

Food security and climate change: challenging our ideas of productivity

Harriet Clayton, Greens/EFA in the European Parliament

The sustainable development goal of zero hunger is proving difficult to achieve - and in the recent disruption caused by the COVID pandemic and by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, persistent food price inflation is making the trajectory even more challenging. Food security requires not only the availability of sufficient food at appropriate quality: it also requires individuals' access to that food, whether physical or economic access; the ability to use the food in healthy diet alongside clean water, sanitation and healthcare; and finally the stability of this food supply. However, in the EU, when food security is perceived to be threatened, agricultural policy responses have more easily prioritised production and volumes, thus focusing mainly on the 'availability' aspect of food security. With inflation high, the price of food is seen as the main indicator of food security, and increasing volumes seen as the main lever to lower prices.

However, in the longer term, once we account for societal damage caused by conventional agricultural practices - in terms of environmental impact, contribution to climate change and biodiversity loss, and unhealthy diets - our food system no longer appears so productive. Ensuring food security in a context of climate change will require us to reconsider what a genuinely productive agriculture looks like. Climate change threatens the stability of food security globally, and, in our European agricultural policies, this should lead us to look beyond just availability, to more stubborn issues of access to nutritious food in Europe and globally, and the longevity of the agricultural sector in environmental as well as demographic terms.

As agricultural policy seeks to ensure food security and tackle climate change, women's leadership and involvement is doubly significant. Firstly, women are more vulnerable to food insecurity, and climate change is expected to act as a multiplier of pre-existing patterns of discrimination - widening existing inequalities in food security whilst also increasing the risk of poverty, displacement, and violence. Though situations vary across the world, broadly women in agriculture continue to have unequal access, control and ownership of key resources, notably land - and this is also the case within the EU. Here too, inequalities in recognised work, wages, and social security rights also persist for women in agriculture.

Secondly, however, women are already key for global food security: they are approximately half of the world's smallholder farmers, they even form the majority of the workforce in many regions, and - to combat the very climate change that affects them disproportionately - they are increasingly showing a preference for more alternative, sustainable modes of agriculture. Women's greater leadership in agricultural policy-making, as well as better targeted measures to support women, could bring about not only greater gender equality in the sector, but a greater awareness and commitment to the environmental challenges of climate change, and the social challenges of achieving a well-rounded food security.

See also:

European Institute for Gender Equality, 'Gender in agriculture and rural development,' 2016. https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-agriculture-and-rural-development?language_content_entity=en

CARE, 'Food Security and Gender Equality: A synergistic understudied symphony,' August 2022. <https://www.care-international.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/Final-Version-Food-Security-and-Gender-Equality.pdf>

Institute for European Environmental Policy background note, Bas-Defosse, F., Pagnon, J., 'What is the link between gender equality and agricultural sustainability?' September 2021. https://ieep.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/What-is-the-link-between-gender-equality-and-agriculture-sustainability_IEEP-2022.pdf