

Given the global challenge to achieve food security for all, ending hunger and pursue sustainable agriculture the authors identify four action areas of a sustainable land, water and energy policy strategy and propose concrete actions that G20 countries’ policy makers, corporate and civil society actors, and those of other countries should implement in coordinated fashion. Action areas include (1) focusing land, water and energy policies on the wellbeing of people, (2) investing in innovations, (3) making use of digital opportunities for sustainable agriculture and (4) Re-designing global governance of agriculture and food. The authors put policy coherence for sustainable development to the forefront of their recommended policy action strategy. Regarding the latter especially linkages and potential trade-offs between different policy domains (water, land use, energy policies) as well as between different action levels (domestic, multi-national, global) are discussed in the paper.

Overall, the paper is certainly an important contribution to the development of a coherent G20 policy strategy towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, well written by an author team comprising of leading agricultural economists in this field.

However, I nevertheless would see some potential to improve this policy paper even further. In particular, I have the following comments:

1. The paper focus on interlinkages between the three particular policy domains: water, land use and energy policy. Although these interlinkages are certainly important there exist other trade-offs and interlinkages that are also important for a coherent policy strategy which have been neglected in the paper. For example, interlinkages between water, land use and energy policy and other policy domains, e.g. trade or development policy, respectively (see Lay et al. (2017)). Furthermore, there are trade-offs regarding policy impacts on different SDGs, e.g. impact of investments in innovation on growth as well as its long-term implications for greenhouse gas emissions or biodiversity. Moreover, there might be trade-offs regarding the domestic and external dimension of policy impacts, e.g. impacts of European Common Agricultural Policy reforms supporting ecological farming on sustainability and economic development within the EU as well as abroad, for example in African countries.
2. A main objective of the German G20 presidency is to make progress on realizing the goals of the 2030 Agenda not only in G20 countries themselves but also through their international cooperation with, for example developing countries. Accordingly, G20 policy actions are located at different action levels, e.g. at the domestic, bilateral or multi-national as well as the global level. In this regard the paper suggests a clear pattern relating policy areas with action levels. For example, implementation actions proposed for area 1 “People Focus” are mainly located at domestic level of the G20 countries themselves, especially China and India. In contrast, proposed implementation actions in the area “Governance” are located at the global level, while the domestic or multi-national level is neglected for this area. However, G20 countries certainly can also implement actions aiming to improve or re-design “Governance” at the national or even local level. Vice-versa G20 actions are conceivable at the global level for the area “People Focus”. Analogously, implementation actions proposed for the policy action areas “Innovations” and “Digitalization” are mainly located at the domestic and multi-national levels, but less on the global level. Hence, although action levels discussed (proposed) for specific policy actions in the paper clearly make sense, the paper, however, could benefit from a more elaborate discussion at this point, e.g. explaining priorities of different action levels for proposed implementation actions.
3. Actions proposed in this paper are focused on policy interventions aiming to influence production, while interventions aiming to influence consumer behavior are not explicitly discussed. However, consumer behavior, e.g. patterns of food and energy consumptions (e.g. meat consumption, transport or traveling) have a significant impact on both sustainability and economic development. Hence, it would be interesting to learn about the authors’ opinion on the potential of consumer oriented policy interventions to contribute to a coherent G20 policy strategy towards a sustainable land and water use to serve the people.

4. Reading the paper suggests that achieving sustainable development is basically a technical problem to implement an adequate policy strategy. However, this appears to me as a (a little bit) too optimistic view. First, there exist unsolved trade-offs between different SDG's in the sense that at least until 2030 we cannot realistically achieve simultaneously maximally desirable target levels for all SDG's. Thus, sustainable development corresponds to a fundamental dilemma situation. Secondly, for any policy strategy there always will exist winners and losers at all levels, i.e. local, national, supranational and global. Accordingly, a prerequisite for the implementation of any successful policy strategy towards the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development are effective governance systems at all levels, that allow the formulation and implementation of a politically feasible compromise between conflicting interests. The latter is essential to achieve a main objective of Agenda 2030 that is "leaving no one behind". This might call, however, for an innovative organization of political processes that goes beyond simple stakeholder participation in form of a stakeholder forum. In this regard the paper is still silent.

References

Jann Lay, C. Brandi, R. Upendra Das, R. Klein, R. Thiel, N. Alexander, I. Scholz (2017): Coherent G20 policies towards the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. G20 Insights Policy Brief, http://www.g20-insights.org/policy_briefs/coherent-g20-policies-towards-2030-agenda-sustainable-development/.