



UNITED NATIONS

# TRANSFORMING FOOD SYSTEMS

Regional policy brief

Sustainable  
Resilient  
Healthy  
Inclusive



Introduction  
on food systems



Pathways  
and actions



Regional priorities:  
highlights from regional  
processes and dialogues

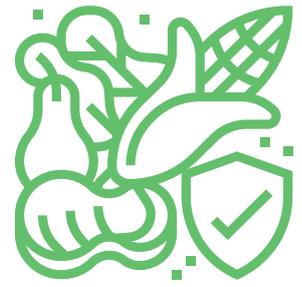


Translating global  
momentum to  
regional development



ECA . ECLAC . ESCAP . ESCWA . ECE

# 1 Introduction on food systems

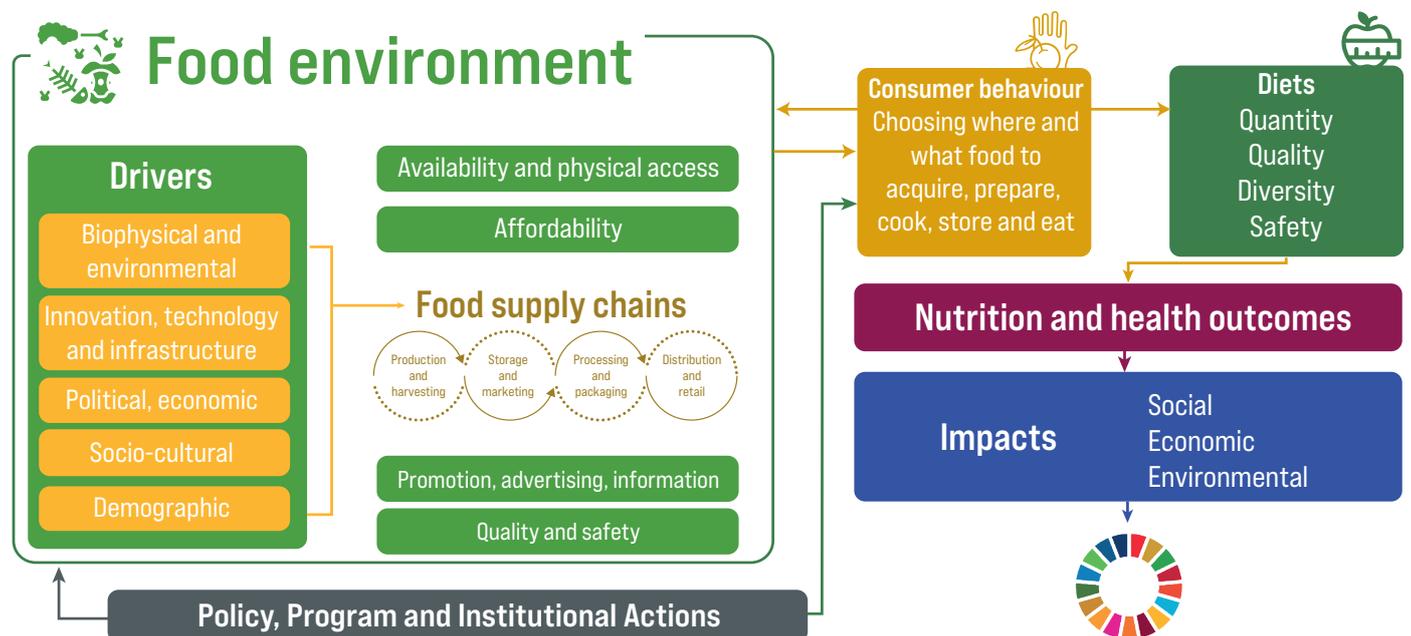


**“In a world of plenty, it is a grave affront that hundreds of millions go to bed hungry each night.”  
Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, World Food Day 2020.**

Estimates in 2020 showed that the number of hungry has been on the rise again, and is currently estimated at 690 million people.<sup>1</sup> Obesity is also rising in all regions, reflecting a food system that produces unbalanced results. The forces yielding such simultaneous increase in hunger and obesity are directly related to the food system itself or broader developmental drivers/issues, including poverty, political instability and economic crisis, along with limited societal awareness regarding healthy diets. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed the world’s fragilities and reemphasized the food system’s weaknesses. The pandemic has intensified inequities in accessing safe and nutritious food at affordable prices, and further highlighted the vulnerability of workers across the food system value chain.<sup>2</sup>

The complexity of the food system arises from the fact that it encompasses a wide range of actors and stakeholders and it integrates socio-cultural, economic, political, biophysical, environmental, infrastructure and technical drivers that interact at different levels along the entire food supply chain to deliver outcomes for human beings and the planet (figure 1).

**Figure 1. The food system**



Source: DESA, Policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on food security and nutrition, 2020.

The debate of whether the food system is broken or just uncoordinated, highlights the need to realign efforts to go beyond ending hunger towards sustainable consumption and production, providing healthy and safe nutritious food, and promoting equitable livelihoods to ensure a transition towards inclusive, healthy, sustainable and resilient systems. To achieve food security while balancing between nutrition, health and enhanced economic, social and environmental outcomes, it is imperative to propose “game changing” solutions and identify actors and stakeholders that can implement them.

### The Food Systems Summit, to be held in September 2021, comes at a time when the world has recognized the “surplus of multilateral challenges and the deficit of multilateral solutions”.<sup>3</sup>

This people’s Summit is an action summit that has activated more than 500 dialogues so far in relation to various topics across the five identified action tracks,<sup>4</sup> or in regard to a special issue of major concern such as climate change, conflict, water, health, gender, and young people. The dialogues have been organized across the world to gather game changing actions and accelerate multi-stakeholder actions and commitments that could transform existing food systems to become more inclusive, healthy, sustainable, and resilient. The Summit also aims to promote actions that deliver progress globally across all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The five regional commissions<sup>5</sup> of the United Nations have organized regional dialogues<sup>6</sup> to identify game changers in their respective regions (Africa, the Arab region, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and North America, and Latin America and the Caribbean). This generated momentum in support of national and independent dialogues, and enabled identifying issues at the regional level that require collaboration and partnerships between countries.

Based on the five regional dialogues, chapter 2 of the present policy brief provides harmonized pathways to overcome challenges that limit the transformation of the food system into an inclusive, healthy, sustainable and resilient system. The section also clusters game changers that were discussed at the regional dialogues. Chapter 3 identifies regional priority actions based on regional food system consultations. Chapter 4 outlines how to translate the global momentum into tangible regional development.



## Food Systems Summit as an accelerator towards implementing the Decade of Action to achieve the SDGs by 2030

A properly functioning food system would be responsive to the 17 SDGs and not only the Goal of reducing hunger, improving nutrition and promoting sustainable agriculture (SDG 2). Within a food system approach, more Goals come into play, including those of reducing poverty (SDG 1), improving health (SDG 3), ensuring gender equality (SDG 5), managing water resources (SDG 6), ensuring economic growth (SDG 8), developing the necessary infrastructure, processing and innovating (SDG 9), reducing inequalities (SDG 10), moving towards sustainability (SDG 12), managing better natural resources (SDGs 14 and 15), ensuring peace and stability (SDG 16), and enhancing partnerships (SDG 17). These interlinked SDGs are part of key drivers and game changers that support the transformation of the food system.



# 2

## Pathways and actions



### A. Towards inclusive food systems for equitable livelihoods

Inclusiveness along the food system necessitates equitable livelihoods, including for farmers and other formal and informal food producers, businesses, labour forces and consumers. To ensure inclusivity, especially among the most marginalized groups (women, young people, older persons, rural dwellers), national and regional measures need to be adopted to address social and economic barriers preventing access to healthy and affordable food. Among the pressing issues to be addressed are income, productive assets and tenures, opportunities (education, training, financial), employment, access to markets, socio-political stability, and forced migration.

Addressing poverty is urgently needed by supporting decent employment opportunities within the food system, enhancing the income of small-scale producers and operators, reducing risks and challenges faced by food producers, and providing social security services. Furthermore, immediate action to end conflicts and promote peace ought to be a regional and global priority.

In the short to medium terms, countries need to adopt social and economic policies and programmes that ensure the expansion of social protection schemes for persons in vulnerable situations, notably those impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and other shocks. Countries need to mobilize resources to build the capacity of small-scale producers and other food system actors, and develop the necessary infrastructure, especially in remote areas. This entails leveraging public and private investments into needed infrastructure including transport, storage and processing, and ensuring equitable access to clean water, energy and communication technologies.

Countries also need to facilitate access to finance for farmers and local small and medium enterprises (SMEs), with emphasis on supporting initiatives that serve women, young people, refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and other vulnerable populations that are less integrated into the food supply chain and more prone to natural disasters.



#### Game changers

- ▶ Developing youth economic empowerment programmes in less advantaged areas, including in rural communities.
- ▶ Enforcing land registration systems to facilitate financial access and access to land ownership for young people and women.
- ▶ Ensuring the provision of social protection systems, and refocusing social safety programmes to better cover the most vulnerable.
- ▶ Supporting rural cooperatives technically and financially to assist in expanding markets, facilitating the adoption of technologies, and promoting rural agri-business.
- ▶ Developing innovative and inclusive financing mechanisms to enhance investments in agricultural and rural development, and improve accessibility to financial services, including rural credits and micro credit to fund small agri-businesses.
- ▶ Developing and supporting food banks and other related community-based initiatives.

Countries can also support the sustainable localization of the food system, which requires a redesign in the functioning of public institutions to allow greater involvement of the private sector and civil society organizations. This approach can enhance local livelihoods and development, and ensure access and availability of food, while supporting sustainability and complementing global food systems.

In the medium to long terms, it is necessary to develop innovative legislations and policies that support small-scale farmers and their communities, and secure land and water rights and access. Tenures and rights in rural agricultural areas are also needed to improve equity and inequality among producers and food systems actors, and to enhance the livelihoods of marginalized and vulnerable groups.

- ▶ Building the capacity of small producers on the use of appropriate and affordable green technologies at the farm level and along the value chain.
- ▶ Strengthening the capacity of institutions and administrations to collect, analyse and share data.
- ▶ Encouraging inter-regional agricultural investment and inter-regional trade cooperation and integration.



## Challenges

Dietary inequalities increase with income inequality, geographical locations and human development in terms of education and awareness. Inequalities among countries are based on resource availability and productivity, and on human aspects in terms of population distribution and development. Extremely poor people tend to live in rural and conflict-afflicted areas and depend on agriculture for their livelihoods. Conflicts in many parts of the world are leading to an increase in the number of displaced populations, which live in precarious conditions unable to meet their food and dietary needs.



POVERTY  
100

In **Africa**, the number of people living in **poverty** is expected to increase between 49 million and 161 million as a result of the pandemic, with **100 million** being the most likely estimate.<sup>7</sup> The number of conflicts increased by some 90 per cent in the fourth quarter of 2020, compared with the fourth quarter of 2019, further disrupting economic activity.<sup>8</sup>



29  
%

In the **Arab region**, **poverty rates** affect **29 per cent** of the population, and almost half of people in conflict-affected countries and least developed countries. High unemployment, particularly among women (20 per cent) and young people (26.5 per cent) are at alarming levels. Inflation reached over 45 per cent in the Arab least developed countries (the Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia and the Sudan), with high household expenditure on food at 31 per cent.<sup>9</sup> In 2019, 40 per cent of the Syrian population was estimated to be living on less than \$1.90 per day.<sup>10</sup>



2  
%

Many countries in the **Asia and Pacific region** spend less than **2 per cent** of GDP on **social protection**, way below the global average of 11 per cent.<sup>11</sup>



33.7  
%

In **Latin American and the Caribbean**, it is estimated that in 2020, **poverty** rose to **33.7 per cent** of the total population, and the extreme poverty rate reached 12.5 per cent, levels not observed during the last 12 and 20 years, respectively. This means that about 209 million people were living in poverty at the end of 2020 (22 million more than in 2019), and 78 million in extreme poverty (8 million more than in 2019).<sup>12</sup>

## B. Towards nutritious and healthy food

Addressing malnutrition and ending hunger will require that enough food is produced, that the food is nutritious, and that supply chains work efficiently to deliver affordable food everywhere.

In the short term, countries need to raise awareness to promote the consumption of healthy and nutritious food, reduce access to unhealthy foods, especially among children and young people, and discourage unhealthy consumption habits. These programmes need to be accompanied by focused social protection interventions to reduce nutrition challenges, while promoting equitable access to food for the most vulnerable, including women and children, older persons, persons with disabilities, and the poorest in both urban and rural areas. Investments in food fortification programmes could prove a sustainable way to enhance the quality of diets.

In the medium term, improving supply chain infrastructure, including roads, storage, warehouses, cold chain, processing units and food-related SMEs, would help enhance food availability and access. It would also entail building a related food and agriculture information system, promoting clean and green energy and technologies, supporting innovation, and promoting sustainable financing. Countries need to ensure that appropriate support is provided to small-scale producers to access resources, and that they have access to both domestic and global markets.

It will be equally important to prioritize food safety to decrease the incidence and burden of food-borne diseases in low- and middle-income countries and among the most vulnerable. Enhancing food safety programmes and building the necessary knowledge will ensure that all stakeholders and actors are accountable and empowered to make the right decision with regards to the functioning of the food system and its capacity to deliver safe, adequate, healthy and nutritious foods.

In the medium to long terms, revamping the working of the food environment should be a focus in all regions to allow people to make informed decisions with regard to acquiring and consuming healthy and culturally appropriate foods. The inclusion of the diverse actors of the food system would ensure that eating healthy is supported by all, including shops, markets, restaurants, workplaces, school cafeterias, neighbourhood food distributions, and online shopping.

Similarly to universal health coverage or free primary and secondary public education, which are increasingly the norm, universal access to minimum dietary energy requirement should also be the norm and be supported by public, civic or market mechanisms that build on the availability of social safety nets, income guarantee schemes, public or civic feeding programmes, public procurement of food, food banks, food assistance or a combination of these to ensure access to food for the most vulnerable.



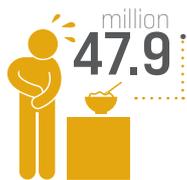
### Game changers

- Revising food security policies, food subsidies and nutrition guidelines to promote healthy diets.
- Implementing nutrition-sensitive social protection programmes that are people-centred and gender-responsive to address the needs of marginalized and vulnerable people.
- Raising awareness on healthy diets through messages targeting children, pregnant and breastfeeding women, and older persons, and addressing misleading and false nutritional information.
- Targeting young people and school-aged children through school health programmes, and providing guidance on the importance of safe and healthy diets, hygiene and physical activity.
- Implementing existing international food quality and safety standards.
- Exploring expansion of healthy food public procurement policies to support local food systems, and promoting food banks and universal food access.
- Promoting open trade, rule-based, predictable and non-discriminatory multilateral trading systems, while strengthening diversified local and regional value chains for fresh and nutritious food.
- Improving intra- and inter-regional logistics and distribution systems.
- Encouraging the use of digital platforms to provide advanced and up-to-date database on food and nutritional information.



## Challenges

Hunger and undernourishment are highly prevalent in low-income countries, leading to stunting and wasting among children and a high prevalence of nutrient deficiencies. Among the most vulnerable are women, children and adolescents, refugees and displaced people, smallholders in rural areas, and the urban poor. Other forms of malnutrition exist, including the consumption of unbalanced diets, which lead to overweight and obesity or micronutrient deficiencies.



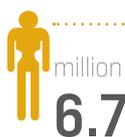
47.9 million

In **Africa**, the number of **hungry people** has risen by **47.9 million** since 2014 to reach 250.3 million, or nearly one fifth of the population. While the prevalence of stunting in Africa is declining, 40 per cent of all stunted children in the world live in Africa, a significant rise from the 18 per cent observed in 1990.<sup>13</sup> Preliminary estimates indicate that an additional 25 million to 42 million people may be undernourished in 2020 due to the economic recession caused by the pandemic.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the number of overweight children under five has increased by nearly 24 per cent since 2000.



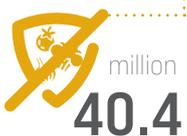
116 million

The **Arab region** suffers from a high prevalence of **child stunting** (22 per cent), **wasting** (8.2 per cent), and **anaemia** among women of reproductive age (35.5 per cent), with about **116 million** people being **food insecure** and 43 million **undernourished**, notably in conflict-affected countries such as the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.<sup>15</sup> In the Arab region, there are 115 million obese people, with obesity rates higher in Gulf Cooperation Council countries and middle-income countries.<sup>16</sup>



6.7 million

In the **Asia and Pacific region**, 350.6 million people are estimated to have been undernourished in 2019, nearly 51 per cent of the global total. An estimated 74.5 million children under five were stunted, and a total of 31.5 million were wasted. The majority of these children in the region live in Southern Asia, with 55.9 million stunted and 25.2 million wasted children.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic is estimated to have pushed an additional 24 million people into acute food insecurity in Asia and the Pacific, and contributed to a 14.3 per cent increase globally in the prevalence of moderate or severe wasting among children under five, equal to an additional **6.7 million** children acutely **malnourished**.<sup>18</sup>



40.4 million

In **Latin America and the Caribbean**, between 2015 and 2019, the prevalence of undernourishment increased from 6.2 to 7.4 per cent of the population (38.3 million versus 47.7 million people), and the prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity increased from 25.1 to 31.7 per cent (156.8 million versus 205.3 million people).<sup>19</sup> In 2020, despite policies to support income and food access, it is estimated that the incidence of moderate or severe **food insecurity** reached **40.4 per cent** of the population, an additional 44 million people.<sup>20</sup> In Latin America and the Caribbean, child **overweight** has increased in all subregions, especially the Caribbean.<sup>21</sup>

## C. Towards a healthy planet and sustainable food systems

Sustainably managing and enhancing food production systems within existing environmental constraints is a priority. It requires enhancing input efficiency and the adoption of appropriate agro-ecological and good practices to reduce the pressure on local environmental systems.

Regional actions tailored to context-specific environments while embracing new technologies are needed. These could include farm-focused ICTs that help mix indigenous and modern knowledge for more efficient and responsive results. It will be equally important to provide services, technology, and infrastructure to support nature-friendly production, particularly for marginalized rural groups. Collecting adequate data and gender mainstreaming should not be overlooked.

Removing harmful subsidies and support programmes could safeguard natural ecosystems both on land and in water bodies, and halt deforestation, land degradation or overfishing. In parallel, it is essential to develop incentive schemes, entrepreneurial programmes, and capacity-building programmes on nature-friendly production systems.

In the medium to long terms, many regions need to focus on restoring degraded ecosystems, reversing biodiversity loss, and rehabilitating functions for sustainable food production to regenerate ecosystem benefits. This could halt encroachment on untouched ecosystems. Providing financial incentives to restore abandoned and degraded farmland could improve productivity and food availability at the local and national levels. An innovative governance mechanism is needed that includes appropriate policies and adequate financing for increased sustainability.

Applying measures and targets for better monitoring the movement of food throughout the food supply chain would encourage food system participants to act and change behaviours. Improving food handling, storage, processing, and preservation would enhance supply chain efficiency and resilience, and reduce post-harvest losses and food waste.



### Game changers

- ▶ Enhancing cross sectoral coordination and adopting sustainable water allocation systems to reduce conflicts and minimize trade-offs between sectors.
- ▶ Enacting policies that optimize water use through water-saving technologies, non-conventional water, water harvesting and water use efficiency in farming.
- ▶ Adopting good agriculture practices and agroecological practices to improve soil management.
- ▶ Improving pasture and livestock feeding practices.
- ▶ Promoting the adoption of bio-based agricultural inputs (bioinoculants, bio-fertilizers, bio-pesticides, bio-remediators) and the valorisation of residual-biomass from food crops and by-products through circular bioeconomy alternatives (bioenergy, biomaterials, recovery of proteins).
- ▶ Investing in appropriate technologies throughout the value chain to enhance farming operations, increase food shelf-life, and reduce waste within the overall transitioning to

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