

## Putting citizens at the heart of food system governance

Establishing inclusive governance of food systems — where farmers and other citizens play an active role in designing and implementing food and agricultural policies — is not just a matter of equity or social justice. Evidence shows that it can also lead to more sustainable livelihoods and environments. And yet, across the world, food system governance is marked by exclusionary processes that favour the values and interests of more powerful corporations, investors, big farmers and large research institutes. How can we tip the balance and amplify the voice and influence of marginalised citizens in setting the food and agricultural policies that affect them? Research points to six tried and tested ways that, when combined, can empower citizens in the governance of food systems.

### Policy pointers

- **Democratising food system governance** means enabling farmers and other citizens to design policies and institutions, decide on strategic research priorities and investments, and assess the risks of new technologies.
- **Empowering farmers and other citizens** in food system governance can be achieved by providing inclusive and safe spaces for deliberation and action, building local organisations, strengthening civil society, expanding information democracy, learning from experience and nurturing citizenship.
- **Citizenship and participation** in policymaking are rights that must be claimed — mainly through the agency and actions of people themselves.

### Power to the people

Throughout the world, food systems are shaped by a mix of food and agricultural policies, research, technologies and institutions that dictate the choices available to farmers, food workers, consumers and the environments in which they live and work. Many of these systems are undemocratic, with policymaking processes excluding farmers and other citizens and instead reflecting, and reinforcing, the values and interests of big corporations and investors, and large-scale farmers. Small-scale farmers and other food producers frequently have little bargaining power and little control over decisions that shape their future.

Across the world, the call for more inclusive forms of food governance that involve farmers and other citizens in policymaking is getting louder. For some, this need to democratise food governance is a matter of social justice. New social movements on all continents are reaffirming the importance of human rights over economics and the rule of market forces.<sup>1</sup> The idea of ‘food sovereignty’, first developed by the Via Campesina coalition of peasant organisations and officially presented in 1996, affirms the fundamental right of citizens to define, for themselves, their food and agricultural policies and technologies.

For others, the call to democratise food governance comes from a lack of confidence in the actors and institutions running existing systems. There is much evidence that the poor — and a growing number

of middle-income citizens — feel ill-served by state institutions that claim to represent their interests but are often neither responsive nor accountable to them.

Similarly, public confidence in scientific expertise is also waning. The BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) crisis in Europe a decade ago made citizens feel ‘at risk’ from science-based solutions. And the introduction of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) into food systems continues to fuel heated debates across the world and undermine people’s trust in agricultural science and technology. Evidence of collusion between some government experts and big business has only added to people’s scepticism of ‘experts’.

What’s more, many people argue that the problems and solutions to food and agriculture are inherently value-laden — and experts are no better equipped to decide on questions of values and interests than any other group of people.<sup>2</sup> Policymaking is a complex and uncertain business that involves taking many decisions without fully knowing what their consequences might be. It is very difficult, for example, to predict exactly how GMOs will interact with the environment because it depends significantly on local contexts.

The complexity and uncertainty of food and agriculture policy and research can give rise to a range of ‘expert’ opinions on what should be done, rather than a unique scientific solution. Opting for more inclusive systems of food governance does not dismiss the benefits of listening to formal science. But it gives equal weight

# Involving communities can help create more resilient food systems

to the knowledge and perspectives of citizens, many of whom may, through years of practice, have a more context-specific understanding of the issues at hand.

Accepting the need to democratise food governance, the question remains: how can it be achieved? There is no definitive answer. But

experience highlights at least six tried and tested ways that together can be very effective in empowering citizens to shape policies and institutional choices for food and agriculture.

## 1. Learning from experience

From the Athenian assembly of ancient Greece to the revolutionary movements in 19th century Europe to the tribal councils, town meetings and majority voting systems that exist today, there is a rich history of direct democracy for us to learn from. It shows that government by discussion, citizen deliberation and reasoning can work to both improve equity in decision making and secure the sustainability of livelihoods and environments.

During the 1936–1939 Spanish civil war, the peasants of Andalusia and Aragon established communal systems of land tenure — in some cases abolishing the use of money for internal transactions — where decisions were made through popular assemblies and face-to-face democracy. The result was citizens effectively managing complex agricultural systems and local economies, within a framework of free institutions and structures, and supporting around three million people.

Today, many initiatives in inclusive governance are renewing or establishing traditions of such direct democracy (see Towards participatory democracy). They similarly go beyond simply consulting citizens to empowering them to design policies, set research agendas and deliver services themselves.

### Towards participatory democracy

Initiatives in ‘participatory democracy’ vary enormously in style and context — from participatory housing design to self managed peoples’ assemblies. But they are often characterised by a common emphasis on:

- inclusion, especially of racial and ethnic minorities, and traditionally marginalised groups such as women, youth and old people;
- multi-actor partnerships that enable wider ‘ownership’ of decisions, processes and projects;
- accountability, drawing on broader definitions that enable all partners to hold institutions, professionals and policymakers to account through social, legal, financial and political means; and
- new political processes that harness the commitment and capacity of ordinary people to make sensible decisions through reasoned and conscious deliberation, and more effectively fulfil the democratic ideal of government of and by, as well as for, the people.

## 2. Building local organisations

Local organisations traditionally played a major role in managing and governing food systems. Across the world, they are still important in: sustaining agricultural ecosystems and managing landscapes and natural resources; coordinating human skills, knowledge and labour to generate economic wealth in the food system; and deciding when, where and how food should be grown and sold.

But, the advent of centralised state policies and a range of market interventions have combined to erode or weaken local organisations with the result that many rural communities are no longer in charge of managing their local food systems and environments. Nor are they ‘trusted’ by governments to do so.

Yet evidence suggests that involving groups or communities in managing food systems — identifying needs, testing technologies, adapting practices to local conditions, sharing them with others — can help create more autonomous and resilient local food systems. In the valley of Lares in Cusco, Peru, local organisations of women manage a network of barter markets — ensuring that some of the poorest social groups in the Andes have access to a diversity of nutritious food, and that biodiversity both on the farm and in the landscape is conserved through the continued use and exchange of food crops.<sup>3</sup> Re-establishing or strengthening local organisations could help deliver more sustainable and cheaper solutions for farming and food processing, storage and distribution.

Building on local systems of knowledge and management as well as the resources that are locally available is key. That is, harnessing the rich context-specific expertise and experience that many rural communities have, and using it to create food systems that meet local needs and suit local social and ecological contexts.

Supporting local organisations to work together — through national and international federations, consortiums, networks and umbrella bodies — can also help increase their effectiveness in managing local food systems, as well as increase their voice and influence in policy and political debates on farming, environment and people’s access to food.

## 3. Strengthening civil society

A strong civil society helps farmers, food producers and other citizens get organised and reclaim power ‘from below’. Three approaches in particular have been found effective in strengthening civil society:

**Linking government and society.** Sometimes it is individuals within the public sector building bridges for a stronger civil society. In the Philippines, for example, civil servants and professionals have lobbied for more inclusive policy debates, leading to the widespread use

of participatory irrigation management. In other cases, inclusive governance is being achieved through changes to the law. Establishing the legal right to participate in policymaking is far more empowering than simply extending an invitation to get involved.

Mandatory joint planning and local council membership rules are just two examples of how legislation is creating a stronger role for civil society. A third — perhaps the most direct and effective — is ‘participatory budgeting’, in which people not only give their views on how public spending is organised but also have a say in what gets funded. Across Brazil, this type of approach has been used to increase the efficiency of public spending, reduce inequalities and create a more transparent and accountable form of government.

At the international level, the reform of the FAO Committee on World Food Security recognises the right of civil society to independently develop an inclusive and self organised process for interacting with member governments and the committee as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

**Collaborating with others.** The most common route to strengthening civil society involves collaboration, most notably between farmers, community-based organisations, nongovernment organisations (NGOs), and researchers. In the Philippines, for example, scientists and NGOs have worked with marginalised farmers to build a joint network, MASIPAG, that promotes the sustainable management of biodiversity, and local control over food systems. A review of 12 federations suggests that the strongest organisations — those that can most effectively carry their members’ concerns into negotiations with governments, donors and businesses — have had long-term collaborations with NGOs or religious leaders.

**Social movements.** Social movements attempt to transform governance structures through political participation, face-to-face discussions, and empowered federations. Some movements are linked to cooperatives and include irrigation associations, fishers’ associations and all sorts of other mutual aid groups. Most typically, social movements involve unions striving for greater consideration in national and international policy processes of the conditions of workers and, most recently, indigenous peoples. For example, in Mexico, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation has used various forms of direct democracy since 1994 to secure indigenous people’s control over parts of Chiapas, one of the country’s poorest states. In this way, the Zapatistas have established autonomous, and effective, food-producing programmes, schools, hospitals and pharmacies in regions neglected by the Mexican government.

## 4. Supporting inclusive deliberation

Creating safe spaces for citizens to communicate and act on their concerns has increasingly been recognised as an effective route to strengthening peoples’ voices in decision

making. Since the 1990s, methods for ‘deliberative and inclusive processes’, such as citizens’ juries, have been used in designing policies across both the global North and South. These approaches aim for greater discussion and debate about proposed policies and practices by engaging with a cross-section of citizens and including them in planning and decision making.

In these processes, the value of formal science is recognised, but so are citizens’ perspectives. When used well, deliberative and inclusive processes bring together professional expertise, local knowledge, negotiation talents, research skills and democratic values to create new wisdom and promote social and ecological change. One example from South India shows how these types of processes have led to new assessments of policy futures for food, farming and environment. Elsewhere, a series of citizens’ juries in West Africa during 2010 helped farmers assess existing approaches to agricultural research for development and articulate recommendations for policy and practice so that it better meets their needs and priorities. These efforts eventually led to a policy dialogue in early 2012 between small-scale farmers and the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, one of the major players in setting research agendas in West Africa.<sup>5</sup>

## 5. Nurturing citizenship

Although citizens are certainly capable of deliberating, making decisions and implementing their choices responsibly, these practices and virtues do not necessarily arise unprompted; they often have to be consciously nurtured through training and education that cultivates civic qualities and attitudes. It means supporting a lifelong process of character development and active citizenship, in which political activity is not seen as a means to an end but an end in itself.

Nurturing citizenship also means paying more attention to the broader conditions — most notably, economic security — that enable citizens to genuinely participate in policymaking and governance (see *Levelling the economic playing field*, overleaf).

## 6. Enhancing information democracy

New developments in community- and citizen-controlled media — from participatory films to local radio and newspapers to community websites to citizens’ journalism — allow citizens to more easily express their reality and aspirations. And amid the global trend of concentrating wealth and media power in ever fewer corporate hands, a growing number of citizens and civil society organisations are using and promoting alternative media to make their voices heard and create global networks for information-sharing and joint action.

In the Medak District of Andhra Pradesh, India, for example, an autonomous media organisation, made up of around 20 rural women, is making and broadcasting

## Levelling the economic playing field

Only with some material security and time can people be 'empowered' to think about what type of policies and institutions they would like to see and how they can develop them. Levelling the economic playing field for inclusive governance and sustainable livelihoods requires radical reforms to economic arrangements, including:

- a guaranteed and unconditional minimum income for all;
- a tax on financial speculations, to fund the regeneration of local economies and ecologies;
- a significant drop in time spent in wage-work and a fairer sharing of jobs between men and women;
- the re-localisation of plural economies that combine both market oriented activities with non monetary forms of economic exchange based on barter, reciprocity, gift relations, and solidarity; and
- a shift from the globalised, centralised and linear systems we use to produce food to circular models that mimic natural cycles and link sustainable food and energy production with water and waste management in a range of urban and rural settings.

films and radio programmes about the issues that matter most to themselves and their communities. Some of the films have been aired on national television or shown at international events.

Community-controlled media such as those in Medak contributes enormously to democratic governance. By bringing together federations of the rural poor to produce and share knowledge, they release new energy and creativity. And, through community-controlled media, federations can help make national and global institutions more accountable to citizens, especially those most marginalised from decision making.

But enhancing information democracy is not only about creating autonomous media. Supporting progressive initiatives within established media houses is just as important. Alliances of citizens, unions and reformist media organisations can help change broadcasting policies and practice. Such alliances can also help ensure regular critical analysis of the processes, products and institutions of mass communication. Knowing and understanding who owns what, who says what to whom and why, and how it is received are key for reclaiming democratic control over mass communication.

## Rio and beyond

When state officials, development professionals and business leaders meet in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012, for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, or Rio+20, they will spend much time discussing and debating what type of green economy can best serve sustainable development. Their conclusions

will be critical in determining the future of citizenship and the extent to which citizens can truly engage in policymaking. For example, decisions in favour of market-oriented 'green economy' approaches that promote the commodification, privatisation and financialisation of nature are likely to threaten democracy by undermining the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, women, small-scale food providers and other marginalised groups.

Existing decision-making and policy processes based on representative democracy are increasingly inadequate to deal with the social and environmental crises that undermine food systems everywhere. More inclusive governance regimes are required to cope with growing uncertainty and complexity, and to enable citizens to exercise their fundamental human right to directly define the food and agricultural policies that affect them. The six tried and tested methods described above offer one route to achieving the dispersal and decentralisation of power that we need — putting local communities, municipalities, and citizens' assemblies at the heart of food system governance.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Maeckelbergh, M. 2009. *The will of the many*. Pluto Press, London. ■ <sup>2</sup> Funtowicz, S., Ravetz, J., O'Connor, M. 2008. Challenges in the use of science for sustainable development. *International Journal of Sustainable Development*. 1(1), 99–107. ■ <sup>3</sup> Argumedo, A., Pimbert, M.P. 2010. Bypassing globalization: barter markets as a new indigenous economy in Peru. *Development* 53(3), 343–349. ■ <sup>4</sup> McKeon, N. 2009. *The United Nations and Civil Society: Legitimizing global governance — whose voice?* Zed Books, London. ■ <sup>5</sup> Pimbert, M.P. 2012. *Putting farmers first: reshaping agricultural research in West Africa*. IIED Briefing. IIED, London.