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Food and Agriculture
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Продовольственная и
сельскохозяйственная организация
Объединенных Наций

Organización de las
Naciones Unidas para la
Alimentación y la Agricultura

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PROGRAMME COMMITTEE

Hundred and Thirty-eighth Session

Rome, 20-24 May 2024

Update on the global civil society organizations (CSOs) dialogue and other mechanisms of engagement

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This document presents the significant progress FAO has made in strengthening its engagements with civil society organizations (CSOs), Indigenous Peoples, parliamentarians, family farmers' organizations and other stakeholders. Through inclusive and innovative approaches, FAO has expanded its engagements and partnerships to address the complex and evolving challenges in achieving food security and nutrition.
- FAO has made continuous efforts in fostering dialogues with CSOs through various platforms, including global informal dialogues and online consultations. Recommendations from these dialogues include enhancing information dissemination and integrating CSO involvement in project development and formulation of Country Programming Frameworks (CPFs).
- There is a pressing need to modernize accreditation procedures and provide clearer guidelines for international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) to participate in FAO's Governing and Statutory Bodies. A substantial overhaul of FAO's internal procedures and its relationships with INGOs holding formal status is currently underway, which aims to enhance transparency and assess the significance of FAO's engagements with these organizations. The anticipated outcome is to broaden and deepen FAO's engagements with CSOs, rendering them more strategic, transformative and aligned with programmatic goals.
- Moreover, the World Food Forum (WFF) is actively pursuing new alliances with various agrifood stakeholders to bolster collaboration. By connecting pertinent civil society actors across different WFF initiatives, FAO can provide a platform for civil society to contribute their perspectives in shaping the trajectory of sustainable agrifood systems.
- FAO's concerted efforts to strengthen partnerships with diverse stakeholders underscore its commitment to addressing the multifaceted challenges of food insecurity. By fostering inclusive engagements and transparent relationships with CSOs, INGOs and other key stakeholders, FAO is positioned to drive impactful change and progress towards achieving the transformation of agrifood systems.

GUIDANCE SOUGHT FROM THE PROGRAMME COMMITTEE

- The Programme Committee is invited to review the content of the document and provide guidance as deemed appropriate.

Draft Advice

The Committee:

- **recognized and appreciated the substantial progress made in strengthening engagements with civil society organizations (CSOs), as well as other major stakeholders such as Indigenous Peoples, parliamentarians and family farmers' organizations in an inclusive manner;**
- **welcomed the update on FAO's efforts to revamp the accreditation procedures for international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) holding formal status with FAO, and provide clearer guidelines regarding their participation in meetings of FAO Governing and Statutory Bodies.**

I. Introduction

1. FAO has a long history of collaborating with non-state stakeholders, particularly CSOs, to fulfil its mandate of ensuring food security and nutrition and improving the livelihoods of the world's most vulnerable populations, thereby ensuring no one is left behind. In 2013, FAO Members adopted the Strategy for Partnerships with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)¹ (hereafter referred to as “the Strategy”), recognizing the critical role of CSOs as valuable allies in the fight against hunger and malnutrition. CSOs bring technical expertise; represent food-insecure, land-dispossessed, and hungry communities; and have a significant presence in the field. The FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31 emphasizes the importance of reinvigorating transformative and expanded partnerships as key vehicles to address complex challenges.

2. The Evaluation of FAO's Strategy for Partnerships with Civil Society Organizations,² (hereafter referred to as “the Evaluation”) conducted in 2020 underscored the legitimacy of the Strategy as a comprehensive framework guiding FAO's engagement with CSOs. It facilitates collaboration and demand-based partnerships based on shared value, equality, trust, inclusion and mutual benefits. As of February 2024, FAO maintains 35 active formal partnerships with CSOs, with an additional 12 partnership pipelines in various stages of negotiation. These figures are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Status of the CSO partnership	
Active	35
Pipeline	12
Total	47
Region that the CSO partner is from	
Africa	5
Asia and the Pacific	5
Europe and Central Asia	25
Latin America and the Caribbean	3
Near East and North Africa	1
North America	8
Total	47
Type of CSO	
Member-based organization	19
NGO	23
Social movement	5
Total	47

Source: PSU database

3. However, the extent of FAO's engagements with CSOs, particularly at country level, goes beyond the mere quantity of formal partnerships, as illustrated in sections II and III, with a diversity of engagement modalities. The Evaluation also noted that most CSO collaborations at country level are driven by specific project needs, often through service delivery arrangements. Annually, FAO engages with CSOs through numerous Letters of Agreement and Operational Partner Agreements for

¹ FAO. 2013. *FAO Strategy for Partnerships with Civil Society Organizations*. Rome, Italy. <https://www.fao.org/3/i3443e/i3443e.pdf>

² FAO. 2020. *Evaluation of the FAO Strategy for Partnerships with Civil Society Organizations*. Thematic Evaluation Series, 10/2020. Rome, Italy. <http://www.fao.org/3/cb1636en/cb1636en.pdf>

the implementation of its programmes and projects, and CSOs are commonly referred to as implementing partners or service providers.

4. At the 134th Session of the Programme Committee in 2022, FAO provided an update on the follow-up actions taken based on the Evaluation.³ The Committee commended progress made in implementing the Evaluation's recommendations and looked forward to future updates on the progress of a global CSO dialogue for strategic exchange among a wide range of civil society actors and FAO.

5. This document presents the advancements in dialogues with CSOs and other engagement mechanisms. FAO has employed various platforms to facilitate dialogue with CSOs, aiming to foster more strategic engagement and maximize the expertise offered by CSOs. Reflecting the breadth and diversity of CSOs and other major stakeholders, updates are also provided on engagement with Indigenous Peoples, parliamentarians and family farmers' organizations within the framework of the United Nations Decade of Family Farming 2019–2028 (UNDF).

II. CSO dialogues

A. Global informal dialogue

6. In June 2023, FAO organized a two-day informal dialogue with CSOs aimed at exploring innovative approaches for strategic engagement beyond current practices. The discussions focused on identifying sustainable and inclusive engagement mechanisms to harness the diverse expertise and characteristics of CSOs.

7. The event brought together 26 representatives from various constituencies and geographic regions, alongside 26 FAO participants from headquarters and all five FAO Regions. Held in person at FAO headquarters, attendees shared best practices and challenges encountered in their engagements with FAO at national, regional and global levels. Additionally, participants collaboratively brainstormed on potential strategies to enhance FAO-CSO engagement and engaged in dialogue with the FAO Director-General.

8. The structured involvement of CSOs in FAO processes, notably through regional CSO consultations held during the FAO Regional Conferences, was highlighted as a particularly successful model of CSO engagement at regional level. Many participants expressed a desire to expand successful models of CSO engagement. Additional positive examples of inclusive FAO-CSO engagement were also shared, including experiences with specific multistakeholder mechanisms such as the Committee on World Food Security (CFS). Participants commended FAO's inclusive efforts in engaging CSOs in major global and regional advocacy initiatives, such as the UNDF.

9. Among the challenges raised by CSOs, a prominent issue is the limited channels of communication, particularly with FAO Country Offices. This limitation could stem from factors such as understaffing or insufficient capacity within FAO Country Offices as well as CSOs, or the necessity for more comprehensive stakeholder analyses to identify potential partners. There is a noted gap between the Strategy and its implementation at the decentralized level. Capacity development is essential in order for FAO personnel at decentralized levels to effectively engage with CSOs as outlined in FAO policy documents. CSO participants also advocated for the systematic integration of CSO involvement at all stages of project implementation and in the formulation of Country Programming Frameworks (CPFs), where their voices can contribute to setting country priorities. Other key challenges cited were the financial constraints CSOs face, which hinder their participation in FAO processes and limit the scope of activities they can undertake within projects.

10. Proposed solutions include enhancing the dissemination of information and raising awareness on the various CSO mechanisms, networks and working groups related to FAO's work. This, coupled with periodic stakeholder mappings through a live actor network map tool, would enable FAO to identify civil society actors engaged in specific sectors and potential partnership opportunities, while

³ [PC 134/9](#)

also facilitating networking between CSOs. Early involvement of civil society in global multistakeholder policy dialogue processes was suggested as another solution, drawing on successful past engagements such as the development of the *Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests* (VGGT) and the *Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication* (SSF Guidelines).

11. A highlight of the dialogue was the session between CSOs and the FAO Director-General, which underscored the importance of reinvigorating CSO engagement with FAO. The Director-General emphasized the centrality of science and innovation in the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31 and highlighted key opportunities for engagement, particularly within the context of the World Food Forum (WFF), a flagship platform that welcomes participation from civil society. The WFF aims to raise awareness and encourages engagement and advocacy to play an active role in agrifood systems transformation.

12. The two-day informal dialogue served as an initial step in an ongoing conversation on strengthening engagement between FAO and CSOs. Numerous ideas and recommendations were proposed for consideration. To ensure broader representation, FAO organized an online consultation following the two-day meeting, aiming to incorporate additional voices from diverse regions and constituencies.

B. Online consultation “How can FAO and Civil Society Organizations engage more effectively?”

13. Following the global informal dialogue, FAO organized an online consultation entitled “How can FAO and Civil Society Organizations engage more effectively?” This consultation, held on the FAO Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) platform from September to October 2023⁴, welcomed contributions from any interested parties. Its goal was to gather diverse ideas and insights on enhancing collaboration between FAO and CSOs, addressing both opportunities and challenges for more impactful engagement.

14. The online consultation underscored the importance of continuing and strengthening collaboration between FAO and CSOs at global level. It was noted that this collaboration should focus on technical cooperation, sharing best practices and raising awareness to achieve tangible outcomes on the ground. Respondents emphasized the need to recognize contextual nuances, acknowledging that tailored strategies are essential in transforming agrifood systems. At national level, there were calls for improved coordination and synergy between various stakeholders to foster meaningful and transformative engagement.

15. When discussing how to collectively work towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) without leaving anyone behind, CSOs stressed the importance of FAO engaging with grassroots organizations in a structured manner. They proposed several concrete actions at different levels, including ensuring CSO representation in relevant committees, task forces and working groups; formalizing more inclusive partnerships with CSOs; and granting consultative status to non-governmental organizations.

16. CSOs perceive themselves as agents of change, uniquely positioned in society to bridge the gap between farmers and policymakers. Their grassroots presence enables them to identify the most pressing issues faced by farmers and marginalized small-scale producers on the ground.

⁴ FAO. 2023. *Consultation – How can FAO and Civil Society Organizations engage better?. Rome.* <https://www.fao.org/fsnforum/consultation/how-can-fao-and-civil-society-organizations-engage-better>

17. The online consultation concluded successfully, facilitating the sharing of good practices and innovative ideas for future progress. A synthesis report, encapsulating the collected inputs, is available on the FSN Forum.⁵

C. Regional Civil Society consultations

18. Regional Civil Society Consultations have evolved as an integral component of the FAO Conference process since their inception in 2012 and subsequent institutionalization since 2014 in Africa and Asia and the Pacific regions. These consultations are convened alongside FAO Regional Conferences to ensure broader participation and support for FAO policy discussions and decision-making at regional level. Organized autonomously by and for civil society actors in the respective regions ahead of the FAO Regional Conferences, Regional Civil Society Consultations serve as a platform to bring together CSOs, including food producers' associations, representing pertinent constituencies and countries. The aim is to deliberate on key regional topics and conference agenda items. Their statements,⁶ linked to FAO's programme priorities in the regions, have contributed to the debate for FAO Members' decision-making regarding regional priorities.

19. As of March 2024, four regional CSO consultations were conducted, with participation of a total of 619 CSOs representatives from 62 countries.⁷ It is noteworthy to emphasize that, when consultations took place in the same country as the Regional Conference, support from the Regional Conference's host government greatly facilitated the successful execution of the consultations and enabled the meaningful participation of CSOs in the Regional Conference as observers.

III. Other major stakeholders and the mechanism of engagements

20. Through deliberate efforts to foster a culture of partnerships aimed at achieving outcomes beyond that which FAO can accomplish alone, FAO's interactions with non-state stakeholders have expanded and diversified considerably. FAO actively engages with a broad spectrum of non-state stakeholders, incorporating their insights, experiences and expertise into discussions on key issues such as agrifood systems transformation and gender equality. Three illustrative mechanisms of engagement with different segments of society are outlined below.

D. Indigenous Peoples

21. Collaborative efforts between FAO, the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) and various stakeholders have significantly advanced the cause of Indigenous Peoples and their crucial role in addressing the triple crisis of biodiversity loss, climate change and food security. In 2023, the biennial UN Global Indigenous Youth Forum (UNGIYF) brought together 186 Indigenous youth from seven socio-cultural regions to engage with diverse stakeholders. The resulting Rome Declaration on Safeguarding Future Generations in times of Food, Social, and Ecological Crisis was pre-shared during the 51st Session of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS51) in October 2023 and presented at the 28th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC COP28), showcasing the tangible outcomes of the Forum.

⁵ FAO. 2023. *Synthesis Report on e-consultation: How can FAO and Civil Society Organizations engage better?* Rome, Italy. <https://www.fao.org/fsnforum/resources/summaries-consultations/synthesis-report-e-consultation-how-can-fao-and-civil-society>

⁶ CSOs statements from the Regional Conferences held in 2022 are available from the websites of all Regional Conferences. Regional Conference for the Near East (NERC) CSO statement <https://www.fao.org/3/ni269en/ni269en.pdf>; Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific (APRC) CSO statement <https://www.fao.org/3/ni500en/ni500en.pdf>; Regional Conference for Latin America and the Caribbean (LARC) CSO statement <https://www.fao.org/3/ni689en/ni689en.pdf>; Regional Conference for Africa (ARC) CSO statement <https://www.fao.org/3/cc0060en/cc0060en.pdf>; Regional Conference for Europe (ERC) CSO statement <https://www.fao.org/3/ni221en/ni221en.pdf>.

⁷ This is the aggregated number from four regional CSO consultations to date (as of March 2024) from ARC, APRC, NERC and LARC.

22. In March 2023, the Global-Hub on Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems, with FAO as Secretariat, organized an in-person meeting attended by over 80 Indigenous and non-Indigenous experts from various regions and organizations. This collaborative effort contributed to drafting and finalizing two Wiphala papers and editing standards of practice on ecosystem restoration.

23. The Coalition on Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems has continued to gain momentum, expanding to include several Indigenous Peoples' organizations, 14 countries, and six UN organizations. The Coalition successfully advocated for the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples' Food and Knowledge Systems in the programme of work of the World Committee on Food Security (CFS). Concurrently, the Rome Group of Friends of Indigenous Peoples expanded under Mexico's chairpersonship, now comprising 42 FAO Members who regularly convene to discuss Indigenous Peoples' issues.

E. Parliamentarians

24. Strategic engagement with parliamentarians continues to be pivotal in ensuring that food security and nutrition remain top priorities on political and legislative agendas. In June 2023, FAO, in collaboration with the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation and the Government of the Republic of Chile, organized the Second Global Parliamentary Summit against Hunger and Malnutrition. Approximately 200 parliamentarians from 64 countries attended this Summit, which concluded with the adoption of the first Global Parliamentary Pact against Hunger and Malnutrition. This Pact, although legally non-binding, serves as a significant political declaration aimed at encouraging and promoting joint action among the world's parliaments. It marks a historic milestone in the global effort to eradicate hunger and achieve food security for all, as the first global parliamentary pact focused on progressively realizing the right to adequate food and transforming agrifood systems.

25. FAO has expanded its collaboration with parliamentarians through existing parliamentary mechanisms at regional, subregional and national levels, while also promoting and institutionalizing new parliamentary alliances and networks. FAO has engaged with over 55 parliamentary alliances, and capacity-building sessions targeting parliamentarians have been conducted in various countries, along with numerous high-level events and policy dialogues.

26. FAO has further deepened its collaboration with parliamentarians by advocating for long-term sustainability approaches aimed at integrating food security and nutrition in national development plans, policies and legislation. Over 80 laws related to food security and nutrition have been promoted at regional, subregional and national levels. Notable among these is the Pan-African Parliament (PAP) Model Law on Food and Nutrition Security.

27. Additionally, FAO provided technical support to the Latin American and Caribbean Parliament (Parlatino) in drafting a proposal for a Model Law on Agroecology. This involved organizing public consultations with parliamentarians, CSOs, social movements and international organizations across each Subregion of Latin America and the Caribbean.

F. Family farmers' organizations under the UNDFP

28. FAO actively promotes inclusive policy dialogue by engaging relevant stakeholders under the UNDFP and its Global Action Plan. This is primarily achieved through the establishment and reinforcement of multistakeholder platforms designed to foster policy dialogue on family farming, which serve as the chief implementation mechanism of the UNDFP at national level. To date, at least 80 intersectoral coordination mechanisms, including 45 national committees for family farming and other multi-stakeholder platforms, have been established or strengthened to ensure coherence in objectives and targets. These efforts have involved more than 2 625 relevant actors, including 1 853 family farmers' organizations and federations, as well as non-governmental organizations, public institutions, and academic and research institutions.

29. By facilitating inclusive policy dialogue and enhancing the capacities of these multistakeholder platforms, FAO has contributed to the development and approval of 13 National

Action Plans for Family Farming (NAPs) and three Regional Action Plans. This has provided 40 countries with a relevant policy framework and spurred policy changes in 77 countries.

30. Additionally, 180 women-led organizations and women from family farmers' organizations from 54 countries in Africa, Asia and the Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean have been consulted to develop a coordinated approach for the effective mainstreaming of gender equality in UNDIFF activities at global and national levels.

G. Science and technology communities

31. FAO is expanding partnerships with other major stakeholders. The adoption of the FAO Science and Innovation Strategy in 2022 renewed commitments to establishing transformative partnerships with research organizations from national to international levels. This includes international and regional research consortia; relevant associations, networks, programmes, and partnerships; universities; academies of science; and professional associations, extensions and advisory organizations. The establishment of the FAO Science and Innovation Forum, alongside the WFF, serves as a flagship event to engage with science and technology communities, demonstrating FAO's dedication to leveraging scientific advancements in addressing global food security challenges.

IV. INGOs with formal status

32. The Basic Texts of FAO underscore the importance of collaborating with international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) to fulfil FAO's mandate, aiming to gather expert input and represent diverse public opinions. These texts establish consultation arrangements, outline eligibility criteria, rights and obligations for INGOs, and establish procedures for status withdrawal.⁸

33. FAO recognizes three formal status categories for INGOs: consultative, specialized consultative, and liaison. Presently, 128 INGOs hold formal status with FAO, comprising nine with consultative status; 43 with specialized consultative status; and 76 with liaison status.⁹ While this framework provides a solid foundation for FAO's engagement with INGOs, its full potential remains underutilized in advancing the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31 and achieving food security.

34. The 174th Session of the FAO Council¹⁰ in December 2023 welcomed principles to guide the implementation of participation of INGOs, including those classified as private sector, in FAO Governing and Statutory Bodies. Some INGOs with specialized consultative status and liaison status fall into the private sector category, as defined in the FAO Strategy for Engagement with the Private Sector 2021-2025.¹¹ Currently, 16.4 percent of the 128 INGOs with formal status at FAO represent private sector interests. These principles emphasize that INGOs, as observers, cannot partake in negotiations and decision-making processes. Their participation must align with FAO Basic Texts in a transparent manner. Furthermore, INGOs may be given the possibility to make statements in meetings and participation should be inclusive, flexible, and regionally balanced. The FAO Council also requested proposals for practical modalities for INGO participation and anticipated updates on the progress of private sector observer participation in FAO Governing Bodies' Sessions.¹²

35. Following a survey of FAO's Governing and Statutory Bodies on their approach to observer participation, "it was revealed that each body implements different approaches under the umbrella of the Basic Texts", as reported to the 174th Session of the FAO Council.¹³ This encompasses important issues such as speaking rights, observer number limits, regional balance, accreditation frequency,

⁸ Section M, Volume II of the Basic Texts

⁹ The full INGO list can be accessible from FAO's partnership site: <https://www.fao.org/partnerships/civil-society/documents/document/en/c/426553/>

¹⁰ [CL174/REP](#)

¹¹ For instance, International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) is one of the 9 INGOs with Consultative Status. Crop Life International has a Specialised Consultative Status. These entities are treated as private sector under the current Private Sector Strategy. For the full list: <https://www.fao.org/partnerships/civil-society/documents/document/en/c/426553/>.

¹² [CL174/REP](#)

¹³ [CL174/INF/9](#) paragraph 4.

timeframes and processes. To ensure consistency in the application of rules across these committees, the development of a Standard Operating Procedure regarding the participation of INGO observers in Governing and Statutory Body meetings is being undertaken, to ensure coherent implementation in line with the FAO Basic Texts and guidance from the FAO Council, and enhance transparency and fairness in the relationship with INGOs holding formal status.

36. There is also a notable need for modernization in the application processes and procedures for entities seeking accreditation with FAO. As part of these modernization efforts, FAO is currently developing an online accreditation system, which aims to provide a simple, straightforward, and resource-efficient process by leveraging existing Customer Relationship Management (CRM) structures within FAO. Drawing lessons from the practices of other UN entities, the revamped procedures for consultative status applications, accreditation, and exercising the privileges and obligations associated with holding status, including the participation of INGO observers in Governing and Statutory Bodies, will be clearly defined and easily accessible to all parties.

37. By undertaking a significant overhaul of internal procedures and its relationship with INGOs, FAO stands to achieve several substantial benefits:

- i. enhanced transparency in the accreditation process;
- ii. greater clarity for Members regarding the status of engagement with INGOs, including those classified as private sector entities;
- iii. improved understanding of the extent of engagement with INGOs across various Governing and Statutory Bodies; and
- iv. expanded engagement opportunities and networking with INGOs, guided by transparent rules and procedures.

V. Way Forward

38. In conclusion, FAO has demonstrated significant progress in strengthening its engagements with CSOs, Indigenous Peoples, parliamentarians and other stakeholders in an inclusive manner in 2023. Through innovative approaches, FAO has expanded its engagements and partnerships to address the complex and evolving challenges in achieving food security.

39. FAO is undertaking a major overhaul of internal procedures and relationships with INGOs holding formal status, aiming to enhance transparency and monitor the value of engagement with these organizations. This overhaul is expected to further expand the breadth and depth of engagement with CSOs and make them more strategic, transformative and programmatic.

40. FAO is committed to enhancing the capacity of its Decentralized Offices to collaborate with CSOs through capacity development initiatives. A live actor network map tool is one such capacity development initiative. The stakeholder maps will facilitate informed decision-making, identify new CSOs of strategic importance at different levels and promote transformative partnerships to foster programmatic linkages and pinpoint areas for potential collaboration, to ensure more impactful engagement.

41. FAO has recently become a part of the United Nations Partner Portal (UNPP), which strengthens its ability to identify and assess CSOs at local and national levels. Leveraging operational presence and sector-specific expertise of CSOs, the UNPP is expected to streamline the process of identifying CSO partners, empowering Decentralized Offices to swiftly mobilize humanitarian and development programmes and projects.

42. At global level, the WFF is actively pursuing new alliances with various agrifood stakeholders to bolster collaboration. By connecting pertinent civil society actors across WFF initiatives, FAO can provide a platform for civil society to contribute their perspectives in shaping the trajectory of sustainable agrifood systems.

43. In summary, FAO's concerted efforts to strengthen partnerships with diverse stakeholders, embrace innovation and reinforce scientific collaboration underscore its commitment to tackling the multifaceted challenges of food insecurity. By fostering inclusive engagements and transparent

relationships with CSOs, INGOs, research organizations and other key stakeholders, FAO is positioned to drive impactful change and progress towards achieving the transformation of agrifood systems.