

Transforming Food Systems through Agroecology: Learning from Evidence Side Event of the Science Days for the UNFSS 2021, 6th July 2021, online

The Side Event was organized by the Swiss national FAO Committee (CNS-FAO), World Food System Center of ETH Zurich, Bioversity International-CIAT Alliance, Institute for Research and Promotion of Alternatives in Development (IRPAD), World Food Forum (Youth Group), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations (IDDRI).

In various UNFSS Action Tracks and Food System Dialogues, agroecology emerged strongly as a key concept for inclusive food systems transformation by fostering the diversity of knowledge systems, ecosystems and nutrition. There is increasing evidence that agroecology is a powerful approach to reduce trade-offs between productivity and sustainability.

The objective of the webinar was i) to identify and discuss knowledge and implementation gaps on agroecology in general as well as ii) to share knowledge and evidence on the role of agroecology to foster diversity in production, value chains and nutrition to improve resilience of farming and food systems. Each of the two topics was introduced by a short input followed by a panel discussion. The majority of the 118 participants (over 260 registered) work in the agriculture and environment/ecology sector for science/academia, NGOs, UN-Organizations, and national governments. The audience had the possibility to interact with speakers and panellists via chat and Q&A function.

The discussion revealed that in a world characterized by continuous change and uncertainties, resilient agricultural and food systems are an important precondition for sustainable transformation. Diversity at different levels such as production systems, farms, landscapes and in how knowledge is shared and developed is an important prerequisite for resilience. Although results are mixed and further research is needed, a positive relation between agricultural diversification and diversified diets, is true for many different farming systems. Agroecology does not deliver immediate results. Different voices highlighted that despite the broad and holistic innovation strategy agroecology is offering, there is a need to address challenges such as the time lag between the moment when agroecological measures are implemented and the moment when the effects become visible or measurable. Currently, the focus of agricultural policies is often limited to a production-oriented focus with a particular emphasis on food security. However, such a perspective appears to be too limited. There was consensus that given the planetary boundaries, the large environmental footprint of food systems and the complex and manifold health challenges related to nutrition, the focus of policies should be extended beyond targeting food security only and include other key aspects in food systems such as land, nutrition, and environmental security. This calls for action on the way we create and share knowledge using participatory learning methods, bringing farmers and other food system actors, scientists, extension services and policy makers together. In order to allow a long-term perspective on food systems performance and resilience, policy targets need to shift away from high-input systems focussing on high yields, towards incentivizing diversity in agricultural and food systems.

Given the potential of agroecology in sustainably providing safe, nutritious food without compromising on environmental quality and ecosystem services of agricultural landscapes, there is a need for a policy framework bringing all these different roles together. To unlock the potential and the holistic nature of agroecology, new approaches are required to measure success and impacts of agriculture and food systems. The Side Event called on all actors that are supportive of agroecology, to get actively engaged in the respective action coalitions that are forming under the UNFSS, to ensure the momentum that has been built up around agroecology will be maintained after the Summit