Food security and the Sustainable Development Goals

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The new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) include a significant number of interconnected objectives related to agriculture and food. SDG 2 focuses explicitly on food by seeking to “end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture”, but multiple other goals relate to challenges in the food system. SDG 1 focuses on poverty reduction, where agriculture and food has a key role to play. Sustainable agriculture plays a central role in achieving SDG 6 on water, SDG 12 on sustainable consumption and production, SDG 13 on climate change adaptation and mitigation and SDG 15 on land use and ecosystems. Sustainable management of fisheries also features prominently in SDG 14 on marine resource and oceans. This chapter summarises the main policy leverages to achieve sustainable and secure food systems in line with these goals.

A majority of the world’s poor lives in rural areas, where farming – predominantly by smallholders – is the central economic activity. Large increases in agricultural investment will be needed both to raise incomes and increase the supply of food sustainably. Most of the investment will need to come from the private sector, but governments have an important role in establishing the framework conditions. Public investment, supported by development aid, can also complement and attract private investment. Policies that support agriculture’s enabling environment, but do not distort incentives or crowd out the private sector, are likely to be more effective in the long term than specific subsidies to the agricultural sector. Priority areas for public spending include research, innovation and rural infrastructure, together with social protection and backstopping to ensure improved nutrition.

Agricultural productivity growth will increase food availability and benefit consumers to the extent that domestic prices are lower than they would otherwise be. Productivity gains imply lower unit costs and also translate into higher incomes for innovating farmers. But the resulting decline in prices dissipates some of these gains. Farmers who fail to innovate will only experience the price decline and thus face adjustment pressure. For that reason, broad-based development is needed to ensure that less competitive farmers are pulled, rather than pushed, out of farming into more remunerative activities.
Trade will have an increasingly important role to play in ensuring global food security. Developed and major emerging economies in particular need to avoid policies that distort world markets, making them a less reliable source of food supplies. Multilateral action to ensure that national policies do not generate a new range of spillovers that compromise food security in poor countries has been elusive thus far but remains a priority for early action.

Climate change and the degradation of land, water and biodiversity resources are expected to require changes in production systems. Policies at the national level need to be aligned towards sustainable productivity objectives. An essential step is to remove agricultural policy incentives to market-distorting environmentally harmful practices, such as subsidies to energy and agricultural inputs. More efforts are needed in the areas of agricultural R&D, technology development, and skills. Environmental policies are also required to ensure well-defined property rights for natural resources and to tackle economy-wide environmental challenges. Given the local specificity of the challenges, targeted agri-environmental policies have a role to play to effectively redress negative environmental impacts and to ensure a better management of resources.

Fisheries provide jobs and nutrition to hundreds of millions of people worldwide, especially in poor coastal areas. Overfishing threatens the long-term health of fisheries and ultimately harms fishery-dependent communities. Modern management tools such as individual fishing quotas help to control overfishing and improve the prospects of the sector, but their adoption has been slow. Part of the problem is the lack of resources in many countries for the required monitoring, control and surveillance, but resistance to changing traditional approaches has also played a role.

The benefits of reform of fisheries policies are clear. Controlling harvest to achieve maximum sustainable yield is estimated to enable the sector to produce an additional USD 50 billion per year or more in profits. Recovering fish stocks can lead to eventually harvesting nearly 20% more fish than is possible at current stock levels.
Many people assume that the majority of problems occur on the high seas, where enforcement is weak and illegal fishing is common. But most fishing occurs in domestic exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and most overfishing is done legally, resulting from poorly set quotas or ineffective effort control regulations. Improvements in domestic fisheries management are where the biggest gains are to be made.

One part of the solution is reducing policy supports that increase fishing effort and maintain excess capital and labour in the fishing sector. In many cases, improved management can remove the need for supports as profits and prospects in the sector improve. For fisheries and aquaculture, sustainable management and protection of marine ecosystems means more production, higher quality and more diversity of food choices. It offers a clear win-win-win solution for producers, consumers and the environment. Success does not require new technologies or leaps in productivity, just a commitment on the part of governments to use sound science and proven management techniques to maximise the biological productivity of the resource.

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