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G20 Ministerial Meeting

Agricultural and food topics merit key role

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Bonn, 6 May 2019. Ahead of the G20 summit in Japan in June, the agriculture ministers are this year once again kicking off the G20 series of ministerial meetings. Nevertheless, agriculture and food security have only recently become important topics in international policy-making.

In the 1990s and 2000s, when global agricultural market prices were low, they were rather niche issues, seen as local development problems and inhibiting factors in international trade agreements. If they were ever seen as priority areas, then only in development cooperation, yet even there the two topics often had a difficult time. The proportion of total international official development assistance accounted for by agriculture fell from between 15 and 20 percent in the 1980s to less than 5 percent by the late 1990s.

Interest only shifted significantly during the 2007/2008 agricultural price crisis. The doubling and tripling of many international food prices in a short space of time led to a global increase in poverty and hunger and to fears of an international food shortage. While the global food situation was not much better before the crisis, it was the urban poor and middle-income classes rather than the rural population who suffered this time. Many developing countries experienced political unrest. This served to place agricultural and nutritional topics back on the international agenda. At their 2009 summit in L'Aquila, Italy, the G8 pledged to significantly increase their assistance for agricultural and food security topics. These issues were then addressed by the G20 in 2011, though initially not followed up further after 2012. The G20's permanent working group on agriculture has only been in place since 2015.

The agenda of the Agriculture Ministers' Meeting in Niigata, Japan on 11 and 12 May now includes old and new topics. The AMIS, the first agricultural topic addressed by the G20 in 2011, requires ongoing finance. It is necessary to drive the digitalisation of the agricultural sector. Raised by China in 2016, this issue was also a focal area of Germany's G20 Presidency, along with the plans for ending the use of antibiotics in feed to promote animal growth, which every country is due to submit by 2020. Having already addressed the topics of water in 2017 and soil in 2018, the G20 will this year also turn its attention to agricultural value chains and the food system as a whole. It is expected that this will also see the group discuss other environmental issues in agriculture such as biodiversity and its contribution to climate change.

The challenges facing today's agricultural industry are highly diverse. The sector consumes between 70 and 80 percent or so of the world's water. As a result, it dominates competition with other sectors of human water consumption (drinking water, industry) and aquatic ecosystems, which, in periods of drought especially, are often left with virtually no water. Depending on the method of

calculation and allocation used, for instance, whether and how deforestation and afforestation, food processing and consumption/waste are attributed to the sector, agriculture accounts for some 10 to 30 percent of greenhouse gas emissions. For the most part, the risk to planetary biodiversity stems from agricultural expansion and intensification. A considerable proportion of the world's plastic packaging and resulting environmental pollution also originate with the food sector. Additionally, the food system is considered one of the main factors in illnesses such as malnutrition and modern lifestyle diseases such as obesity and diabetes.

However, agriculture is not only virtually by definition an intervention in the natural environment, using, consuming and destroying natural resources; it is also the source of almost all human food supplies, of much of the income of impoverished households in poor countries and, frequently, of biodiversity itself. It is therefore unhelpful to simply demonise the sector. While wealthy industrialised nations certainly can and must do more in their agricultural practices to protect the environment and the climate, the situation for smallholders in poor countries is in the first instance one of pure survival and the meeting of basic needs. There is often little room for longer term considerations as to how these individuals can maintain their own livelihoods and protect the environment.

If we are to find viable solutions, then we need to stop having agricultural debates about these farmers and start debating the issues with them. Only by working together will we be able to identify efficient and realistic strategies. The limited capacity of the state in developing countries to enforce policies in rural areas essentially precludes regulations that are not in farmers' interests. In order to protect the natural world in these nations, environmentally friendly policies must benefit farmers.

This is why the G20 must address the topics of agriculture and food security in the context of the widely differing food and agricultural issues facing its members. The group can also serve as a platform for learning from the mistakes of past agricultural strategies in industrialised nations. The agricultural sector needs to coordinate activities closely with other policy areas. In wealthier nations this tends to involve environmental and health issues, while in developing countries it is frequently necessary to consult with economic and social affairs ministries. What we require is a systemic perspective which considers the food chain as a whole, from production and processing to consumption and waste management, rather than just the agricultural sector.