Policy Brief | Governance of Food Systems Transformation

The health of our food systems profoundly affects the health of our bodies, as well as the health of our environment, our economies and our cultures. When they function well, food systems have the power to bring us together as families, communities and nations.
– UN Food Systems Summit

Governance emerged as a major theme from national and independent food systems dialogues (FSDs) as well as from all Action Tracks. National FSDs emphasize a need for coherence and consistency while diversifying and deepening stakeholder engagement. National dialogues have underscored the lack of knowledge and data to support constructive, systemic, decision-making processes. This was coupled with the need to recognize complex relationships and tensions between competing food systems priorities. Independent FSDs highlighted the importance of diverse, inclusive, and equitable engagement of women, youth, small farmers, and Indigenous people in food systems transformation decision-making and governance.

Transforming our collective food systems--from local to global--is necessary to achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Yet food systems are complex: they encompass multiple sectors--from seeds to land health, from local production to global value chains, and from consumption patterns to food waste management. They influence numerous outcomes, from nutrition to economic development and climate change. As such, catalyzing food systems change requires operating across diverse sectors, scales, and stakeholders. Current governance mechanisms tend to be siloed, often with limited participation, transparency, and accountability in decision-making processes. This makes it difficult to execute and monitor comprehensive change that reflects the complexity of food systems and the diversity of actors.

This brief defines Food System Governance, presents Guiding Principles for Food Systems Transformation, outlines a human-rights based approach to governance, and lays out key dimensions of effective food system governance. The brief concludes with a recommendation to develop a community of practice to advance innovation and learning on food systems governance.

> **Highlights**
> - Food systems governance is the process by which societies negotiate, implement, and evaluate collective priorities while building shared understanding of synergies and trade-offs among diverse sectors, jurisdictions, and stakeholders.
> - Guiding Principles for Food Systems Transformation (p. 2) provide a compass to inform future implementation decisions.
> - Systems transformation requires building capacity for all-of-society to adapt and solve problems as they arise, recognizing complex systems change over time.
> - Coherently aligning relevant policies with sustainable food system goals is one of the most powerful levers for food systems transformation.
> - Food systems change requires bringing together actors from different sectors and institutions to work in an aligned and coordinated way that is place-based, with a long-term and multi-generational commitment.

WHAT IS FOOD SYSTEMS GOVERNANCE?

Food Systems Governance is a tailored process by which societies negotiate, implement, and evaluate collective priorities of food systems transformation while building shared understanding of synergies and trade-offs among diverse sectors, scales, and stakeholders.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

Throughout the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) and in surrounding processes, many institutions and stakeholders have called for a set of principles to help guide the governance of food systems transformation. The Governance group[i] has developed a set of *draft* Guiding Principles[1] to provide a vision of the goals for food systems transformation. These are designed to inform choices, provide direction (not prescription), and offer adaptability to diverse contexts, recognizing that complex systems and our understanding of them changes over time. A **priority for action** is to convene a diverse cross-section of food systems actors to foster shared understanding and convergence on a final set of Guiding Principles for the Governance of Food Systems transformation.

1. **Uphold peoples' right to food and nutrition.** Build food systems based on the culture, identity, tradition, social, and gender equity of local communities that provide healthy, safe, accessible, affordable, diversified, nutritionally and culturally appropriate diets.

2. Ensure the **conservation, protection, and restoration of the health and integrity of the Earth's ecosystems** including through sustainable healthy food production and consumption based on ecologically sound methods within planetary boundaries, while ensuring resilience to future crises.

3. Ensure the **protection of the climate system** from the harmful impacts of food systems and enable food systems as well as people to adapt and increase resilience to climate change.

4. **Ensure intergenerational, gender, and socio-economic equity** so that our current way of food production and consumption does not compromise the ability of future generations or marginalized populations to achieve their own right to food and to secure their livelihoods.

5. **Ensure agency** so that all can fully participate and prosper from food systems, including the most vulnerable constituencies encompassing, but not limited to, Indigenous peoples, women, youth, refugees, small holder farmers/peasants/producers, pastoralists, fishers, and workers.

6. **Leave no one behind**, ensure access to safe and nutritious food, end poverty, hunger, and malnutrition in all their forms and dimensions with a focus in particular on the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable.

7. **Do no harm** and ensure that transformation pathways, food system actors and stakeholders prevent and mitigate any negative impact on the environment and health of affected populations.

8. **Ensure that the economic, social, and technological initiatives related to food systems occur in harmony with nature** and are inclusive, building upon Indigenous, farmer, and local traditional knowledge as well as the best available scientific information in all implementation decisions.

9. **Ensure urgent, timely, effective, and complementary humanitarian responses** to crises are linked to development interventions, so as to strengthen food systems.

As a Summit outcome, Guiding Principles serve as an optimistic, collective vision for food systems transformation to ensure "food systems play a central role in building a fairer, more sustainable world."[2]

A HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO FOOD SYSTEM GOVERNANCE

Recognizing that human rights underpin food systems, this section offers a human rights-based approach to food systems governance. Human rights constitute a set of universally applicable standards and concrete obligations owned primarily by States to guide policymakers to support justice and the rule of law. Establishing "good governance" for food systems transformation requires heightened attention to the right to food. The international community has already developed and endorsed several resources to support the progressive realization of the right to food consistent with "good governance." Placing human rights, justice, and the rule of law at the center of food systems governance—i.e., adopting a human rights-based approach—ensures that

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[1] These draft Guiding Principles are adapted from previously agreed UN member state processes.

[2] UN Food Systems Summit. About the Summit. https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit/about

governments and other policymakers design and implement inclusive legislative frameworks, build effective institutions, and allocate resources to account for underlying environmental, social, and cultural inequality across food systems.

An enabling governance environment may include: free and democratic civic spaces that ensure civil society actors have opportunities to shape decision-making processes and hold relevant parties accountable, in line with SDG 16; transparent monitoring and accountability mechanisms; oversight institutions to monitor and report on the right to adequate food, and delivery of other public goods and services; avenues for inclusive and participatory legal and institutional reform; capacity development; legal empowerment and awareness on the right to adequate food and related human rights, particularly for vulnerable groups; safeguards against government corruption and rights violations; and inclusive and effective political, economic and social institutions (including state and non-state) at all levels.

DIMENSIONS OF FOOD SYSTEM GOVERNANCE

Utilizing the Guiding Principles for Food Systems Transformation as a vision and resource, governments at all levels, civil society, private sector, and other stakeholders will need to adjust processes of decision-making in food systems. Below are key dimensions of food systems governance.

Define holistic, context-specific goals and targets for food systems transformation. Assessing the current status of food systems with respect to these goals and targets is a prerequisite for agreeing on transformative action and measuring progress. Goals and targets need to be appropriate for the territorial context, embedded in landscape and culture, and developed in a participatory and inclusive manner. A systemic approach enables decision-makers to reduce trade-offs and increase synergies, consider distributional impacts as well as spatial and temporal scales, and illuminates the interconnectedness of SDGs, particularly those linked to poverty reduction, climate action, and food security. Negotiating goals and targets often requires reconciling trade-offs and diverging interests, as well as co-designing solutions to find synergies. Monitoring progress on the agreed goals and targets requires the establishment of effective accountability mechanisms and assigning clear responsibilities to different sectors and institutions. Approaches and tools such as True Cost Accounting and TEEBAgriFood can be used for holistic food systems evaluation.

Foster inter-Ministerial coordination (horizontal integration). Food systems transformation depends on strengthening inter-institutional mechanisms that integrate relevant sectors and engage them in strategy development, budget planning, and implementation, in accordance with national legal and institutional frameworks. In doing so, Ministries will need to articulate their respective roles across different aspects of food systems transformation and identify potential tensions, trade-offs, and synergies. Without coordination, it is difficult to consider the impacts of decisions made by one Ministry on outcomes key for another. A variety of approaches can facilitate coordination: identifying one lead Ministry with a coordinating role, creating an inter-ministerial committee, or establishing dedicated agencies responsible for articulating a coherent policy vision. The Netherlands' integrated ministerial decision-making practices is an example of how to bring about policy coordination and coherence. India also has an inter-ministerial approval committee for coordinated decision-making, as another example.

Strengthening territorial governance. While food system transformation calls for action at all levels, territorial level action is central to ensure food systems meet local needs, priorities, and context, whether through local governments, landscape partnerships, city-regions, indigenous territories or other place-based approaches. Territorial governance can support transformation by bringing together local actors from different sectors and institutions to work in an aligned and coordinated manner, with agreed goals and a long-term, multi-generational commitment. Studies on four continents document more than 428 local landscape partnerships with negotiated action plans aligning agriculture, food security, livelihood, and environmental goals. There are already many existing networks of local governments, city-regions, indigenous territories and landscapes that could share evidence and learning for collective action. Establishing territorial action platforms (e.g., food system councils, landscape partnerships) should be a priority. National policy frameworks that embrace territorial, landscape, and city-region action as a focal level of food systems governance can structure policy

to empower territorial partnerships. Moreover, national and subnational governments can work with civil society and the private sector to institutionalize long-term technical, legal, training, and financial support for these partnerships. Scientific data, tools, and knowledge can inform negotiation, planning, and policy at territorial and national scales.

Facilitate effective multi-level governance (vertical integration). Vertical integration of governance is needed across scales, from the local to international. Governments transforming their food systems need to define food systems objectives, priorities, and desired outcomes. To inform and link decision-making at different levels, communication channels are needed between food policy councils at national and regional levels, and among local territories and communities. Multi-level processes can facilitate the transfer of effective practices across scales and foster connectivity between national (and even international) decision-making and local governance.

Pursue reforms to coherently align relevant policies with sustainable food system goals. Policy reform was identified by UNFSS Action Tracks and Food System Dialogues as one of the most powerful levers for food systems transformation. A coherent set of policies should simultaneously address national and sub-national objectives, including the vision reflected in the draft Guiding Principles (see p.2). Policies and laws should incentivize sustainable and health-promoting practices, constrain and disincentivize unsustainable and unhealthy ones, and support scaling of transformative agroecological systems. An increasing number of countries, federal states and municipalities have shown that – with political will – food system legal and policy reform is actionable, impactful and can reduce overall societal costs and have a positive impact in food systems and livelihoods. As policies influence all aspects of food systems, such reform will have positive effects on human health, equitable livelihoods, regenerating environmental integrity, while providing income opportunities particularly for rural youth and women. Subsequently, existing policies relevant for food systems must be reviewed (including agriculture, fishery, spatial planning, health, environmental, rural development, climate, trade), assessing gaps and associated opportunity costs, aligning them with food system objectives and eliminating incoherence, discrimination and inequalities. Repurposing public support to the agriculture and food sector is a powerful tool in policy reform that requires particular attention.

Enhance equitable and inclusive multi-stakeholder processes (from engagement to collaboration). Diverse stakeholders have been engaged throughout the UNFSS and FSDs with growing recognition that broad cooperation is necessary for food systems transformation. Multi-stakeholder processes in support of food systems transformation need to consider a number of factors for effective, credible processes and resulting outcomes. First, it is critical to articulate the objectives of multi-stakeholder processes: whether stakeholders are being engaged for information-sharing, consultation, decision-making, collaboration, implementation, and/or evaluation. Second, stakeholders need a clear rationale for engagement, bearing in mind limited time and resources, especially among vulnerable and marginalized groups generally excluded from governance. Third, processes can ensure meaningful stakeholder participation by building participatory capacity in light of disparate power and resources. Fourth, once defined, the process objectives can be used to determine what constitutes a stakeholder on the topic, followed by articulating their roles, rights, and responsibilities in the process. Fifth, it is critical to transparently and genuinely communicate conflicts, trade-offs, divergences, and asymmetries. Finally, effective and credible multi-stakeholder processes are not intended as a substitute for meaningful and inclusive participation in governance and policy decision-making processes, rather as a complement to those. Finally, the UNFSS Innovation Lever developed seven principles for multi-stakeholder collaboration.[ii] In future food systems collaborations, it is important that stakeholders collectively define the terms upon which they engage--this fosters buy-in and legitimacy for the process and supports the strength of its outcomes.

Institutionalize support for food systems governance. Actors promoting food systems transformation today have few places to go for long-term support. There is a need to design and institutionalize support systems among public, private, and civil society for multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approaches to food systems transformation. These support systems must be developed in conjunction with strengthening marginalized stakeholders' participation through rights-based planning, territorial, and community-led initiatives. Building capacity to identify and cultivate synergies across sectors while being cognizant of climate impacts and

community needs is essential to planning and managing resilience and investments in a long-term horizon. The types of support will need to be contextualized but are likely to include: facilitation services, training, spatial planning, policy advocacy, legal aid, planning processes, communications, technical advisory and extension services, scientific support, monitoring and evaluation, knowledge exchange, links to market and finance, and policy advocacy. The design of these support services should be co-developed with users, including Indigenous peoples, women, and youth to ensure respect for local knowledge and that support is responsive to their needs.

Strengthen governance of finance. Finance will need to play a leading role in food systems transformation. To do so, national and international financial governance needs reform and strengthening, as addressed by UNFSS Action Tracks and the Finance Lever. It is imperative that financial flows align with, and do not undermine, collective food systems priorities. Governance of public expenditures on food systems may require new tools and mechanisms (e.g., Money Flows Assessments). Financial flows for public subsidies and procurement contracts for products, services, and infrastructure require transparency and accountability mechanisms--which also support transparency in supply chains and trade. Public and private finance institutions need improved coordination, while aid agencies, civil society, and public development banks need complementary roles in financing food systems. Effective articulation of national and local governmental financial flows may require financial regulatory reform. New financial models are needed to encourage investments that reflect multi-stakeholder territorial priorities and strategies. For example, landscape or territorial banks that respond to territorial governance could play a crucial role in resource mobilization through diverse funds and mechanisms. Financial institutions may need to reorganize their portfolios to serve cross-sectoral food system investments. It is essential to mainstream the valuation of nature and assessment of climate and biodiversity risks into investment decision-making. New international reporting disclosure frameworks being developed by the Task Force on Nature-related Financial Disclosures (TNFD) and the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD) can be applied through a food systems lens. Governance changes are also needed to improve smallholders, SMEs, women, youth, and indigenous communities' access to finance.

Address land and resource rights. Land and natural resources underlie many dimensions of food systems: agricultural production (land, water, agrobiodiversity), gathering of wild foods, biofuels, and inputs for agro-processing. Their effective management mitigates risk of drought, heat, pests, disease, flooding and high winds, as well as habitat for biodiversity and human settlements. Rules and rights of ownership, use and access to land, water, forests, and fisheries – and how such decisions are made – profoundly influence food systems. Aligning food systems governance with the Guiding Principles will sometimes require re-thinking and re-negotiating these rights.

Enhance private sector governance. Private sector actors play a central role in food systems, and thus must both engage, and have their issues addressed, in multi-stakeholder governance processes. Corporations must also examine and adapt their own internal governance. Accounting for food systems externalities (positive and negative) requires transparency and standardized approaches and metrics to support and accelerate market transformation. Policy guidance and norms will contribute to the validity and comparability of impact assessments and value accounting. The integration of True Cost Accounting into business sustainability reporting will facilitate internal decision making, impact-weighted accounts and impact statements, and enable the private sector to report on and manage their externalities to enhance the value they create. Internationally accepted frameworks such as the Natural, and Social and Human Capital Protocols, Social Value International's framework, and the System of Economic Environmental Accounting (SEEA) represent the synthesis of previous efforts to standardize approaches. The standardization of metrics, definitions and criteria will be key for sustainable production, processing, trade and consumption. Government leadership is required to modernize accounting and transform private sector practices, decision making, and reporting.

Strengthen rule of law supporting food systems transformation: Formalizing the above governance dimensions in the rule of law can be an accelerator for food systems transformation. Issues range from establishing the human right to food, to legally guaranteeing processes for communities and multi-stakeholder platforms to provide input to policy and programs, to accountability mechanisms for food system governance

such as transparent public budgets. While flexibility can facilitate stakeholder negotiation and creative co-design, some core legal guidance may need to be in place, for example, to ensure cross-sector planning. Communities and highly vulnerable populations should be legally empowered to claim the effective implementation of laws and their rights. National or subnational jurisdictions are encouraged to undertake a legal gap analysis to identify priority actions, recognizing that many state and non-state actors need technical support and capacity development on governance issues.

CREATING A FOOD SYSTEMS GOVERNANCE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Priority for Action | Creating a Community of Practice (CoP) for Food Systems Governance
Drawing upon existing models, members would volunteer to:
- Recognize the urgency for, and commit to, food systems transformation
- Determine priorities based upon national, sub-national, and stakeholder engagement
- Commit to finalized Guiding Principles
- Draw upon on the UNFSS solution clusters (i.e., a menu to choose from) to develop national pathways
- Commit to exchange and co-learning
- Connect to and mutually reinforce other communities of practice that may form (e.g., Indigenous, territorial, private sector, cities, etc.)

Through the food systems dialogues, many member states and other stakeholders have underscored the important roles of governance in food systems transformation. As UN member states develop their national pathways--while civil society and private sector actors consider how to improve food system governance--creating a community of practice (CoP) will support governance and policy innovation, experimentation, and shared learning. To draw an example from structured supports in the private sector-- innovation clusters, accelerators, and incubators provide onramps for new ideas and innovations to scale. These supports provide training, mentorship support, help catalyze connections, and pilot test solutions. Comparatively few such supports exist for policy innovators. These supports are a proven method for de-risking innovation and could easily be adapted for government intrapreneurs to explore new models for food systems governance. Creating a shared, apolitical space for exchanging first-hand experience from governance and policy innovation can act as an accelerator for food systems transformation across all relevant sectors, scales, and stakeholders.

A global CoP could show-case best practice and celebrate leaders whose reform actions deliver progress. Since governance, legal, and policy frameworks need to be adjusted to the territorial context and are substantially different across industrialized countries, low-income countries, SIDS, and politically fragile contexts, such peer-to-peer exchange could be organized among groups of similar background. Insights garnered from participation across Coalitions of Action will also inform the CoP and catalyze continued coalition growth and momentum.

Existing models can inform the design framework for a food systems Governance CoP. For example, the voluntary Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, calls for members to commit to a lean set of principles, offers thematic clusters as entry points towards achieving a common goal of sustainable food systems, and fosters sharing experiences. The Food Policy Forum for Change, a pilot initiative supported by FAO, Switzerland, and Germany, facilitates peer-to-peer exchanges among a growing community of policy makers engaged in food systems transformation. The Landscapes for People, Food and Nature initiative provided a platform for global knowledge-sharing and dialogue on landscape-level management. Finally, the Global Research Alliance of Agricultural Greenhouse Gas Emissions (GRA) is a model for advancing innovation and learning among technical and policy practitioners across 60+ member countries and partner organizations. The GRA charter provides a framework for voluntary action to increase cooperation and investment in developing solutions to address emissions from food systems. Guided by a Council and strategic plan, GRA research groups and networks catalyse collaborations, knowledge sharing, use of best practices, and build capability among scientists and policy makers from its member countries.

Evidence-based decision making requires collective understanding of synergies and trade-offs among potential pathways. A number of resources are available to support this understanding. To name a few examples, True Cost Accounting allows the assessment of positive and negative externalities of food systems and provides an approach to optimize public goods. Another example is the open source, integrated modeling technology system, ARIES, that can integrate scientific data and models that simulate and integrate environmental and socioeconomic systems, deepening our understanding of the natural world and of how the choices society makes can impact future prosperity and sustainability. Similarly, InVEST provides models to map and value goods and services from nature that sustain and fulfill human life. It helps explore how changes in ecosystems can lead to changes in the flows of many different benefits to people. Finally, the Integrated Sustainable Development Goals (iSDG) model allows policymakers and stakeholders to make sense of complex interconnections between SDGs and assess the effect of (food systems) policies. iSDG focuses on dynamic interactions within the SDG system to reveal the best paths and progression towards achieving the SDGs.

Endnotes

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[ii] See Innovation Lever Policy Brief principles for multi-stakeholder collaboration: 1) developing a shared understanding of the key issues to address, taking into account long-term outcomes; 2) developing collaboration objectives that are context specific, locally-owned and aligned with country goals; 3) establishing inclusive and accessible multi-stakeholder structures; 4) designing for an inclusive and adaptive journey which addresses power imbalances and divergences; 5) promoting and reinforcing the right to effective participation and different entry points to implementation; 6) gauging and managing risk in multi-stakeholder dialogues; and 7) developing common and agreed upon food-related policies that balance different interests and goals.

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APPENDIX | Governance-related UNFSS Solution Clusters & Propositions

It is strongly encouraged to explore related governance solutions which are highlighted below.

#	Solution Cluster/Proposition Name	Relevance to Food Systems Governance
1.10	Promote women-led enterprises to grow and sell nutritious but neglected crops	Address women, youth, and Indigenous peoples which deserve special consideration for participation and inclusion
1.14	Foster a global conversation around coherence for food environment policies for healthier children	Policy
1.20	Foster shared learning on Food System Transformation Pathways	Policy
2.1	Integrated Cross Sector Assessments and National Action Plans up to 2030	Policy
2.2	Slashing food loss and waste and transitioning to a circular economy	Food Systems Governance; national, cities and local governments
2.2.1	Healthy Food Environment cluster	Policy
2.3	Fiscal Policy Measures to improve food environments	Policy
3.1	Repurposing public support to food and agriculture	Policy
3.1.2	Land-freshwater Nexus	Territorial Governance
3.1.3	Deforestation-free and conversion-free supply chains	Territorial Governance
3.12	Aligning policies with nature-positive production	Policy
3.2.3	Transformation through agroecology and regenerative agriculture	Territorial Governance
3.2.6	Indigenous Peoples Food Systems	Territorial Governance; address groups such as women, youth, and indigenous peoples which deserve special consideration for participation and inclusion
3.24	Indigenous peoples' food systems: conservation and biocentric restoration	Address women, youth, and Indigenous peoples which deserve special consideration for participation and inclusion

#	Solution Cluster/Proposition Name	Relevance to Food Systems Governance
3.3	Gender Transformative Approaches for Inclusive and Sustainable Food Systems	Address women, youth, and Indigenous peoples which deserve special consideration for participation and inclusion
4.1	Rebalancing Agency within Food Systems	Address women, youth, and Indigenous peoples which deserve special consideration for participation and inclusion
4.02	Improve Governance of Labour Markets in Food Systems	Food Systems Governance
4.3.1	Promoting Integrated Food Systems Policies, Planning, and Governance (Includes solutions 1, 2, 6, 7, 9, 10, 14, 15, 19)	Food Systems Governance; Policy; Territorial Governance
4.3.2	Promoting Inclusive Financial Investments in Food Systems	Territorial Governance; Cities and Local governments
4.3.4	Promoting Economic Diversification and Economic and Social Inclusion	Territorial Governance
5.1.3	Integrated approaches to resilient food systems	Food Systems Governance
5.2.1	Enhance local production for local consumption	Territorial Governance; Food Systems Governance
5.3.3	Integrated international-national policies and plans	Policy; Food Systems Governance
6.1.1	Food Systems Governance: Guiding Principles for Food Systems Transformation	Food Systems Governance
6.1.2	Coalition of Governments for Food System Transformation through Policy Reform	Policy; Food Systems Governance
6.1.3	Strengthening Territorial Governance	Territorial Governance; Policy; Cities and Local governments

Related papers of the Scientific Group
- The true cost and true price of food
- Bonding science and policy to accelerate food systems transformation