It's time to tackle climate change and agricultural development in tandem
Next stop for policymakers gathered in Rome for World Food Day should be Cancun, venue of the climate change summit

The Indonesian singer Anggun performs at the World Food Day gathering in Rome. But can she get the attendees singing from the same hymn sheet on climate change and agricultural development? Photograph: Andreas Solaro/AFP/Getty Images

Remember 2008? The prices of agricultural commodities doubling in a matter of months, food riots in about 30 developing countries, 150 million more people facing hunger.

Two years later, as the committee for world food security holds its annual session in Rome and celebrates World Food Day, there is little to rejoice about. The stocks have been replenished, but no bold efforts have been made to reform the food systems. Food-deficit countries are still in a highly vulnerable situation. Small-scale farmers are still not sufficiently supported. And poor consumers are still not shielded from price increases.

Yet, there is something even worse than efforts that come too little, too late: efforts that, because they are focused on the short term and on quick wins, may be achieving the very opposite of what we need.

Of course, we have learned the cost of underinvesting in farming and, after 30 years of neglect, there is a renewed interest in agriculture, both within the private sector and among governments.

But the recipes promoted to relaunch agriculture may not be up to the challenges we are facing today. The provision of chemical fertilisers, the greater mechanisation of production and the expansion of irrigation seem far away from the professed commitment to fight climate change and to support small-scale, family agriculture.
reality, these "solutions" will mostly benefit the larger plantations. And it is their industrial model that is expanding.

If we were to stick to this approach, it would be a recipe for disaster, threatening the ability of our children’s children to feed themselves. Agriculture is already directly responsible for 14% of man-made greenhouse gas emissions – and up to one third, if we include the carbon dioxide produced by deforestation for the expansion of cultivation or pastures. As a result of temperature changes, the yields in certain regions of sub-Saharan Africa are expected to fall by 50% by 2020 in comparison to 2000 levels, and conservative estimates locate the global agricultural capacity in 2080 below the current levels by between 10% and 25%.

Today, weather-related events linked to climate change are already causing an increase in the number of floods and droughts, shorter and less predictable rainy seasons, and more volatile agricultural markets. In addition, the approaches which are currently promoted make food production increasingly dependent on fossil fuels, oil and gas, at the very same moment that the extraction of these resources is nearing its peak. Agriculture choosing this path is agriculture committing suicide.

This can change. We can improve the resilience of agriculture to climate change by combining diverse crops on the same farm, by planting more trees, and by developing water harvesting techniques to moisture the soil. The classic "green revolution" approaches should be fundamentally rethought to achieve this. Agriculture, now part of the problem of climate change, should be made part of the solution.

Effecting this shift requires that we think about climate change and agricultural development in combination. Left to different policy makers, the two are too often dealt with in isolation from one another. We need to travel the road from Rome to Cancun, home of the next climate change summit in December.

This change also requires that we adapt our modes of governance. We won’t shift to a carbon-free agriculture if we remain hostages to the short termism of markets and of electoral politics. The immediate expectations of shareholders and of voters cannot be ignored, but the aspirations of citizens must be allowed to grow into something larger that recognizes our debt towards future generations, and that enriches democracy into something more permanent and closer to the citizen. We can do this by binding ourselves to multi-year strategies, adopted by participatory means, which identify the range of measures necessary in various policy areas, with a clear timeline for action and an allocation of responsibilities across various branches of government.

It is always tempting for the proponents of business as usual to dismiss as utopian proposals that are so far-reaching they seem to be "revolutionary" in nature, while dismissing other proposals as so minor and insignificant that they will not really make any difference. We must move beyond this false opposition.

What matters is not each of the policy proposals considered in isolation, whether reformist or more revolutionary, but the pathway: the sequence of measures that, piece by piece, may lead gradually to a carbon-neutral agriculture, protect the ecosystems and sustainably feed the planet. Once part of a multi-year strategy, the set of measures we need to move towards sustainable food systems cannot be so easily dismissed: what seems utopian now may be seen as achievable if it is the point of arrival of a long-term plan. And changes that may seem trivial at first will be seen in a very different light once they are presented as part of a broader and more ambitious strategy.

Our democracies are premised on the idea that even the greatest collective problems can be solved if broken down into pieces and addressed one by one. It is an idea that we must now reclaim.
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