

## ‘Climate-Smart Agriculture’: the Emperor’s new clothes?

Today we find ourselves facing converging food and climate challenges of an unprecedented scale. While on the one hand we live in a world in which nearly 805 million people are suffering from chronic hunger;<sup>[1]</sup> this situation is set to be exacerbated by climate change, which poses a major threat to food security: the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicts that food insecurity could increase by between 15–40 percent by the year 2050.<sup>[2]</sup> Agriculture and the food system have a unique and complex role to play within this context. Firstly, as a source of food and nutrition security, they serve as a lifeline to millions, yet despite decades of increased production, millions of people remain without access to adequate food. Secondly, they are also major contributors to the causes of climate change, and therefore an integral part of the problem driving food insecurity. Thirdly, agriculture is a sector that is immensely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, and in this context it is crucial that small-scale food producers are enabled to build farming practices that make them more resilient to such changes. To achieve food security for everybody it is therefore imperative that global agriculture and the food system are reformed in such a way that they:



- are more resilient to the impacts of climate change (known as ‘adaptation’) and other shocks and crises (such as food price volatility, the ongoing economic crisis, and depletion of natural resources)
- contribute less to global climate change (known as ‘mitigation’)
- ensure the right to food of people through appropriate levels of production as well as through distribution and equitable access.

This unique role of agriculture presents a whole host of challenges which are technical, environmental, social, and economic in nature, and all relevant stakeholders – policy makers, academics, civil society, and scientists among them – grapple with ensuring food security in a climate-constrained world. Extensive research and debate have been increasingly emerging around this theme of late, and within this context the concept of ‘climate-smart agriculture’ (CSA) – a term first coined in 2009 and subsequently developed in 2010 by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (UN) – has surfaced as a “new conceptual framework that aims to simultaneously address”<sup>[3]</sup> these interlinked challenges of food security and climate change.

As defined by the FAO, ‘climate-smart agriculture’ “sustainably increases productivity, resilience (adaptation), reduces/removes greenhouse gases (mitigation) while enhancing the achievement of national food security and development goals.” However, CIDSE perceives some significant weaknesses in terms of content, particularly regarding:

- the absence of criteria to distinguish models which are sustainable from those which are not, and the degree of emphasis on productivity at the expense of the broader context and set of issues at stake;
- the absence of the concept of the right to food;
- the somewhat limited conception of resilience which does not challenge the structures that made people vulnerable in the first place, and
- the misplaced focus on climate change mitigation while focusing on small-scale farmers, and the failure to recognise the contribution of specific models and historical responsibilities of developed countries regarding greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions that result from such models.

CIDSE believes that as long as a lack of clarity around the concept prevails, the term ‘climate smart’ will continue to be misleading, offering leeway for socially and environmentally detrimental practices.

The Global Alliance on Climate Smart Agriculture (hereafter “the Alliance”) has emerged as a voluntary initiative, in parallel to and independent of pre-existing global institutions and agreements governing the world’s response to food insecurity and climate change. This approach in itself undermines the relevance, legitimacy and any potential impact posed by the initiative from the outset. Bodies such as the World Committee on Food Security (CFS) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), amongst others, are the appropriate and legitimate fora for tackling the challenges of food insecurity and climate change whilst prompting political action to keep global temperature increase below 2 degrees Celsius. The Alliance established a roadmap during the third Global Conference on Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Security and Climate

Change<sup>[vi]</sup> (held in 2013 in South Africa), which includes the launch of the Alliance during the UN Ban Ki-moon Climate Summit in September 2014.

While the efforts of the Alliance might be regarded by some as the international community's first attempt at a systemic approach towards the problems in question, bringing policy issues pertinent to agriculture, food security, climate change and sustainable development all together under one umbrella, CIDSE believes that the concept of 'climate-smart agriculture' being promoted by the Alliance is a missed opportunity for the following reasons:

- The Alliance does not question the structural causes of the problems it claims to address
- The concept of CSA is so broad that it “encompasses virtually any agricultural practice,”<sup>[vi]</sup> even potentially unsustainable ones which can compromise the future resilience of communities
- The Alliance may create confusion and further fragment food security policies and risks to weakening recognised governance spaces
- The Alliance lacks transparency, a governance structure, and social and environmental safeguards



As a result, the Alliance risks diverting attention away from the real changes needed, leading to a misplaced emphasis on building an enabling environment for international investments, developing markets and increasing the commodification of nature and agriculture, in addition to promoting technological fixes and increasing regional specialisation and international trade. These approaches do not bring anything new to the public debate on food and agriculture; they also fail to meet the high standards implied by the Alliance as outlined in its Global Alliance for Climate-Smart Agriculture Framework Document (hereafter referred to as the “Framework Document”). The current vagueness of the concept and the many questions still pending regarding the Alliance's governance and vision give leeway for the justification – via a simple and superficial “climate-smart” label – of a whole plethora of projects, alliances and initiatives which have no adequate accountability and monitoring mechanisms in place to ensure legitimacy, coherence and transparency of their proposed approaches.

CIDSE considers that the current concept of 'climate-smart agriculture' being promoted by the Alliance is gravely flawed and threatens to open a veritable Pandora's box of social and environmental risks and detrimental impacts. CIDSE calls upon policy makers to support a real transition towards agroecology – the only approach, science and set of practices which truly addresses the three pillars in which 'climate-smart agriculture' is centred – and to foster more socially and environmentally sustainable food systems at global level by:

- Implementing a rights-based approach
- Developing food democracy
- Strengthening local and regional food systems
- Helping citizens to improve their dietary habits, partly through the consumption of local and seasonal products
- Strengthening small-scale farming systems to support local economic development
- Scaling-up agroecology

As our paper intends to demonstrate, there are many good policies, frameworks, guidelines, models and alternatives to overcome hunger in the face of climate change which already exist and which could shape the way our food systems looks like, both in the global North and South. Yet, they lack implementation, and this is where action is needed. CIDSE invites policy makers and other stakeholders engaged in the fight against hunger to elaborate on these aforementioned approaches in order to overcome the challenges posed by climate change and to secure the human right of all people to feed themselves in dignity.

<sup>[i]</sup>IFAD, WFP, FAO, The State of Food Insecurity in the World, Executive Summary, 2014, <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4037e.pdf>

<sup>[ii]</sup> IPCC WGII AR5, Chapter 7: Food Security and Food Production Systems, 2014, [http://ipcc-wg2.gov/AR5/images/uploads/WGIIAR5-Chap7\\_FGDall.pdf](http://ipcc-wg2.gov/AR5/images/uploads/WGIIAR5-Chap7_FGDall.pdf)

<sup>[iii]</sup>FAO, Climate-Smart Agriculture, <http://www.fao.org/3/a-mk541e/mk541e01.pdf>

<sup>[iv]</sup> Road Map for the Alliance on Climate-Smart Agriculture, 2013 <http://afconference.agric.za/downloads/pr/Press%20release%205%20-%2005%20December%202013.pdf>

<sup>[v]</sup>Neufeldt et al., Beyond climate-smart agriculture: toward safe operating spaces for global food systems, *Agriculture & Food Security* 2013, <http://www.agricultureandfoodsecurity.com/content/2/1/12>

Contacts:  
**François Delvaux**, CIDSE  
delvaux@cidse.org  
**Meera Ghani**, CIDSE  
ghani@cidse.org