

## Inter-academic controversy on Food and Population - Paris 2024 SUMMARY OF WORK

At its general meeting on 3 October 2023, the Inter-Academy Development Group (GID) proposed to organise a first controversy, an original approach to discussion and exchange between academics based on contradictory proposals on specific topics.

It was therefore decided to prepare an initial controversy on the major theme of « Food and Population » in several stages. A framework note and a questionnaire structured around 38 themes were drawn up and sent to around thirty academic members of the GID. The responses were analysed and summarised. A face-to-face symposium was then organised on 30 May 2024 at the French Academy of Agriculture in Paris, bringing together 22 academics from 10 countries around the Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Africa (Algeria, Benin, Ivory Coast, France, Greece, Italy, Lebanon, Madagascar, Senegal and Turkey).

All these exchanges were very intense and varied, with points of view and positions often differing. This note summarises both the responses to the questionnaire and the discussions at the conference on 30 May.

The responses to the questionnaire amounted to 174 very interesting typed pages, and the colloquium discussions lasted over 8 hours on 30 May.

From all these contributions from these countries, illustrating different realities but also different ways of reporting on them, it is interesting and significant to identify and distinguish the points on which there was real convergence between the participants, and those which gave rise to real divergence.

### Points of convergence:

- Importance of the Food and Population theme:

The responses from all the academics provide an overview of the issues that concern us and make the link between food and population a central issue for the future of our societies, given the interlocking crises concerning the environment, climate, health and economic, social and political dynamics.

- Putting food sovereignty back on the agenda:

This follows on from the health and security crises that are creating uncertainty on the world market. In recent decades, the issues have tended to focus on supply and increasing production, in a context of demographic transition, price controls, speculation and hyper-volatility.

The issue of sovereignty emerged in the 1990s, promoted by La Via Campesina, which brought together farmers from many countries and civil society organisations, in response to the undesirable consequences of globalisation. The participating academics all confirmed that food sovereignty is a priority in their countries.

- Importance of water security:

The great dependence of agricultural production on water resources was underlined by all the academics, some of whom even spoke of « water sovereignty ». This is an extremely sensitive issue around the Mediterranean: climate change is forcing all countries to manage their resources more rigorously and innovatively, and to promote crops that require less water.

- The agri-food industries play a major role in processing and preserving food products:

All the participants considered that in their countries, the presence of small, medium and large-scale industrial facilities is essential to ensure the preservation, processing and valorisation of their agricultural produce. The aim is to add value to produce, make it easier to market and limit losses.

Several academics from African countries have pointed out that this industrial presence is still insufficient, particularly for the initial processing of their exported cash crops. One of the difficulties encountered is the supply of packaging in sufficient quantity and quality.

- Diversification of diets:

All the academics note the recent changes in eating habits, depending on the country, the age of consumers and their urban or rural location. Fast food is on the rise everywhere, even though culinary and gastronomic traditions remain deeply rooted in each country, creating a coexistence of diets that is accompanied by a decline in traditional diets such as the « Mediterranean diet ».

- Role of population movements:

This convergence may seem surprising, but virtually all countries, in the South as in the North, report frequent use of cheap labour from outside immigration when production requires it.

- Fighting loss and waste:

All countries are aware that reducing losses and waste is one way of improving food sovereignty. In some areas of agricultural production, mainly in developing countries, losses in the field, in the initial post-harvest stages and in processing units are often very high when the supply chains are poorly organised or when logistics are faulty (silos, cold chain, etc.). In high-income countries, wastage mainly concerns the distribution chain, collective catering and domestic use. Informing and educating consumers, training operators and adding value to commercial waste are potential avenues for progress.

- Food education:

The academics shared their views on the importance of food education for young people and the general public.

This tool can be useful in promoting a balanced and sustainable diet. School feeding plays a significant role, as recognised by the Global Coalition on School Feeding, which emerged from the 2021 United Nations World Summit on Food Systems (UNFSS) and now includes 87 Member States as well as the EU and AU.

<b>Points of divergence:</b>
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- « Intensive » agriculture and agroecology:

This was clearly the most controversial topic at the conference on 30 May, and the subject of lively discussions between academics:

Many of them defend the agro-ecology model, a tool they believe is essential if food systems and their agricultural component are to contribute to the United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Other participants, particularly from Africa, believe that while agroecology should not be neglected, it alone cannot meet the present and future food needs of the populations of their various countries. In their view, we need to maintain what is known as conventional or even « intensive » agriculture, even if the latter term is not really appropriate: agricultural yields need to be sufficient to feed the population, something that

agroecology does not guarantee for these countries today. The term « responsible » agriculture is therefore increasingly used: the aim is to produce « more » and « better » at the same time.

On this subject, it appeared that it would be preferable to seek a « harmonious cohabitation » of the two approaches rather than to oppose them. Nowhere is agriculture unique, there are « different » types of agriculture, and this diversity must be preserved. However, beyond these declarations, the political, social and economic conditions for the cohabitation of production models remain to be defined.

- Use of inputs in agricultural production :

This point is very complementary to the previous one: the advocates of agro-ecology denounce the massive use by so-called « intensive » agriculture of inputs that present health risks (fertilisers, pesticides and other synthetic chemical products). Supporters of « responsible » agriculture believe that modern agriculture must continue to use certain inputs, which are essential production factors, but their use must be limited and reasoned out of respect for the environment and also for reasons of cost, as these inputs are overwhelmingly imported.

Several academics stressed the danger of certain inputs for biodiversity: preserving biodiversity is a priority in all countries. The preservation of genetic resources of cultivated plants was also highlighted.

- Reconciling food sovereignty and security with international trade:

It was also a much-discussed subject, particularly among academics from countries with significant agricultural production destined for export. They believe that these export products, which are very often highly consumed, are essential to the economic equilibrium of their countries. They enable them to import goods that cannot be produced locally.

However, international trade in agricultural and food products, driven by highly volatile « spot » markets, requires regulation to reduce the risks for consumers (shortages can lead to food riots) and for producers, who need medium- and long-term visibility to invest.

On the other hand, all the academics agreed not to confuse food sovereignty, food security and self-sufficiency, three concepts that need to be taken into account in specific ways. The scope of this sovereignty (local, national, regional) was also discussed.

A striking example of these distinctions is the major change in the supply of animal proteins to the markets of the coastal countries of the Gulf of Guinea: the closure of their northern borders prohibited the import of live cattle, which was very quickly replaced by poultry meat, still often imported but increasingly produced locally.

- Use of new technologies:

No consensus has been reached on analysing the impact on sustainable development of many recent technological advances (chemicals, GMOs, genome editing, artificial intelligence, communication networks, privatisation and commercialisation of living organisms, precision farming, etc.). The positions of the various countries are quite different, particularly as regards the possible technical alternatives.

Some believe that a handful of world leaders (the « GAFAMs » of agriculture) have a growing and harmful influence on global agricultural and food production.

- Role of agricultural subsidies and prices:

The conflict in Ukraine has led to widespread inflation, which has changed the way food prices are set. Government subsidies to farmers have long been a reality in the countries of the European Union, but are little used in the countries of the South, where governments are trying to organise producers better, for example by extending the seasonality of harvests. However, imports of essential products (wheat flour, rice, etc.) are often used to preserve social peace.

One academic has advocated direct food aid to the most disadvantaged populations.

Other questions were addressed only briefly, even though all the participants stressed their importance:

- What role do the private and financial sectors play in public policy?
- How to remunerate the environmental services provided by food systems and their agricultural component?
- Can we rethink international food trade to promote sustainable food?
- In each country, how can we prevent imported products, which require CO<sup>2</sup>-emitting transport, from displacing locally-sourced products?
- How important is livestock farming to responsible agriculture?
- What is the relationship between land tenure and agricultural production?

#### **First conclusions and recommendations:**

The richness of the discussions at this GID controversy highlighted a number of fundamental issues for the future of our societies.

Food is at the heart of the life of every person and every society, and for a very large proportion of humanity it remains a daily concern, with governments taking very different levels of responsibility.

A better distribution of agricultural and food production will be essential to feed the 10 billion people who will inhabit our planet by 2050. But we will have to feed without destroying, or feed without devastating or depleting the natural resources on which this production is based. Food and environmental issues must therefore be reconciled in all models of organisation and development.

These challenges are particularly complex, and to meet them, the GID controversy highlights convergences, but also several points of divergence, some of which are major.

**GID is proposing firstly to organise targeted communication on the results of this controversy, the points of agreement and disagreement, and then to examine them in greater depth, in order to identify and propose solutions for the future.**

Some examples can be given by the following first questions:

- Can we clarify or organise the cohabitation of the very different models of agro-ecology and conventional agriculture, which would be better described as « responsible »?
- Is it possible to codify the reasoned use of selected inputs and new technologies?
- How can we better reconcile the role of cash crops and food crops in food sovereignty?
- Can certain practices (land-sharing / land-sparing) improve respect for biodiversity?
- What are the right territorial scales for sustainable food systems?
- How can we develop food education for local people?
- How can we redeploy the « knowledge chain » (research, experimentation, development, knowledge sharing, training, information), including technological and organisational innovations and indigenous knowledge, to improve the contribution of food systems to sustainable food?



Another approach that the GID could propose would be to differentiate this reflection according to four climatic and geographical zones where the contexts are different: arid and semi-arid zones, tropical zones, temperate zones and Mediterranean zones.