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Ensuring transparency and accountability of the Global Alliance for Climate Smart Agriculture in the perspective of COP21

Pierre-Marie Aubert, Matthieu Brun, Sébastien Treyer (IDDRI)

The Lima Paris Action Agenda (LPAA) is to create a broad platform to support cooperative initiatives between state and non-state actors. Its overall objective is to provide a solid ground for the implementation of the expected Paris 2015 agreement.

Agriculture is among the sectors targeted by this Action Agenda. Climate change and agriculture indeed relates with respect to three sets of issues: food and nutrition security (FNS), adaptation and mitigation. In this perspective, the inclusion of the Global Alliance for Climate Smart Agriculture (GACSA/the Alliance) in the LPAA is currently discussed. The Alliance indeed aims at supporting the adoption of “climate smart agriculture” (CSA), a concept coined 5 years ago “to promote a paradigm shift in agriculture at all levels”¹ in order to foster actors’ capacity to simultaneously address the three sets of issues mentioned above.

While most civil society organisations have been highly critical of the Alliance for it does not define what is/is not CSA and it lacks social and environmental safeguards, former experiences also show the difficulty of global public-private partnerships to be effective in addressing such broad issues at such a large scale.

This policy brief seeks to explore the conditions under which the GACSA could be a credible candidate for being part of the LPAA. It identifies three areas where significant progresses can be made.

1. CSA SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE, 2010. *Chair’s Summary: Road Map for Action*. The Hague, 13 p.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. In a context where most stakeholders recognise that the achievement of FNS under climate change requires changes in food systems, the role of the GACSA should foremost be that of a platform for experiences and knowledge sharing in order to:
 - a. analyse the respective strengths/weaknesses of different agriculture development models—including agroecology—with clear and explicit performance criteria;
 - b. propose explicit representations of the transformative pathways which could lead food systems to sustainably deliver FNS in contrasted situations.
- 2. To play such a role, the GACSA should be endowed with clearer accountability mechanisms with a need to:
 - a. render explicit both the objectives and the set of guidelines the projects carried out under the GACSA umbrella have to follow;
 - b. establish a monitoring system to assess the social, economic and environmental impacts of projects developed by Alliance members altogether with their compliance with the above mentioned guidelines.
- 3. The Alliance should explicitly respond to the concerns publicly expressed by civil society organisations (CSOs), in reaction to which those CSOs could reconsider their refusal to get involved in the GACSA.

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1. REINFORCING THE LEARNING PLATFORM ROLE OF THE GACSA TO DISCUSS TRANSFORMATIVE PATHWAYS OF WORLD FOOD SYSTEMS

The Global Alliance for Climate Smart Agriculture aims at fostering the adoption of CSA with the overall objective of improving FNS in the face of climate change. It considers CSA not as a specific production system but rather as an approach to “identify which production systems and enabling institutions are best suited to respond to the challenges of climate change (adaptation/mitigation) for specific locations, to maintain and enhance the capacity of agriculture to support food security in a sustainable way”.² While members of the Alliance acknowledge that it may not always be possible to achieve all three objectives simultaneously and that trade-offs will be necessary,³ the criteria to make choices between different possible trade-offs are not explicitly presented in any GACSA document. There is first a need to render explicit those criteria and to recognise the political nature of any choice. The GACSA should in particular affirm its prime concern for FNS compared to the two other objectives.

We also argue that looking at long-term transformative pathways rather than focusing only on the effects of a given project on the short or medium terms could be of a great help. In this perspective, the Alliance should favour discussions with two main objectives. One is to review, on an empirical basis and with clear criteria, the respective weaknesses and strengths of different production systems which could be promoted by a project or an investment under the GACSA umbrella. If CSA does not refer to any specific system by itself, the types of “CSA success stories” presented in two recent publications⁴ indicate that the range of options to be considered is quite broad: from agroforestry to genetically modified organisms crops or to sustainable intensification. These different options have, however, different social and environmental costs and impacts, depending on the context in which they are implemented, that need to be carefully assessed. More specifically, agroecology needs to be considered carefully as it has gained more and more recognition worldwide as a promising

candidate for delivering on the three dimensions of CSA.⁵ However, not only have different agriculture models different impacts on the short/medium terms; they also engage the whole food system of a country or an area in specific transformative (or non-transformative!) pathways.

Therefore a key aim of the Alliance should be to foster a dialogue on the types of transformative pathways the choice of one or the other model contribute to define. Two important criteria need to be met for the Alliance to enable this dialogue.

- One relates to its internal organisation. As for now, the Alliance is indeed made up of three “action groups”: the Knowledge Action Group, which aims at increasing and promoting knowledge, research and development into technologies, practices and policy approaches for CSA; the Investment Action Group, seeking to improve the effectiveness of public and private investment in support of CSA; and the Enabling Environment Action Group, whose goal is to mainstream CSA into policy, strategies and planning at different levels. If the GACSA is foremost to enhance experience sharing and debate, the role of the Knowledge Action Group should be outweighed compared to the other two—at least at the beginning.
- The other criterion pertains to the level of transparency of the Alliance. It implies that members accept to present, discuss and assess *ex-ante* the impacts of their project. It also entails a discussion about the “theory of change” of the whole food system which lies behind their projects. Two inter-related facts allow to expect some difficulties regarding this need for transparency. First, the GACSA membership is highly unbalanced: the fertilizing industry and other representative of industrial agriculture are greatly represented while supporters of agroecology options are almost absent. Second, the latest dialogue about the future of agriculture and FNS, the IAASTD, raises so much opposition from the industrial agriculture supporters that its conclusions were not endorsed by all participants.

This is why (i) the Alliance should be endowed with an accountability framework which would enable to overcome such resistances, but at the same time (ii) supporters of agroecological models should join the GACSA to showcase its interest.

The next two sections deal with these issues.

2. FAO, CGIAR & CCAFS, 2014. *Climate-Smart Agriculture: What is it? Why is it needed?*.

3. GACSA, 2014a. *Framework document*. Rome.

4. CTA & CGIAR / CCAFS, 2014. *Climate-smart agricultures success stories for farming communities around the world*. Wageningen.

FAO, 2014. *FAO success stories on Climate-Smart Agriculture*. Rome.

5. To this respect, it is worth noting that a panel of scientists from different backgrounds has just addressed an open letter to the FAO general director calling for more public investment in agroecological research.

2. STRENGTHENING THE ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK

While GACSA members have agreed on the need to voluntarily report to the Alliance, they have considered that “accountability was [...] too strong a word, though the Alliance’s communication strategy should address concerns such as greenwashing, the diversion of funds from smallholders”.⁶ However, the GACSA framework document together with other official papers produced by the Alliance lay the ground for a clarification of two dimensions of any accountability framework: its normative framework and its system of monitoring/reporting.

2.1. Making explicit a set of principles to serve as a normative framework

The normative framework of an accountability mechanism serves to judge whether a given behaviour is acceptable or not. Documents produced by the GACSA explicitly refer to “international processes related to agriculture, FNS and climate change, such as the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and Multilateral Environmental Agreements” and to the Voluntary Guidelines for the Progressive Realisation of the Right to Food.⁷ These Guidelines, along with two other texts published by the CFS—the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests⁸ and the Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems⁹—allow to clarify a set of principles that GACSA members should follow when operating under the GACSA umbrella. We propose to distinguish between three principles, which should be made explicit by the GACSA facilitation unit:

- Take into consideration and favour smallholders by any possible means, including smallholder sensitive investments; (*Guideline on the Right to Food* n° 4.6; *Guideline on Tenure* n° 12.2; *Principles for Responsible Investment* n° 1 (i) - 2 (vi));

- Support or conserve biodiversity and genetic resources and restore ecosystem functions; (*Guidelines on the Right to Food* n° 8.12-8.13; *Principle for Responsible Investment* n° 6 (ii))
- Be transparent and inclusive in the phase of project definition monitoring, *ex-ante* and *ex-post* evaluation, in order to identify and then address possible negative impacts on the environment and on smallholders. (*Guidelines on the Right to Food* n° 3.8-3.9; *Guidelines on Tenure* n° 12.4-12.6; *Principles for Responsible Investment* n° 9 & 10)

This set of three principles lay the ground for an interesting accountability framework. Most notably, it includes specific considerations on the need to assess projects’ impacts both *ex-ante* and *ex-post*. To be effective, it however needs to be backed up by a reporting system which is currently weak.

2.2. Reinforcing a weak reporting system

While GACSA members have considered the need “for some kind of monitoring and evaluation framework [...] in order to measure and show progress in both a qualitative and quantitative manner”, they have also stated that “it should be a very light mechanism to avoid major reporting burden, which might also scare off new members”. As such, reporting by GACSA members on a voluntary basis was proposed as an alternative approach (“sharing” rather than “reporting”). As the GACSA membership “does not create any binding obligations”, it seems unlikely that any stronger reporting mechanism could be set into motion in a near future. And it is all the more clear that no formal sanction mechanism whereby GACSA members would be sanctioned for their (non-)action could be set up with such a weak reporting system. In most cases, such voluntary systems do not lead to effective accountability.¹⁰ Two factors could however reinforce GACSA members’ incentives to effectively report on their project. One is the existence of the above mentioned set of principles, which should in this perspective be made explicit.

Second is the fact that, as members of the Global Compact—a UN initiative calling companies to align their strategies and operations with universal principles on human rights, labour, environment and anti-corruption—most GACSA members from the private sector are also highly incentivized to report about their activities, at least on an *ex-post* basis through their CSR annual report.

6. GACSA, 2014b. *Summary Report of the First Working Meeting of the Alliance*. Rome.

7. FAO, 2004. *Voluntary guidelines to support the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security*. Rome.

8. FAO, 2012. *Voluntary Guidelines on the responsible Governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests in the Context of national food security*. Rome, The Committee on World Food Security.

9. CFS, 2014. *Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems*. Rome, The Committee on World Food Security.

10. E.g. CLAPP J., 2008. Illegal GMO releases and corporate responsibility: Questioning the effectiveness of voluntary measures. *Ecological Economics*, 66, 348-358.

In the absence of a formal reporting mechanism, a determinant role of the Knowledge Action Group should be to collect all documents assessing GACSA members' projects and to make them easily available and then comparable. The objective here is twofold:

- Assessing to what extent projects carried out under the GACSA umbrella comply with the above-proposed set of principle;
- Facilitating the discussions on the strengths/weaknesses of different agriculture model and how they contribute to one or several transformative pathways, to eventually allow for collective progresses towards the achievement of the overall aim of the GACSA: improving FNS in the face of climate change.

Without such a work done, there are few chances that the proposed normative framework could have any practical effect.

3. TOWARDS EXTERNAL ACCOUNTABILITY: RESPONDING TO CSOs' CONCERNS

The GACSA light reporting system leads its members to report to each other rather than to the actors who could be affected by their actions. This is what Grant & Keohane¹¹ refer to as "internal accountability". They contrast this internal accountability with what they call "external accountability", through which actors are not only held accountable to people with whom they are institutionally linked, but also to all actors whose lives might be impacted by their actions. As the overall objective of the GACSA is to contribute to the achievement of FNS under climate change by improving livelihood and food system resilience, and by reducing GHG emission, it clearly intends to affect the life of a broad range of persons, in particular smallholders. If GACSA members are to be held accountable to smallholders, there is a need to better integrate CSOs representing them. But for this to happen, the co-chair of the GACSA should first officially reply to the concerns CSOs expressed more than a year ago.¹² Such a public answer is much awaited and would be a starting point. Communication channels between CSOs and the GACSA should also be established and

consolidated over time, as discussed in the last CSA scientific conference in Montpellier. This needs to be done quickly as CSOs are now waiting for more than one year, if one wants to have a chance to have them on board a few months prior to COP21.

As soon as they will have received guarantees that their concerns have been taken into account by the chairs, CSOs would then be able to reconsider their refusal to embark on the Alliance, even if some aspects might remain blurred. CSOs' engagement is indeed the only way to improve the representativeness of producers, farmers, and even consumers, and thus to make their voices heard. If, as suggested in this policy brief, the GACSA is to enhance debates regarding the respective strengths and weaknesses of different agriculture models, with the aim of feeding a broader debate on long-term transformative pathways of food systems worldwide, we need all actors to bring their view to the discussion. And for agroecological options to be carefully examined as plausible candidates for such transformative pathways, we need actors bearing a particular interest for those options to be part of the debate.

While one of the CSOs argument not to enter the GACSA is that there is a high risk for them to serve as a gage for projects they do not endorse, an other argument highly militates for a greater involvement from their part: when looking backward to previous global public-private partnerships experiments, and most notably those launched at the Rio+10 Conference in Johannesburg (2002), it clearly appears that almost nothing came out from it.¹³ Without a greater pressure put on corporates' shoulders, they are likely not to spend much time and energy in such initiatives. ■

11. GRANT R. W. & KEOHANE R. O., 2005. Accountability and Abuses of Power in World Politics. *American Political Science Review*, 99 (1), 29-43, 2005.

12. The letter of concerns and the letter of rejection issued by more than hundred CSOs about the GACSA is available here: <http://www.climatesmartagconcerns.info/>

13. BÄCKSTRAND K., 2006. Multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable development: rethinking legitimacy, accountability and effectiveness. *European Environment*, 16 (5), 290-306.