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## Narratives for the sustainability of agri-food systems in Ecuador: Understanding their divergences, similarities, and complementarities to catalyze transformative change

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### Abstract

Due to the expansion of large-scale and export-oriented agriculture and the depletion of ancestral knowledge, Ecuadorian agri-food systems are facing vicious cycles of environmental and social impacts that jeopardise their potential to ensure food and nutritional security for the growing population and contribute to global food production without depleting the natural and social capital. Transforming unsustainable agri-food systems requires alternative narratives to the status quo. Narratives are defined as storylines underpinned by frames to define problems, diagnose causes, and suggest solutions. In this sense, an analysis of narratives is critical to problematizing these vicious cycles within agri-food systems and identifying potential solutions. Therefore, this study aims to analyse the narratives of multiple stakeholders around the sustainability of the agri-food systems in Ecuador, to identify divergences, similarities, and complementarities among their underlying frames. The study employs the discursive agency approach (DAA), which has a particular focus on actors and their agency.

The study is reviewing policy documents and conducting semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders from Ecuador whose work is related to the production, transformation, commercialisation, or consumption of agricultural products. The data are coded into the categories provided by the DAA.

Two narratives have been distinguished based on preliminary analysis. One could be labeled neo-liberal sustainable agri-food systems, which problematizes the current crisis as a lack of knowledge and innovation. According to this narrative, access could be granted through capacity building, investment, and/or bank loans, and the costs and risks of transition are addressed through contract farming or international certification. The other could be called local-oriented and culturally-embedded agri-food systems, which see the problems as a result of the colonial past, marginalisation, unequal access to land, and depletion of local knowledge. Under this narrative, access to healthy and nutritious food is put at the centre through solidarity economies, local markets, and trust-based certification. Although there is some overlap between the two narratives, the emphasis is quite different as the second goes well beyond changing the way food is produced, but also the way it is consumed. Both narratives involve different actors as agents of change and call for different institutional settings.

**Keywords:** Food security and nutrition, narratives, sustainable agri-food systems, transformative change