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Title: What is ‘Sustainable Agriculture’? Critical Analysis of the International Political Discourse

The recently published Sustainable Development Goals include ‘sustainable agriculture’ as part of the second goal. However, what ‘sustainable agriculture’ precisely means is still not clear, as several articles indicate (Mockshell & Kamanda, 2018, Struik, et al., 2014, Johnson, 2006).

In our study, we want to enhance this understanding. We assume that international political frameworks have a strong impact on national politics regarding ‘sustainability’ issues. Therefore, we examine the meaning of ‘sustainable agriculture’, as presented in UN milestone documents since 1972. We use a combination of critical discourse analysis and content analysis to answer our research questions:

1) Which elements are typically ascribed to ‘sustainable agriculture’?
2) Which are the major discourses in regards to ‘sustainable agriculture’ and who is participating?
3) Where are potential gaps within the discourses and between political and scientific actors?

By comparing the international political standpoint with the scientific debate, we find that three main discourses exist. We call them ‘sustainable development in agriculture’, ‘sustainable agricultural intensification’ and ‘environmental management’. Different actors support the discourses: While scientists specialize on environmental issues in agriculture, the UN body focuses on the implementation of human rights, such as the right to food. Further, the UN supports the intensification of agricultural production to cover increasing global food demand. The problem arises that the three discourses do not align – on the contrary, they have competing goals.

There is an obvious need to prioritize the goals by the UN. But even more so, there are several gaps that need to be addressed – to reach a common understanding of ‘sustainable agriculture’ and to guide all UN member countries towards improving agricultural practices. We contribute to solving this problem by revealing several of these gaps.