sustainable future for our food system? 2017.