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A renewed interest in controversies

By Patrick Caron

The increasing polarization of food systems debates hampers transformation towards sustainability. Making knowledge actionable and action knowledgeable is key for our society to move forward, says Patrick Caron.

Polarization in food-related matters has reached an unprecedented level. Stark divergence exists between localists versus globalists, producers versus consumers, rural dwellers versus urban ones, and defenders of ecological causes versus advocates of economic pragmatism. This divergence tends to be accentuated by the hyper-mediatization of subjects, the impact of social networks, and the spread of beliefs and fake news that increase suspicion towards scientific knowledge. Such polarization delays progress, often making us blind to existing innovative and successful initiatives, and the lessons they could offer. Worse even, polarization keeps us trapped in a narrative of paralysis, blocking avenues for engagement in a much-needed sustainability transition.

The Montpellier Process is an initiative promoted and curated by CGIAR, the University of Montpellier, Cirad and other research organizations, in which I have played an active role, to reinstate our dialogue capacity. Its ultimate goal is to facilitate the design of food systems transformative pathways across climate, biodiversity, health, agriculture and other economic activities. By pooling collective intelligence[1], the Montpellier Process promotes safe spaces for risk-taking, where citizens, decision makers, economic players and academics can compare their perspectives, share knowledge, address controversies, learn from one another and explore potential solutions.

Lock-ins tend to lead to procrastination and the maintenance of the status quo resulting from traditional power relations. In more extreme situations, lock-ins may also lead to backlash, confrontation and violence. A preferable alternative would be to explore paths for negotiation involving supporters of both the dominant and alternative positions, so as to ensure that the latter can survive, flourish and contribute to the co-existence of a diversity of models on which resilience and sustainability rely. Such an option presupposes that the terms of the confrontation — and the subject of the controversy — are clearly understood and shared. It is necessary to see, recognize, name and qualify the disagreements, as well as identify the interests and values that shape them. Reaching an agreement about disagreements through mediation may enable the parties to engage in collective co-design; negotiation should then allow the parties to move from disagreement on desirable agreement towards agreement on agreement.

In a context of growing tensions where divergent visions of the world oppose each other, it is important to rehabilitate our capacity to address controversies and to consider constructive pathways to facilitate the transition towards sustainable development. This means refusing on the one hand the naivety of a consensus incapable of overcoming the status quo, and on the other the violence and uncertainty of dual confrontation[2]. This choice relies on our capacity to transcend polarization, which is encouraged by the merchants of doubts and certainties.

The 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit has illustrated how much opposition emerges when it comes to designing sustainable food systems and achieving a global vision for their future development. A major controversy involves technology's enthusiasts who believe in technological solutions for food systems issues, and technology's skeptics who are wary of these solutions' footprint and question their capacity to promote much needed structural changes. Dissonance was also seen among the promoters of renewed science–policy interfaces and the role they assign to science — whether to help think the unthinkable and manage risks and uncertainty or to provide evidence, forecast and prescribe actions. Other contentious topics included food system metrics and whether they are focused on agricultural productivity or consider the multifunctionality of food systems; the capacity to design a new global action regime that would ensure the convergence between private and public actions and their contribution to the production of public goods (as illustrated by the difficulty of exploring new trade objectives and patterns); the appropriate scales for governance and sovereignty to ensure the convergence of local and global processes; and finally, the emphasis on diversity to ensure resilience or standardization to increase efficiency.

Science can and should contribute to the sustainable food systems transformation that is required by providing evidence and methods. In addition to producing knowledge and technology, scientists' participation in transdisciplinary dialogues is key to clarify the categories of analysis and biases, structure and strengthen the bridges with policy, and possibly define and/or redefine the role of researchers in the transformations underway.

The mere transfer of knowledge to decision makers and one-size-fits-all solutions cannot address trade-offs and barriers to change, such as power asymmetries and conflicts of interest. To account for the diversity of contexts and aspirations, there is a need to articulate models, actionable knowledge and place-based innovation to design, implement and assess specific transformative pathways through adapted arrangements, dialogues and approaches[3]. This means promoting the capacity to learn from the many ongoing initiatives that aim to transform food systems at local, territorial, national and international scales. Niche innovations can then contribute to creating a new regime of action[4] through adapted regulation frameworks that acknowledge global sustainability as a priority. In such an enterprise, human scientists are welcome — not as instrumentalized experts that ensure the adoption of technologies, but as critical mass able to reframe the way that knowledge and institutions contribute to transformation.

In line with the founding assumption of the Montpellier Advanced Knowledge Institute on Transitions to address the interconnected challenges of agriculture, food, environment and health, science could help us move beyond

positivism and cope with uncertainty and complexity. Renewing our capacity to address controversy to articulate dialogues across sectors and stakeholders as illustrated by the Montpellier Process is therefore essential. As recently discussed in events during the 16th Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity in Cali, one key challenge for science will be to shape bridges and learning processes between innovation-oriented dialogues at the local scale, policy-oriented dialogues at the territorial and national levels, and global framework-oriented dialogues at the international scale.

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Competing interests

As mentioned in the text, P.C. is an active member of the Montpelier Process community, a senior researcher at CIRAD and Vice-Chair of the CGIAR Integrated Partnership Board.