

# THIS WEEK

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## A fresh chance to feed the world

*The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations is about to elect a new director-general. The choice will affect the entire globe for years to come.*

Charting the future of the world's food production is one of the biggest challenges we face. Feeding the 10 billion mouths expected on the planet by 2050 will be demanding, but should be doable. Much more difficult will be doing it without irreparably damaging the planet.

That's why the election next week of the new director-general of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is important. The Rome-based intergovernmental body — which has 194 member states — is the pre-eminent international voice on almost every issue touching on food and agriculture. The agency and its leader — who typically serves for two four-year terms — wield considerable influence on global and local policies and play a key part in agricultural research. Member nations must choose the right person for the job.

The FAO emerged from the major disruption to agriculture and food supply caused by the Second World War. Launched in October 1945, its goals were to promote scientific research, share knowledge and collect detailed and comprehensive statistics, with the goal of alleviating hunger, improving nutrition and productivity, and boosting the livelihoods of poor farmers.

The agency's work today spans fisheries, farming and forestry, and is closely entwined with research. The FAO maintains the FAOSTAT database, which contains extensive data on indicators such as crop production, fertilizer use and food security, and which is used by researchers worldwide. In cooperation with the World Health Organization (WHO) and other bodies, the FAO has helped to restructure farming industries and the livestock trade to reduce the risk of emerging infectious diseases. It has scientists, statisticians and other specialists on its staff, collaborates with academic institutions and researchers to inform its policies, and makes science-based recommendations, such as on antibiotic use in farmed animals and the use of genetically modified crops and livestock.

The future challenges for the agency are huge. It must help to steer food production in many different ecosystems to adapt to climate change as well as the extreme weather events that will accompany it. Population increase, rapid urbanization and shifting diets also demand major changes in farming and food production. So the new head will need to show strong and visionary leadership, set a more sustainable agenda to which countries will sign up, and stand up to vested interests from the agricultural and food industries.

The world's food-production systems generate as much as half of the globe's greenhouse gases, erode soils, pollute the environment, and harm biodiversity by destroying natural habitat. Intensive livestock production is one of the worst offenders, yet the billions of people escaping poverty or becoming the new urban middle class tend to eat more meat than before, so livestock production is on track to double by 2050. Producing more food sustainably demands major shifts in policy and practice, as well as innovation, to lessen agriculture's environmental footprint. This will include reducing the use of pesticides, herbicides and artificial fertilizers, and drastically cutting food waste. Around

one-third of food produced for humans currently goes to waste.

The global food system also produces too much highly processed food — contributing to an increase in obesity and diet-related diseases worldwide. There are now more people in the world who are obese than are underweight. The current director-general, José Graziano da Silva, has helped to drive a shift in thinking at the FAO and its member states, away from an excessive focus on producing more food and calories to also promoting access to healthier and more nutritious foods. His successor must continue these efforts.

There are three candidates in the running, down from an original five. They are Qu Dongyu, a former academic policy researcher and China's vice-minister for agriculture and rural affairs; Davit Kirvalidze, an agricultural scientist and former agriculture minister from Georgia; and France's Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle, an engineer in agronomy and former executive director of the European Food Safety Authority. She is the

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first candidate to be put forward collectively by the European Union and the first female candidate for the post in the FAO's history.

All the candidates are highly qualified for the job — but it would be naive to think that the winner will be selected on merit alone. The FAO election process — a secret ballot in which every country has a single vote — means that the process is rife with geopolitics

and political horse-trading. China in particular is reported to be unabashedly leveraging its influence and its investments in its massive Belt and Road Initiative, to get votes for its candidate. Securing the top FAO job would be a diplomatic win for China and give it weight in setting global food policy.

The behind-the-scenes bargaining means that there is little incentive for the candidates to publicly discuss and debate their visions for the agency in any depth. That's a shame. The election of the director-general of the WHO used to have the same flaws but has opened up, under pressure. The FAO election must be more transparent in future, with candidates obliged to detail and debate their manifestos. The incoming director-general must make greater transparency and openness across the agency a priority.

Greater transparency might also encourage greater donor confidence. With around 11,500 staff, the FAO is the largest technical UN agency, but its budget — US\$2.6 billion for 2018–19 — has been flat in recent years. The incoming leader must do more to raise the profile of the FAO and make it an attractive investment for member countries and other donors. Otherwise, the agency will end up with its hands largely tied.

The FAO is in the unusual position of being able to help feed the world and, by doing it sustainably, to save the world from catastrophic environmental degradation. In an era in which some countries are turning towards nationalism and rejecting international cooperation, it's even more important that the voting nations select a leader who has these global interests at heart. ■