



COVID-19 AND “ONE HEALTH”: FOOD SYSTEMS, TERRITORIAL INVESTMENT AND GLOBAL LEADERSHIP*

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One Health, with food systems as the centre of action

The One Health approach means working on the connection between humans, animals, plants and their shared environments to prevent and control diseases circulating in animals and the environment and spilling over to human health. This approach – introduced by the One Health Coalition of governmental and private organizations (<https://onehealthplatform.com/ohp/who-we-are/international-one-health-coalition>) in the health sector to address animal disease, food safety and antibiotic resistance – is particularly relevant to tackle threats like Covid-19 and their complex causes. The current emergency offers the opportunity for stakeholders at all levels to realise the importance of the One Health approach, and to place food systems at the centre of One Health actions.

More resilient and sustainable food systems should be seen as long-term answers to multiple global challenges, including our ability to respond to pandemics. Each year, unhealthy diets are responsible for 11 million preventable deaths globally. Healthier diets, a key outcome of sustainable food systems, would support stronger immune systems and provide solutions to chronic threats to human health, reducing the impact of crises like Covid-19.

More sustainable food systems would reduce income inequality, a strong multiplier of the negative effects of pandemics, with the poor suffering the most from them. A much smaller footprint on the planet and better climate resilience, another key outcome of sustainable food systems, would limit negative interactions between ecological, animal and human health.

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Such “multi-sectoral systems view” would facilitate policy and investment solutions addressing potential synergies, trade-offs and co-benefits (such as nutrition, climate adaptation, natural resource management, public health, innovative economic opportunities) that underpin sustainable production, increased food and nutrition security, and optimal health for all.

Systematic coordination between food and other thematic institutions

As Covid-19 responses have shown once again, global coordination is often ineffective, if not absent. Most international institutions and initiatives keep following a silo approach, even if it is increasingly evident that pandemics, climate disasters and food insecurity are all related to our huge footprint on the planet. Agriculture has been ignored in United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)-led climate negotiations, and nutrition has been largely neglected in efforts to eradicate hunger. There have been very few international initiatives to help coordinate actions around those human activities that play a huge role in turning microbes into pathogens causing animal disease and pandemics (Samuel, 2020).

Resilience, to health and food crises alike, needs to be planned and coordinated more systematically, through multi-level governance arrangements that maximise synergies between institutions, actions and their financing, at global, regional, national and local levels. In a paper we published with Chatham House colleagues just before the Covid-19 crisis, we conclude that closing the large SDG 2 financing gap and making food systems more sustainable and resilient requires a more effective “food and agriculture” global institutional landscape as well as better task division between these institutions and other thematic institutions such as WHO, WTO and UNFCCC. We show that fragmentation of efforts and sometimes incoherent policies are leading not only to inadequate public investments at national, regional and global levels, but also to lost opportunities for coordinated investments in human, soil, plant, water and animal health, or for climate change adaptation actions to enable resilient local food production (Rampa et al., 2019).

This is partly why the UN Secretary General has launched a multi-stakeholder process to prepare for World Food Systems Summit in 2021 that will involve many different sectors. It is a great opportunity to build, in the coming months, a new global arrangement for the systematic coordination between food and other international thematic institutions to improve resilience and sustainability of food systems, based on One Health thinking. This new arrangement could be endorsed at the Summit and should:

- Build on ongoing reforms and coordination efforts of several international organisations, rather than launching a new institution mandated with such global coordination;
- Include the thematic organisations that so far have had little cooperation with food institutions, both at the policy level (the WTO for instance, since during emergencies like Covid-19 it is key to ensure the smooth flow of international food trade) and financing level (for instance the Green Climate Fund, since food system resilience requires a much higher allocation of international climate adaptation funds to the agriculture sector) (Tietjen et al., 2019);
- Involve directly the highest leadership of states, global institutions, farmer organisations, businesses and civil society, because inclusivity and political backing are essential for real implementation of any planned coordinated action.

A territorial pact: Combining public and private investment for sustainable food systems

A One Health approach with food systems as the centre of action requires much higher levels of public and private investment. This is just as urgent as a new level of global coordination, to develop One Health thinking in specific territories and in line with the local circumstances. Synergies and trade-offs among investments to improve climate adaptation, natural resource management, public health and economic opportunities will vary substantially in different contexts (with different features of, and interactions between, urban, rural and natural areas).

In April 2020, some of the largest food companies in the world, along with farmers' organisations, various UN bodies, academics, and civil society groups issued an important "Call to Action for World Leaders", including the G7 and G20. One of its three key recommendations is "investing in sustainable and resilient food systems [...] for the recovery of people and planet" after Covid-19 (The Food and Land Use Coalition, 2020).

To urgently make this idea concrete, however, a sort of "territorial pact" is needed between public and private investors interested in better resilience and sustainability of specific food systems. This requires both new types of investment and new financial mechanisms.

Substantial public and private funding for agroecological systems would be a good example of innovative food investment (FAO, 2018). Agroecology can build resilience by combining different animals and plants and using natural synergies rather than synthetic chemicals – to fertilise crops, fight pests and regenerate soils.

New mechanisms are also needed to reduce the investment risk associated with the food and agricultural sector in low-income countries, which is one of the largest obstacles to the growth of their food economy. This can be done by blending public and private finance, with the public sector for instance providing seed capital to guarantee the private investment of a company or a bank. This "pact" would be in the interest of the private sector, that would see its return on investment "facilitated" by the public authorities, in addition to better prospects for a more stable business environment because of improved resilience and sustainability. On the other hand, the "pact" would also imply the acceptance by the private sector that under certain circumstances, like a pandemic, the public authorities would be entitled to centralise decisions around food production and distribution, as there will be the need for central coordination to avoid food supply and food jobs disruptions. This is particularly important, considering that food is the major expenditure item of the poor and the food economy is their major job provider. Moreover, adequate criteria would need to be defined to identify which specific private investments should be considered "aligned with the One Health approach" (for instance using agro-ecology principles or the degree of sustainability of specific value chains) and could thus be supported by public seed capital.

Europe's leadership in food and health action as response to Covid-19

A number of important summits are scheduled from October 2020 to the end of 2021: Africa-Europe Summit in October 2020, the Climate Adaptation Summit in October, the Tokyo Nutrition for Growth Summit in December, the World Food System Summit of 2021, and the UNFCCC COP26 on Climate and the COP15 of the Convention on Biological Diversity, both postponed to 2021. The ambition to achieve some degree of coordination, coherence and complementarity between the results of different

summits in terms of One Health and food system approaches, would require strong leadership by one or more of the involved key players. Europe seems well positioned to assume such leadership, thanks to the substantial assistance provided to other countries for Covid-19 responses, to the policies that it is planning to launch for Europe itself, and to the European presidencies of various international bodies scheduled for the next year and a half.

The package of measures already put in place by the European Commission to assist countries in the Global South with their response to the pandemic is very significant, totalling €15.6 billion (of which €3.25 billion is channelled to Africa) (PAEPARD, 2020). But the EU could do even more and better collectively (the EU and its member states provide 57% of global aid), as highlighted by ECDPM and partners recently (Bilal et te Velde, 2020). Even before Covid-19, the EU had put forward, through the independent “Task Force Rural Africa” of which I was a member, a new vision for its future cooperation with Africa on food security that is centred around the sustainability of food systems, a territorial development approach and climate actions (EC, 2018).

Moreover, Europe has recently launched very ambitious internal policy initiatives that, if implemented, could make the continent a global leader in sustainability. The Green Deal puts forward an innovative agenda for deep transformations towards environmental sustainability and climate resilience within the EU and internationally. As part of this Deal, the “Farm to Fork” strategy was announced with the goal of making Europe’s food system the gold standard for sustainability (but its launch was postponed by a few months due to the Covid-19 emergency) (Spencer, 2020).

Concluding remarks

Of course all the above may sound politically difficult. But great reforms are often launched in times of serious crisis. The International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the United Nations, for instance, were all designed during the Second World War. And one of the most effective coordination mechanisms on food systems at global level, the United Nations Task Force on Global Food Security (UNHLTF), emerged during the 2008-2009 food price crisis. The time therefore seems right to bring forward a new One Health approach, with food systems as the centre of action, and its key components: (1) a global arrangement for systematic coordination between food and other thematic institutions, (2) a territorial pact that combines public and private investment, (3) international summits and a strong global leadership led by Europe.

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