

# The missing lens: feminist perspectives on agro-food system transformation in Vietnam and Indonesia

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**Abstract** Against the background of climate change and the international discourse of global agro-food systems transformation, we show how a feminist perspective provides a more gender and power sensitive lens for understanding contemporary agro-food policies in the Global South. Using recent agricultural policies in Vietnam and Indonesia as case studies, we adopt a Feminist Political Ecology perspective and apply Parto Teherani-Krönner's meal politics approach to reveal the shortcomings of disembodied, supposedly gender-neutral and technocratic conceptualizations of agro-food policies. We argue that predominantly productivist and commodification-oriented policy goals and narratives give precedence to technocratic knowledge under the guise of professionalization while devaluing the role of embodied, relational knowledge in agro-food system transformation. Furthermore, the linear conceptualization of the farmer as male translates into unequal gender relations and other dimensions of social inequality in terms of resource access and control, as well as a neglect of socio-ecological care work and meal security.

**Keywords** Feminist political ecology · Meal politics · Agro-food system policy · Climate change · Southeast Asia

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## Der fehlende Blick: Feministische Perspektiven auf die Transformation der Agrar- und Ernährungssysteme in Vietnam und Indonesien

**Zusammenfassung** Vor dem Hintergrund des Klimawandels und des internationalen Diskurses über die Transformation globaler Ernährungs- und Lebensmittelsysteme zeigen wir, wie eine feministische Perspektive auf die aktuelle Agrar- und Ernährungspolitik im Globalen Süden dazu beitragen kann, soziale Ungleichheiten zu verstehen und eine geschlechter- und machtsensitivere Sichtweise auf Transformation zu entwickeln. Anhand von Fallstudien der jüngsten Agrarpolitiken in Vietnam und Indonesien und aus der Perspektive Feministischer Politischer Ökologie, wenden wir Parto Teherani-Krönners Ansatz der Mahlzeitenpolitik an, um die Unzulänglichkeiten entkörperlichter, vermeintlich geschlechtsneutraler und technokratischer Konzeptualisierungen von Agrar- und Ernährungspolitiken aufzuzeigen. Wir argumentieren, dass vorwiegend produktivistische und wachstumsorientierte politische Ziele und Narrative technokratisches Wissen unter dem Deckmantel der Professionalisierung bevorzugen, während verkörpert, relationales Wissen für die Agrar- und Ernährungstransformation abgewertet wird. Zudem schlägt sich die lineare Konzeptualisierung des „Bauern“ als männlich in ungleichen Geschlechterverhältnissen und weiteren Dimensionen sozialer Ungleichheit in Bezug auf Ressourcenzugang und -kontrolle sowie sozial-ökologischer Care-Arbeit und Mahlzeitsicherheit nieder.

**Schlüsselwörter** Feministische Politische Ökologie · Mahlzeitenpolitik · Agrar- und Ernährungssysteme · Klimawandel · Südostasien

### 1 Introduction

In the context of climate and environmental change, the future of food and agriculture is a central concern of our time. According to estimates of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 25–30% of global food production is vulnerable to extreme weather events and other climatic shocks (FAO 2016). At the same time, global agriculture produces about one-third of all global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (Crippa et al. 2021). Despite its tremendous achievements in terms of improved worldwide food security, further expansion of the dominant model of fossil fuel-based and input-intensive agricultural growth is limited by the increasing scarcity of land and water resources and deteriorating soil health. In Southeast Asia, a region particularly prone to climate change effects, members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) delicately manoeuvre between traditional fossil fuel-based development pathways and international demands for decarbonization, sustainable development and climate justice (Overland et al. 2021). At the same time, post-colonial agricultural regimes and the legacy and externalities of the Green Revolution in Asia have far-reaching repercussions on the present.

Given the paradoxical position of agriculture as both contributing to and affected by global climate change and its importance for global food security, it is unsurprising that calls to rethink the way food is produced and consumed are getting louder. Those calling for agricultural transition include international organizations, govern-

ments, corporate agribusinesses, philanthropists and scientists, as well as local civil society networks, and decolonial and agroecological food movements. Nevertheless, despite overall agreement on the need to transform food and farming, actors have highly antagonistic visions on the direction and nature of the transformation that is required. While agribusiness promotes new physical, digital, and biological technologies under the banner of the *Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR)*, transnational food movements aim at radical system change with a focus on food sovereignty and agroecology (Pimbert 2022).

Against the background of international discourse of agro-food system transformation, we show how a feminist perspective yields new insights by challenging orthodox analyses of food system change. From a Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) perspective, combined with Parto Teherani-Krönner's meal politics approach (2014), we interrogate recent agricultural policies in the Global South, using Vietnam and Indonesia as case studies. The two countries were selected as they have emerged as important regional agricultural players with impressive economic growth rates. Both aspire to join the ranks of higher middle-income countries and are vocal members of ASEAN as it attempts to establish itself as a geopolitical power situated between China and India.

Using document and feminist policy analysis, we critically examine selected agro-food policies of both countries by asking the following research questions:

1. What major policy goals and narratives can be detected?
2. What are their implications for the politics of knowledge for agro-food transformation?
3. How and to what extent might they produce and perpetuate gender and intersectional inequalities, in terms of resource access and control?
4. What are the likely effects on socio-ecological care networks and everyday meal provision?

On the basis of the case studies, we argue that predominantly productivist and commodification-oriented policy goals and narratives give precedence to technocratic knowledge under the guise of professionalization, while devaluing the importance of embodied, relational knowledge in agro-food transformation. Furthermore, we reveal how the linear conceptualization of the farmer as male translates into inequitable gender relations, and unequal resource access and control, as well as a neglect of socio-ecological care work, all of which have implications for local meal security and meal cultures.

In the following we first describe agricultural development and food system path dependencies in Southeast Asia, with particular reference to Vietnam and Indonesia. Next, we outline the perspective of FPE and link it to the concept of meal politics. After outlining our methodology, we present the analysis and results of the two case studies and a summary of the principle conclusions.

## 2 Agro-food system path dependencies in Southeast Asia

European colonialization transformed the way food was produced and consumed in Southeast Asia. The colonial powers outsourced a large part of their agricultural production to the colonies, both to enhance European food security and boost industrialization. This was achieved through the forced reclamation of frontier lands and installation of oppressive plantation models in Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia (Maimunah 2022). Pingali and Abraham (2022) identify four periods of food systems development in Asia since independence:

In the first phase (1960s–1980s), following severe famine as a consequence of colonial politics (Sen 1982), the emphasis was on hunger reduction through increased productivity of staple foods and the provision of calories to consolidate the newly independent nation states in the region. The second phase (1980s–2000s) was marked by structural reforms, rapid economic growth and the introduction of the Green Revolution. International development agencies promoted Green Revolution technology, including irrigation management, high-yielding plant varieties, and synthetically produced fertilizers and pesticides, whose adoption drove an astounding productivity boost in the region. In Indonesia, the Green Revolution was implemented thoroughly under the authoritarian regime of Suharto from 1965 to 1998. In 1986, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam initiated a comprehensive economic reform programme, *Doi Moi*. This package of trade liberalization, privatization and land reforms (Beresford 2008), combined with agricultural intensification after the end of the Indochina Wars in the 1990s, triggered agricultural productivity gains and economic growth. However, across Southeast Asia, the tremendous increases in yields and improved food security through agricultural intensification came at the expense of an ecosystem crisis affecting soil and groundwater quality as well as human health (Pingali and Abraham 2022). Moreover, the region is highly susceptible to climate change risks, including sea level rise and flooding, as well as worsening conditions for agriculture caused by high temperatures and droughts (Nguyen, V.P. 2021; Wihardja et al. 2023).

In the third phase (2000s–2020s), food production and consumption in Southeast Asia diversified as countries in the region joined the World Trade Organization and were caught up in the globalization of the food trade. Sustained economic growth led to the formation of consumption-oriented urban middle-classes, accompanied by urban *supermarketization* and the first steps towards food diversification away from staple foods. This culminated in the so-called *nutrition transition*, a change of dietary patterns characterized by growing consumption of processed, convenience foods high in fat and sugar content (Ehlert 2021). Thus, while hunger has decreased impressively in both Indonesia and Vietnam, malnutrition and diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCD) are now on the rise (IFPRI 2015). Micronutrient malnutrition as a consequence of reduced food diversity especially among poor people and in rural areas, rising obesity, and food safety concerns related to the overuse of agro-chemicals in food production constitute more recent challenges to food system sustainability (Ehlert and Faltmann 2019; Faltmann 2021; Alta et al. 2023).

Against the background of memories of historical experiences of severe food insecurity, and of productivity increases achieved during the Green Revolution, the agricultural sector in the region today faces conflicting challenges: economic development aspirations are increasingly constrained by emerging environmental crises due to resource overexploitation and accelerating climate change. In response, the current fourth phase of food system development (since 2020) aims to harness the transformative potential of scientific and technological innovation, and the digitalization of food systems. *4IR* (Pimbert 2022) comprises a suite of “climate-smart” agricultural technologies, including genome editing to develop stress-resistant crops, ICT technologies for environmental and climatic risk management, Uber-like apps for tractor sharing, and other digital tools to enhance productivity and environmental control on the farm level (Pingali and Abraham 2022).

Before turning to how these regional trends are manifested in agricultural policy in Vietnam and Indonesia, in the next section we outline the analytical perspective that informs our analysis of the policies.

### **3 Feminist perspectives on agro-food policies: feminist political ecology and the politics of the meal**

Feminist scholars question global agro-food policies by criticizing a conceptualization of food security that de-politicizes food production, and is rooted in technical solutions and orthodox global economic models of development (Brückner 2020). Instead, feminist critics highlight power relations in the agro-food system and the essential role of social reproduction as the foundation of the capitalist economic (food) system (Sproll 2020; Vercillo et al. 2023). The dominant focus on food production not only obscures inequalities of access to sufficient, nutritious, locally appropriate, safe and tasty foods. It also ignores the socio-cultural relations of food eaters and perspectives of people feeding others (Teherani-Krönner 2014; Brückner 2020). Feminist scholars criticize global policy-making arenas for excluding civil society and farmers’ groups while reaching out to agro-food corporations, leading to a bias in favour of neoliberal food security strategies, rooted in the power of markets and technology to feed the world. Furthermore, they criticize the way gender is integrated into agro-food and nutrition policy as leading to the instrumentalization of women for “smart economics” by overemphasizing the productive cash crop sector (Vercillo et al. 2023). MacGregor and Mäki (2023) similarly criticize the Sustainable Development Agenda for its reductionist binary of production and reproduction, with the latter commonly assigned to the essentialised realm of female unpaid socio-ecological care work devalued by neoclassical economics and neoliberal ideology.

This article builds on such feminist critiques, using the cases of Vietnam and Indonesia to investigate how current agri-food policies risk reinforcing social inequality. FPE combined with the concept of meal politics inform our policy analysis.

FPE assumes that human relations with the natural environment are mediated by intersectional power dynamics (see Rocheleau et al. 1996; Nightingale 2011; Harcourt and Nelson 2015; Elmhirst 2018; Padmanabhan 2022; Harcourt et al. 2023). It examines power and knowledge in gender relations and economic and

ecological systems, and how multiple forms of knowledge shape and co-construct environmental practices and the politics of the everyday. The approach yields insights into structural forms of power that define inequality and differentiated access to and control of resources across multiple forms of social difference such as gender, caste, class, ethnicity, and age. FPE is critical of the hierarchization of knowledge that treats scientific knowledge as the principal frame of reference for interpreting and intervening in human–nature relations. In contrast to the disembodiment of Western scientific epistemologies, FPE draws on the situated yet structurally framed knowledges of the everyday (Rocheleau et al. 1996), and on knowledge arising from the struggles for justice by local communities and indigenous, feminist and environmental movements (Harcourt and Nelson 2015).

Complementing these insights of FPE, we introduce the concept of meal politics (Teherani-Krönner 2014) to focus on food as a particular mode of human–nature relationship. According to Teherani-Krönner’s genuine human ecology approach, the concept of meal security complements the concept of food security and serves to correct the bias in current global debates on the production side of food. By focusing on the category of the meal, she not only places the consumption of food at the centre but also reconnects food production with the sphere of social reproduction. The concept of meal security encompasses the entire process by which food is socio-culturally transformed into a meal, from the production and processing of food, through its distribution, to eating food as a mundane and embodied social practice that is embedded in local meal cultures, and the symbolic order of food as a means of distinction and belonging (see Mennell et al. 1992; Barlösius 2016; Ehler 2021). Meals are embedded in broader meal politics (Teherani-Krönner 2014), meaning that climate and agro-food policies, urban and rural food environments, the social organization of agriculture and the social norms of food frame the construction of meals. From this perspective, Brückner and Çağlar (2022) call for biodiversity policies to pay closer attention to the lifeworlds of everyday food consumption where (agro-)biodiversity is viscerally experienced and socio-culturally negotiated. Zaremba et al. (2021) discuss feminist agroecology and highlight the importance of asking whose priorities, nutritional needs and food cultures are valued in agro-food policies. The provision of meals is closely bound up with gendered care work, a central concern in feminist debates. In line with this, we focus on the gendered realm of social reproduction to underline how power, exploitation and responsabilization are constitutive in the act of caring through food provisioning for humans and the non-human world (Bauhardt and Harcourt 2019). The concept of meal politics allows us to bring together production and consumption of food and to elaborate on care work as a reproductive practice of eating and providing food to others (DeVault 1991; Cairns and Johnston 2015).

#### 4 Agro-food policies in Vietnam and Indonesia

This paper adopts the above theoretical perspectives to critically engage with agro-food system transformation. This section starts by describing our methodological approach (4.1). We then present the analysis for Vietnam (4.2) and Indonesia (4.3),

and conclude by synthesizing the results of both cases with reference to the research questions and meal politics (4.4).

#### 4.1 Methodology

In the context of agro-food system development and environmental change in South-east Asia, the aim was to assess the content of agri-food policy in Vietnam and Indonesia as proxies for the two governments' visions for future food systems against the backdrop of climate change and development priorities.

While documentary data in the form of policy documents and newspaper articles (see below) constituted the primary data corpus, our long-standing involvement in field research in Vietnam and Indonesia respectively allowed us to ground the document analysis in relevant contextual knowledge. Ehlert has extensive experience of qualitative research on local knowledge and agrarian change in the Mekong Delta including the dynamics of gender, class and food consumption change in urban Vietnam. The Indonesian case study additionally draws on work of the IndORGANIC project on the potential of organic farming to contribute to the transition to food sustainability in Indonesia, including participatory workshops with policymakers and local stakeholders (IndORGANIC [n.d.](#)).

The FAO's FAOLEX database, a global online open-access repository of laws and regulations relating to food, agriculture and natural resource management, was used to identify policy documents pertaining to agro-food system transformation in the two countries. After reviewing available policy documents, we selected the most recent (and in the case of Indonesia, the first ever) long-term policy documents setting out the government's visions for sustainable agricultural development in the two countries as primary data sources for detailed analysis (Table 1).

For Vietnam, two recently published national policy documents were selected, namely the Prime Minister's "Decision on Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development Strategies for the Period 2021–2030 with a Vision Toward 2050" (henceforward referred to as SARD; Socialist Republic of Vietnam [2022](#)) and the "National Action Plan on Food Systems Transformation in Vietnam: Towards Transparency, Responsibility, and Sustainability by 2030" (NAP-FST; *ibid.* [2023](#)). The analysis also drew on articles published in national newspapers, identified by searching for keywords such as "agriculture and climate change", "green/organic/sustainable agriculture", and "agriculture and ICT/technology", based on the assumption that these news outlets also function as mouthpieces for government policy. We also analysed press releases and articles published by international organizations relating to the participation of Vietnam in global conferences on climate change and sustainable food systems.

For Indonesia, the principle document selected for analysis was the "Agricultural Development Master Strategy 2015–2045: Sustainable Agricultural-Bioindustry as a Solution for Future Development in Indonesia" (*Strategi Induk Pembangunan Pertanian 2015–2045: Pertanian-Bioindustri Berkelanjutan: Solusi Pembangunan Indonesia Masa Depan*) (SIPP; Ministry of Agriculture of Indonesia [2014](#)). Published in 2014, the SIPP is the first long-term strategy for agriculture in Indonesia and sets out the government's vision for agricultural development over the following three



**Table 1** Overview data corpus

<i>Vietnam</i>	<p>Prime Minister's "Decision on Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development Strategies for the period 2021–2030 with a Vision Toward 2050" (SARD; Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2022)</p> <p>"National Action Plan on Food Systems Transformation in Vietnam: towards Transparency, Responsibility, and Sustainability by 2030" (NAP-FST; Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2023)</p> <p>Eight articles published by national newspapers (e.g. Viet Nam News, Vietnamplus); press releases and articles published by international organizations about global food and climate change conferences (e.g. United Nations agencies)</p>
<i>Indonesia</i>	<p>Agricultural Development Master Strategy 2015–2045: Sustainable Agricultural Bioindustry as a Solution for Future Development in Indonesia (SIPP; Ministry of Agriculture of Indonesia 2014)</p> <p>Research papers published by the IndORGANIC project (2017–2022)</p>

decades. In the case of Indonesia, news outlets were not considered because they cannot be assumed to echo government policies in the same way as in Vietnam. However, we identified the SIPP as the central policy document on Indonesia's visions for sustainable agricultural development through the FAO's FAOLEX database. While the policy documents in the Vietnam case were supplemented by newspaper articles, the Indonesian case considered additional results of previous empirical research on organic farming practices and policy by the IndORGANIC project, as described above. We interrogated all policy documents and the additional materials of both countries according to the narratives of agricultural visions, plans regarding resource access and control, production and consumption along markers of intersectional dimensions.

We applied documentary analysis as qualitative research method (Bowen 2009). Our analysis focused on the content of the respective policies, and did not consider the processes of policy formulation or implementation (Dalglish et al. 2020). Our analytical approach combined feminist policy analysis with qualitative content analysis. Specifically, we adopted the Feminist Policy Analysis Framework developed by McPhail (2003), as adapted by Vercillo et al. (2023) to the field of agro-food and nutritional development policy and by Kanenberg et al. (2019) to incorporate intersectionality. While most policy frameworks are presented as gender-neutral, these frameworks assert that all policies entail gendered power relations affecting women in general (McPhail 2003) and, moreover, have different implications for women according to their subject position in terms of, for example, class, ethnicity and age (Kanenberg et al. 2019). This analytical framework allows exploration of how gender and other social relations of power and inequality are constructed and perpetuated by state policies, and of who are perceived as agents—or invisibilized—in the envisioned agro-food system transformation. To complement this analytical category of "intersectional identities" (ibid.), we employ the category of "care and responsibility" (ibid.) to examine the gendered responsibilities and food-related care work that sustain food production and the meaningful provision of meals (Teherani-Kröner 2014). Guided by this analytical framework, our theoretical framework and our research questions (see Sect. 1), we jointly developed a priori categories for deductive coding. This initial coding guide was complemented by inductive coding,



allowing us to incorporate topics of interest that emerged during the course of the analysis (Mayring 2015).

Based on this data analysis, the two cases presented below shed light on what we refer to, in line with feminist epistemology, as the politics of knowledge. We assess the hegemony of predominant knowledge systems in agro-food transformation and the resulting devaluation of particular knowledges through the “construction of ignorance” (Hobart 1993; Kelkar 2007). We show how different actors are included in and excluded from the agro-food policy gaze, and explore the implications for socio-ecological care networks and meal politics (Teherani-Krönner 2014).

## 4.2 Results Vietnam: the greening of agriculture and disappearance of the small-scale farmer

The first United Nations 2021 Food Systems Summit was a pivotal moment for Vietnam. Since then, the country has portrayed itself as a driver of change and a reliable partner in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda. In international fora and national press coverage, Vietnam is building its reputation as a showcase for sustainable food system transformation in the ASEAN region and beyond (FAO 2023; Government News of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2023; UNDP 2023; UN Food Systems Coordination Hub 2023; VOV World 2024). To examine these claims, this section analyses two key policy documents through our FPE and meal politics lenses.

The overall goals of the Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development policy (SARD, Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2022) are food security, overall economic and income growth. These goals are to be achieved through productivity gains and development of the agricultural value chain, with focus on agricultural commodity production. To this end, the policy directive refers to a wide range of somewhat contradictory agricultural models, including biotechnology, the circular economy, smart agriculture, and ecological and organic agriculture. These approaches are to be tested in model regions and, if successful, scaled up (Viet Nam News 2023a). The combination of various models is meant to facilitate climate change adaptation and contribute to reducing environmental pollution, including a 10% reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions compared to 2020 (SARD, p. 4). SARD envisages a total agrarian restructuring through the creation of modern rural areas where recreational, green, and aesthetic landscapes are spatially separated from highly industrialized agricultural zones, while uncontrolled migration to major urban centres is reduced through the development of satellite “green cities” (p. 10). Similarly to SARD, the major policy goals of the National Action Plan on Food Systems Transformation (NAP-FST, Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2023) are food and nutrition security, income growth, especially in rural areas, and reductions in GHG emissions. However, the NAP-FST, reflecting its focus on the overall food system, also outlines highly specific consumption and nutrition outcomes, including reductions in the rates of stunting and wasting in children, and of obesity in children and adults. NAP-FST—in contrast to SARD—specifically identifies agroecology as a promising future farming model, and sets corresponding planning goals: by 2030, 2.5% of the total agricultural land should be under organic production, and 30% of fertilizer supplied on the market

should be organic (a 50% increase compared to 2020) (p. 2). In both directives, the stated goal is to expand domestic markets, and especially to develop export markets for food commodities with green added value. This goal is reflected in news media reports on the trend towards green consumption amongst Vietnamese consumers (Vietnamplus 2023b) and the huge untapped potential of consumer demand in the EU for carbon-neutral and organically certified food (Vietnamplus 2023a, c; Viet Nam News 2023b).

This narrative of greening agriculture and modernizing the food system relies heavily on specific knowledges for agro-food transformation, while others are ignored and thereby devalued. The SARD's far-reaching vision for a total agrarian restructuring entails a corresponding shift in the labour structure from agricultural to non-agricultural employment, and from small-scale farming to land concentration and industrial-scale farming (pp. 8 f., 25). Investment in a generation of "civilized" professional farmers will enable the creation of agricultural areas dedicated to intensive commodity production. These modern farmers will be "intellectualized" by facilitating access to science, technology and digitalization, in line with the requirements of the "Industrial Revolution 4.0" (p. 13 f.). The increasing emphasis on science, technology and innovation reflects what Kurian and Munshi call "masculinist development" (2003), where sustainability is conceptualized as a technocratic-scientific problem to be addressed by "elite intervention and expertise" (MacGregor and Mäki 2023, p. 228). The narrative of the SARD assigns the power to transform to a team of professional farmers and to those with "adequate capital and technology potential [to] invest in agricultural production according to [state] planning" (p. 21). Public-private partnerships with agro-food giants like Nestlé and Syngenta Vietnam function as strategic gatekeepers for decisions on investments and the development of science, technology and markets for the envisioned transformation (Vietnamplus 2022). This growing collaboration with agro-food industry actors reflects Vietnam's political and economic shift of focus, away from the peasantry and towards non-farm groups (Trang 2011). Elite capture and professionalization of knowledge in the agro-food realm devalue and risk losing knowledges about subsistence farming and meal security, which are mainly held by women (Zaremba et al. 2021).

This raises the question of who is going to be "professionalized"? The SARD only mentions gender equality once (p. 11), in a passing reference under the rubric of inclusive development and social welfare in rural areas. This corresponds to mainstream development thinking that has a long tradition of conceptualizing women as housewives and mothers, rooted in the reproductive sphere and dependent on their husband's income generation, and certainly not as agents of development themselves (Kabeer 1994). In this ideal vision of a rural landscape, void of small-scale farmers, cultivated by professionalized farmers, women are unlikely to have access to state subsidies, land agglomeration programmes, extension services, or training. Access to productive assets like land is embedded in unequal gender relations, which socio-culturally, administratively and judicially favour male farmers (Nguyen, T.K.C. 2019). Given this production-reproduction dichotomy in the agro-food sector, the focus on professionalization is likely to exacerbate gendered inequality, with financial support to promote government policies flowing to large-scale mostly male farmers. In turn, agroecology, one of the farming models proposed in the NAP-FST,

also needs to be carefully assessed. While high profitable green cash-crops often remain in the hands of professionalized, male farmers, women are assigned to the more labour-intensive, low-input agroecology. On the basis of the essentialization of women as closer to nature and their roles in forms of social reproduction, they risk an undue labour burden to “serve the ‘greater good’ of combatting climate change, biodiversity loss, and land degradation” (Zaremba et al. 2021, p. 9).

Furthermore, while SARD envisages the conservation and use of resilient indigenous varieties for upscaling and commodification and praises indigenous communities for their knowledge of traditional plant varieties (pp. 7, 15). Yet, the focus on *4IR* technologies and associated intellectual property regimes, and on private–public partnerships in research, risks opening the door to the extraction and commodification of indigenous knowledge in the name of sustainability. This might have negative impacts on indigenous plants and meal security. In this regard, the NAP-FST’s promotion of nutrition-sensitive agriculture programs for disadvantaged mountainous areas and ethnic minorities (p. 5) reads like a measure to “compensate” for the reduced meal security and the decimation of biodiversity (see Löw 2023). At the same time, Rigg (2020) shows how meal security of indigenous mountainous communities in neighbouring Laos is already threatened by their integration into agribusiness production networks producing fodder to meet increasing demand for meat among the growing middle class in Vietnam. Here the intersectional lens helps to exemplify the relationality between female food caretakers in urban middle-class settings and rural indigenous women, who experience higher rates of malnutrition than other social groups in Vietnam (Le et al. 2023).

Moreover, scaled-up production of green export commodities reduces meal diversity for local consumers and might reinforce the problem of malnutrition, especially in the countryside where these strains are already felt (Ehlert 2012). The export of certified healthy, nutritious and environmentally friendly products risks leaving domestic eaters concerned about food safety. Women, who are mostly responsible for food care work, worry about the dubious quality of the food they provide to their families. While urban middle classes can access expensive organic niche markets, catering to premium female consumers, as a coping strategy, the lack of alternative options for women from lower social classes affects their meal security (ibid. 2021; Faltmann 2021).

Thus, Vietnam’s vision of green agricultural modernization embodies increasing separation of production from consumption, thereby weakening the socio-cultural rootedness of local food systems and contributing to increased anxiety among consumers about the quality, tastiness and perceived healthiness of food ingested in daily meals, prepared predominantly by women.

#### **4.3 Results Indonesia: missing meals and people in a top-down productivist state with an organic niche**

Analysis of food policy in Indonesia reveals similarities and differences in comparison with the case of Vietnam. In 2023 Indonesia assumed the G20 presidency and led the debate on the transformation towards sustainable agriculture. Indonesia’s efforts to achieve sustainable agro-food systems must address the triple challenge

of reducing poverty, maintaining food and nutrition security and cutting carbon emissions (T20 2022). The Agricultural Development Master Strategy 2015–2045 (SIPP) (Ministry of Agriculture of Indonesia 2014) frames the major policy goals and narratives of food security, farmer welfare and climate change. It sets out a 30-year trajectory linking agricultural development to a sustainable bioindustry and incorporating agriculture into the logic of the corporate sector. In what follows, we draw on the IndORGANIC study of organic farming as a proxy for a more general transformation towards sustainable agriculture in Indonesia (Schreer and Padmanabhan 2020; Laksmana and Padmanabhan 2021). Though the politics and practices of organic agriculture are a niche concern for agricultural policy, developments in organic farming reflect broader trends in politics of food knowledge and meals.

SIPP identifies global climate change as a threat to agricultural production, while downplaying agriculture's own role as a driver of climate change. The strategy notes that predominantly small-scale Indonesian farmers are challenged by multinational corporations and the requirements of value chain management (p. 85). However, as in Vietnam, in the long run it is envisaged that peasants will be replaced by industrial farmers and vaguely defined agro-services (Sudaryanto 2015). The small-scale farmer appears in the strategy as an indistinct figure: a class of object that needs to be developed and integrated into the emerging bioeconomy, in order to escape from poverty and, ultimately, leave the agricultural sector (SIPP, p. 57). The plan identifies governance reform and decentralization as management measures to obtain people's participation. However, dismissal of small-scale farming as "outdated" prevents deeper analysis of nuanced social questions of power in rural areas pertaining to intersectional dimensions such as gender, generation, class and ethnicity—none of which are mentioned in SIPP. Wihardja et al. (2023) criticize Indonesia's agricultural policy as being stuck in a production-centric mindset that hinders adoption of socio-ecological agricultural practices. This approach is also evident in policies set out for organic agriculture.

Organic agriculture in Indonesia emerged in the 1980s as a response to the negative impacts of the Green Revolution on human and environmental health (Simatupang and Timmer 2008). The development of organic agriculture began as a civil society movement and was only later taken up by the state in the *reformasi* era (Fitz et al. 2021) following the fall of President Suharto in 1998. Political decentralization led to increased government involvement in organic agriculture, which was viewed as a potential niche market (Hidayat et al. 2011). In 2001, the government launched the "Go Organic 2010" programme to establish Indonesia as a leading exporter of organic food by 2010, not intended to change consumption patterns of Indonesians. In 2002, the government introduced the Indonesian National Standard for the organic food system. Thus, in the 21st century, organic agriculture in Indonesia entered a phase of standardization that mirrored the dominant agro-economic trajectory. The logic of the regulations pertaining to organic agriculture is to reduce complex, dynamic and knowledge-intensive ecological cycles to commodified inputs (Schreer and Padmanabhan 2020).

These framings in the SIPP have implications for the dominance and devaluation of knowledges in the processes of agro-food transformation. The Indonesian state views organic farming as promising export-oriented sector in need of regulation and

standardization. This narrow view reduces the diversity of meanings and practices of organic farming by defining “organic” as “organically certified”, privileging legal criteria and market integration over the agricultural practices that farmers engage in on a daily basis (ibid.). This market-oriented approach fails to understand the complex social-ecological dimensions of organic farming practices and meal cultures as they evolve in everyday life.

An FPE reading reveals that out of the diverse meanings of organic (ibid.), only one interpretation is put into policy practice. The state-driven certification model echoes the conventional agricultural model by radically simplifying human–nature relations and emphasizing uniformity over socio-ecological relations (Rocheleau et al. 1996). This approach duplicates the package deal of the Green Revolution, consisting of fertilizer, seeds and agrochemicals, regardless of social-ecological context and the diversity of knowledge holders. In this dominant model of organic practice, regulatory institutions shape interactions in accordance with a perceived hierarchy of scientific expertise that privileges disembodied over embodied knowledge and male knowledge over female knowledge. In this hierarchization of knowledges, that unquestionably accepts the predominant patriarchal conceptualization of the farmer as male and senior, it is doubtful whether female bodies are considered as knowledgeable at all. In contrast, an FPE perspective reveals the shortcomings of reducing creative and embodied male and female practitioners of farming to mere receivers of advice and other inputs. Laksmana (2024) criticizes the cult of expertise and calls for an epistemological shift in alternative agriculture by prioritizing embodied knowledge (Kinkaïd 2019).

While the dominant politics of knowledge in the SIPP ignores women as farmers, businesswomen and activists (p. 49), a focus on social relations challenges policy makers to think beyond the male, senior farmer and engage with a diverse, intersectional farming population. While charismatic male eco-leaders in Islamic boarding schools and in Green Islam reach a wide following (Keilbart 2022), women administrators and policy makers are prominent at regency and district levels and actively push for organic policies at these sub-national and local scales. In farming communities, while few women dare to claim farmer status, charismatic female pioneers exist (Matous 2023). Young farmers and women, with limited social and cultural power in their community, can nevertheless be successful in convincing their peers to adopt new practices, and in doing so challenge the received wisdom that leaders are male and old (ibid.).

The narrow view of the SIPP is reflected in neglect of gender and intersecting inequalities in socio-ecological care, which is a fundamental requirement for daily meal provision. The strategy is heavily laced with rhetoric of food sufficiency and food sovereignty in the policy sphere (Schreer and Padmanabhan 2020), with a focus on the output of five staple foods, and especially rice. However, it disregards local meal cultures by defining food provision in terms of calorie and protein intake. Indonesian social policy recognizes the importance of micronutrients for tackling the alarming rate of stunting in children (Alta et al. 2023). At the same time, nutritional status is identified as an income-related variable, not as an outcome of meal politics (SIPP, pp. 21/16). However, the SIPP fails to address questions of power linked to income distribution and to the households as production and consumption units.

The SIPP envisages that incomes will grow in line with increased productivity while the number of people working in agriculture will shrink (p. 81). Poverty is expected to disappear along with the peasantry and the remaining farmers will catch up economically with other sectors. Thus, the industrialization of agriculture and its transformation into a supplier to other sectors implicitly excludes the farming household as the site of intergenerational care and knowledge transmission. The farming family as a consumption and production unit vanishes, and with it concerns about the already neglected theme of intra-household power relations (Agarwal 1997), particularly in relation to the politics of daily meal provisioning. The foundational provision of care to reproduce labour therefore remains hidden by the professionalization of the male farmer.

The SIPP takes care relations as given, while rendering them invisible by adopting the male farmer as the norm—whether materialized as the small-scale farmer, the professional farmer, or the industrial farmer. The latter is envisioned as developing socio-political capital by strengthening business capabilities and organizing around political interests. In contrast, small-scale farmers might not fall in line and rather seek to build social solidarity through knowledge exchange and mutual cooperation (Laksmiana and Padmanabhan 2021). However, farmers of all ethnicities, age and genders, equipped to different degrees with agricultural, economic and political knowledge, depend on informal networks of care relations. This reveals the fallacy of the imagined, independent, mainstream farmer freed from the constraints of an opaque peasant society. The modern farmer who fits neatly into linear value chains is still reliant on unacknowledged networks of care.

#### 4.4 Discussion: blending the Vietnamese and Indonesian cases

This section discusses and compares the results of the two cases, with reference to the research questions. Table 2 closes this section by synthesizing the power relations, frictions, and contexts of the meal politics both countries.

First, we show how the agro-food policies of Vietnam and Indonesia both envisage agricultural modernization as key for reaching the goals of food and nutrition security, climate change adaptation and overall economic and income growth. The goal of agricultural policy in both countries is the integration of agriculture into the corporate sector. Vietnamese policy for sustainable food system transformation aims at a wholesale restructuring and industrialization of the agrarian sector. Likewise, Indonesian policy is built on a narrative of sustainable bioindustry that incorporates agriculture into the corporate sector. Policies in both countries display a production-centred mindset with a focus on market expansion and industrial-scale production as components of an opaque greening agenda. Despite paying lip service to alternative agriculture and other niche policies, they pursue a mainstream industrial agricultural policy. Alternative agriculture is only valued as a response to health concerns among the growing and increasingly affluent domestic urban middle-classes, and as a means to gain a foothold in European markets, overcome import barriers and enhance the country's reputation among Northern consumers.

Second, our feminist policy analysis provides insights into the politics of knowledge in agro-food transformation (Rocheleau et al. 1996). Since agriculture as a busi-

**Table 2** Meal politics of agro-food transformation in Vietnam and Indonesia

	Vietnam	Indonesia
<i>Goals and narratives</i>	Production-centred industrial agricultural policy with greening agenda Total agrarian restructuring replaces peasants Growing production–consumption divide Green modernization with only recent focus on organic farming sector	De-politicization of organic movements via integration into bioindustrial economy
<i>Politics of knowledge</i>	Sustainability as a technological–scientific problem Domination of expert knowledge Patriarchal conceptualization of professionalization Devaluation of embodied and female subsistence knowledge Revaluation of indigenous knowledge; risk of extraction	Devaluation of alternative knowledge of organic movements
<i>Social inequality</i>	<i>Production/reproduction dichotomy:</i> Green cash crops by male professional farmers; feminization of subsistence and of labour-intensive organic practices Limited access to assets for agro-food transformation by female/youth <i>Gender–class intersections:</i> Increased meat consumption by urban middle-class at the expense of meal security of diverse women in rural areas Health-oriented consumption of premium organic by middle-class inaccessible for lower classes	
<i>Socio-ecological care work and meals</i>	Sustainable agriculture as economic techno-scientific activity for income and nutritional goals, neglecting relational, embodied agri-food systems Organic certification regimes reduce socio-ecological cooperation to legal definitions and marketing schemes Growing production–consumption divide threatens the social embeddedness of socio-ecological care relations	

ness is conceived as a knowledge-based enterprise, access to and control of knowledge are of central importance. In both countries, “expert” knowledge is assigned a dominant role in the transformation of agro-food systems, which is conceptualized as a technocratic–scientific problem. Policies in both countries embody the narrative of the male farmer as successful agro-economic manager. “His” high level of agricultural professionalization in terms of scientific and technological expertise and his entrepreneurial spirit equip him with the agency to drive the greening of agriculture and tap into growing markets for green added value food commodities. At the same time, women are not perceived as change agents. In Vietnam as in Indonesia, the presumed hierarchy of scientific expertise entails replacing the peasant and his embodied knowledge systems with scientific reasoning. This “masculinist development” vision (Kurian and Munshi 2003) juxtaposes science-based expertise with the constructed ignorance of female farmers and the marginalization of diverse local knowledges (Kelkar 2007).

Third, we expose the implications of these dominant representations on the discursive level of policies for social inequality in terms of resource access and control (Vercillo et al. 2023). Our analyses focused on the intersection of gender with other



dimensions of inequality, namely ethnicity and class in Vietnam, and age in Indonesia. In Indonesia, by denying youth, and in particular young women, a voice and any attractive opportunities, the policies predestine them to fill the care gaps arising from the linear conceptualization of the male farmer. In both countries, the practice of assigning labour-intensive subsistence production and agroecological farming to women should be critically examined in the context of men's often exclusive access to profitable cash-cropping and land agglomeration initiatives (Zaremba et al. 2021). In Vietnam, after decades of supplanting indigenous varieties, which are preferred by ethnic and local communities in taste and used for ritual and celebratory purpose (Rousseau and Turner 2018), current government policy, ironically, re-prizes indigenous (women's) knowledge of plant varieties under the banner of sustainability. Directly targeted for agricultural development, local knowledge faces the risk of extraction and commodification. While mainly produced for the international market, the health and food safety benefits of organic food are widely recognized in both countries. However, only affluent middle-class consumers can afford to buy organic "safe" food. Moreover, we point to the intersectional dimension of increasing meat consumption as a status-enhancing practice of growing urban middle-class households, which comes at the expense of food crops and, therewith, meal security of diverse women in rural areas.

Fourth, we highlight possible negative impacts of agricultural policies on local socio-ecological care networks and the embodied practices of daily meal provision. Socio-ecological care relations are fundamental for meal security, but they are missing from the policies in both countries, which assume the welfare of farming households and the larger undifferentiated rural communities to be dependent on—increasingly—off-farm incomes. As we show, biodiversity loss and the increasing prevalence of malnutrition in Southeast Asia are due to the cumulative effects of post-colonial plantation models, the ideology of the Green Revolution, long-standing programmes of national self-sufficiency in rice and calorie production (Pingali and Abraham 2022), and the more recent development of agro-food business models in the region. While the policies examined acknowledge these externalities of agro-food system modernization and propose nutrition-sensitive agriculture and organic as solutions for "health-concerned" consumers, they fail to address complexity and context, leaving the webs of care of dependents and the living matter upon which agriculture depends in the dark (see Elmhirst 2018). This was exemplified by the Indonesian case of organic certification for non-local markets. Local concepts of organic agriculture as networks of socio-ecological cooperation, are subordinated to legal schemes and market logics. The reduction of plant species diversity goes hand in hand with the loss not only of micronutrients in food but also of embodied tastes and relationships, memories, and gendered food knowledges. Such visceral dimensions of eating, including the sensual assessment of food quality, are supplanted by standardized nutrition measurements and outcomes (see Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2008; Brückner and Çağlar 2022). To rebuild trust in the quality of food, dependence on external and expensive certification schemes is growing, reinforced by the widening divide between production and consumption, which is the explicit aim of agro-food policies in both countries.

## 5 Conclusion

Through the lenses of FPE and meal politics, we identify the major narratives and discourses driving agricultural and food policies in Vietnam and Indonesia and also shine a spotlight on what is omitted, and whose perceptions, knowledges, nutritional needs and meal cultures are ignored.

As the case studies show, the vision of agricultural policy in both countries is restricted to the aspiring male farmer implicitly invisibilising the farmer's wife (care) work. The hierarchy of knowledges is reaffirmed, with scientists', experts' and agroindustry's uniformist gaze dominating and silencing the situated and sensory experience of people farming, eating and feeding others, while disembodied abstractions prevail over concrete social-ecological relations. These daily politics of meal provisioning are absent from the field of agricultural policy. We argue that widening the conceptualization of farmers to include youth and women and that of food to include meals are two important first steps towards correcting these deficiencies.

We hold that feminist perspectives are essential to prevent food system interventions from technocratic reductionism, whereby the understanding that food flows from farm to fork is reduced to a mere economic function of linear management and production efficiency. Instead, we understand food systems as a relational web of production and social reproduction that is laced with structural power. Climate change and agro-food system transformation in Southeast Asia, requires a fundamental restructuring of society and is therefore, a social question that cannot be reduced to technocratic fixes. This approach underscores the need for feminist epistemology, with its emphasis on power structures, frictions and context, to direct attention to the different dimensions of inequality involved in food system transformation. Feminist perspectives recognize plural and socio-culturally situated forms of knowledge and direct attention, in this case, towards local meal cultures. At the same time, it is an inherently feminist concern to question *whose* perspectives are included in the deliberation of transformation pathways, and to contest normalized agricultural paradigms. The feminist lens looks for those *who* will care for adequate food and meal security and enact the practices of sustainable agriculture.

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