



International Agri-Food Network Position paper

Indicator 2.4.1 – Productive and Sustainable Agriculture Proposals

Indicator 2.4.1 has taken a comprehensive approach to measuring progress toward productivity and sustainability in agriculture and it should provide a template to assess progress to meeting SDG Target 2.4. However, there are aspects of the indicator that do not reflect the realities of either small- or large-scale sustainable agriculture and in this briefing the International Agri-Food Network (IAFN) makes some suggestions to improve the indicator.

The indicator was developed in isolation without formal consultation with stakeholders – farmers, the business sector, academia and civil society - and so does not incorporate the wide knowledge and experience these groups bring. At the UN Statistical Commission meeting in early March the issues with the current version on 2.4.1 were raised by Brazil in Plenary and other countries expressed their concerns outside the formal sessions. Given the concerns raised by UN member countries, FAO has now accepted that the Indicator needs refinement and a small working group is being established within the IAEG-SDGs to correct the problems. This provides an opportunity to improve Indicator 2.4.1 so that it reflects the ambitions of Target 2.4 – Productive and Sustainable Agriculture.

A key issue with the current version is that in several instances sub-indicators of one theme directly contradict sub-indicators of another theme, making it impossible for a farmer to adhere to both at the same time. Several criteria or limits within sub-indicators appear arbitrary and show no appreciation for the heterogeneity of global agriculture or the value of local knowledge and the ability of farmers, large and small, to provide the most informed perspectives on the needs of their own lands. As well as measuring progress, an indicator should be designed to encourage practices that will help achieve the targets and goals. It is essential that the indicator does not promote bad practices and damage the viability of farms of all size and threaten food security and increase poverty amongst smallholders.

Theme 8 - Biodiversity

The key issues are with the section on Biodiversity - Theme 8 - but there are also problems with the sections on resilience and on fertilizer and pesticide use.

The indicator should focus on positive actions by farmers that promote conservation and biodiversity whilst maintaining productivity. In most of the other sections, this is the case, whilst the biodiversity theme is proscriptive rather than encouraging positive actions to promote biodiversity. The current proposal includes arbitrary practices which do not necessarily lead to improved biodiversity. There is another issue in that some of the actions to promote biodiversity – e.g. protection of rare breeds and preservation of heritage seeds – can only be done at a national or international level and not on an individual farm basis. The indicator is farm centred and some of the biodiversity sub-indicators, whilst desirable, cannot be achieved at an individual farm level. We suggest a simpler measure of practices supporting on-farm biodiversity:

- The farm uses site-specific management practices with positive biodiversity outcomes such as buffer strips around riparian areas, invasive species control, integrated pest management strategies, habitat restoration and wildlife corridors
- The farm only uses pesticides in line with the practices specified in Theme 7
- The farm uses precision agriculture and digital techniques
- The farm practices conservation tillage
- The farm uses crop rotation in line with best agricultural practice for its region.
- The farm uses the most responsibly produced animal feed available, either purchased or grown on-site

Other aspects of the indicator which are damaging to sustainable agriculture include:

Theme 3 - Resilience

- Share of a single agricultural commodity not greater than 66%. This does not take into account larger farms that specialise in an agricultural product and use other risk mitigation strategies such as crop insurance or forward

selling. Also it does not reflect the reality of small-scale subsistence farmers that produce a range of crops for their own consumption and produce an optimum cash crop for sale. This sub-indicator should be deleted.

Theme 6 – Fertilizer risk

- The theme promotes sustainable fertilizer use but the “desirable” category includes the phrase “Does not use fertilizers” (defined as mineral fertilizers and manures). Following this would lead to soil degradation (thus conflicting with Theme 4) and massive fall in crop yields and farmer income. We suggest the desirable (green) category should read “The farm only uses fertilizers taking specific measures to mitigate environmental risks (at least four from the list above)”.

Theme 7 - Pesticide risk

- “Does not use pesticides” is categorised as desirable but would lead to big increase in crop losses due to pests and disease. The practices indicated in the theme are sensible, and the desirable (green) category should read “The farm only uses WHO Class II or III pesticides and it adheres either to an Integrated Pest Management programme or to both health-related measures and at least three of the environment-related measures”

IAFN feels these adjustments to the indicator make it a more appropriate measure of progress towards SDG Target 2.4. By describing measures that promote productive and sustainable agriculture it will also encourage best practice by farmers and contribute to the achievement of the Target.

Appendix

Issues with the current Theme 8 - Biodiversity

Practices described as desirable, but which do not correspond with best sustainable agricultural practice include:

- Leaving 10% of the agricultural holding uncultivated - *damages farm productivity, income and food security for subsistence farmers.*
 - 10% is an arbitrary figure which does not accommodate heterogeneity of global agriculture or in any way assure that the uncultivated land would actually achieve biodiversity goals.
 - Instead, recommend appropriate, site-specific management practices such as buffer strips around riparian areas and wildlife corridors with demonstrated positive impacts on biodiversity.
- Does not use pesticide – *would result in massive increase in crop losses due to disease and pests*
 - This sub-indicator directly contradicts Theme 7, Management of Pesticides, which states that “pesticides are important inputs in modern agriculture” and are to be used if applied properly.
- Does not purchase more than 50% of livestock feed – *impractical for many livestock farms*
 - The 50% threshold is arbitrary and cannot be tied to biodiversity impacts in any way. Importing responsibly produced feed to a farm may be better than growing it on site. This sub-indicator simply limits individual farm management options without any progress towards indicator goals.
- At least 10% of farm production made up of pasture, trees, livestock or fish – *impractical*
 - Forcing diversification upon farmers of any size goes against advantages from climatic, agroecological and financial conditions that may make certain crops and livestock more productive.
 - It also interferes with a farmer’s right to self-determination.
- Includes 3-crop rotation on 80% of the farm – *impractical and damaging to yields*
 - Certain desirable perennial crops may be more productive over multiple years, making a 3-year rotation requirement burdensome and/or inappropriate for productivity and sustainability.
- Area under single commodity not larger than 2 hectares – *no logic or justification to this*
- At least 50% of animals consist of locally adapted breeds or breeds at risk of extinction – *could be damaging to livestock health and productivity*
 - Some breeds may be less desirable for consumption. Taking breed selection out of the hands of farmers does not make use of farmers’ agricultural knowledge or respect their autonomy.