

## The challenge of developing global food systems that respond to the needs and possibilities of today's world

Martín Piñeiro, Blog del IICA, August 16th 2020.

Achieving food security and eradicating world hunger has been a central concern of humanity throughout its history. This concern led policies and efforts, both in the countries and in multilateral organizations, to boost agricultural production. The Green Revolution was a product of these concerns and was a central instrument to increase production and reduce hunger in the world.

In the 1990s, the evidence on global warming and the growing deterioration of the environment and natural resources introduced a new dimension to the concerns related to agricultural production and highlighted the strong global interrelationships that exist in environmental and , consequently, the importance and need to consider the global food system in an integral way.

More recently, FAO and other public and private organizations have pointed out the growing importance of human diseases linked to consumer habits associated with urbanization and economic development. An example of this was the intense treatment of the subject at the G20 / T20 / B20 meeting held in Buenos Aires in 2018.

Finally, the Covid-19 pandemic has generated a new presence and urgency to the dimension linked to the health and safety of food and the possible impact of the global food system, and in particular trade, in the spread of diseases.

This short sequence highlights four important realities:

Human food is provided and depends on a complex global food system in which many private actors intervene under a regulatory framework defined by the public sector. Agricultural primary production is a minor component of the global system. For example, in the US, the value of primary food production represents only about 15% of consumer spending on food.

The global food system is made up, through trade, of a broad set of national food systems. Trade has an important role. Around 20% of the food consumed in the world originates from imports.

A balanced development of the global food system must take into account four main dimensions or objectives: a) efficiency and productivity to be able to feed the world, b) environmental sustainability to take care of the planet, c) the safety and health of food to

take care consumer health and d) nutritional characteristics of foods to reduce the occurrence of nutrition-related diseases.

There is, at the global level, no international institution that has a clear and unequivocal mandate to support, guide and establish rules for the development of the global food system. This institutional absence is particularly important in relation to the establishment of rules and standards in the dimensions of food safety and nutritional quality.

The EU has dealt with the issue the most and, through two important documents, the Green Deal and the From Farm to Fork, has made the proposal more comprehensive and complete, although in my opinion, with an excessive emphasis on the objective of environmental sustainability and insufficient emphasis on the other dimensions of the problem.

On the other hand, many other voices have begun to make different proposals, many of them unbalanced and supported by beliefs or exaggerated expectations of what is possible and convenient and without taking into account scientific evaluations or concrete economic realities.

As always happens with economic issues, when there are multiple objectives there are also trade-offs between them. A simple example illustrates the dilemma: From the point of view of environmental sustainability, it would be convenient to completely eliminate herbicides and most of the fertilizers. But that would result in a very significant decrease in production and therefore affect food prices and world food security.

Therefore, the main dilemma is to achieve the most suitable balance between the four objectives - production and productivity, sustainability, safety and nutritional value. This balance will be different in different ecosystems and in different countries, and the way in which these balances develop in each country will affect, through trade, the balance that is achieved at the global level.

This global interdependence and the importance of achieving an adequate balance to the present and future needs of humanity suggest the importance of countries working in a coordinated manner and that multilateral organizations adopt it as a priority mandate.

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