

7 Conclusion

This final chapter summarises the findings of the report and draws policy implications. While the performance of food systems in terms of the triple challenge has not been as black and white as some suggest, there are major shortcomings. Better policies for food systems are a powerful lever to improve food security and nutrition, livelihoods, and environmental sustainability. Coherence across these areas will require breaking down silos between agriculture, health and environmental policies, but will also require overcoming knowledge gaps, resistance from interest groups, and differing values. Robust, inclusive, evidence-based processes are thus essential to making better policies for food systems.

Food systems around the world can point to some impressive achievements. Between 1960 and today, world population more than doubled, yet global food production tripled, ensuring more food per person at lower prices. What's more, this was accomplished while only using about 10-15% more agricultural land, as food systems achieved a large increase in output per unit of agricultural land. The expansion of agricultural land has had important negative effects on forests and biodiversity, and led to large greenhouse gas emissions. If food systems had not managed to increase productivity, the consequences for human and environmental well-being would have been devastating. While production growth after 1960 was initially achieved mostly by using more inputs (e.g. fertilisers), which create their own set of environmental challenges, in recent decades efficiency gains have been the main source of production growth.

The scale of these past achievements is as remarkable as what still remains to be done. Food systems are expected to provide food security and nutrition for a growing population expected to approach 10 billion people by mid-century. Food systems are also relied on to provide livelihoods for those working on 570 million farms worldwide, and along other stages of the food supply chain. And food systems not only depend on natural resources, but are also expected to contribute to environmental sustainability.

Meeting this “triple challenge” is central to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, but with only ten years left the world does not appear on track to meet these goals. The COVID-19 pandemic and the global recession it triggered constitute a major setback, with undernourishment on the rise as livelihoods have been disrupted. But even before the COVID-19 outbreak, food systems were inadequately addressing the triple challenge. After falling for many years, the number of undernourished has been increasing since 2014. An estimated two billion people do not have regular access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food while an even greater number are overweight or obese. Food production is also exerting major pressures on the environment, including through overfishing, nitrogen pollution, deforestation for agricultural expansion, and direct emissions from agriculture. Meanwhile, productivity growth in agriculture is often associated with a fall in agricultural employment, which can put pressures on livelihoods.

These problems have led some observers to talk about a “broken food system”. Yet as Chapter 1 of this report has shown, the performance of food systems is not as black and white as that term suggests. There is no doubt that food systems face a daunting triple challenge requiring urgent policy responses. But the metaphor of a “broken food system” risks ignoring the enormous heterogeneity and complexity of food systems around the world, and falsely suggests that a single causal mechanism is at work behind the various problems, or that there is a single way of “fixing” these. Instead, effective policy responses need to be pragmatic and evidence-based, as emphasised in a significant body of work (by OECD and others) identifying policy options to create productive, sustainable and resilient food systems and to address poverty, hunger, and malnutrition. In particular, that work has shown that agricultural and fisheries support policies in many countries can exacerbate problems. Removing these counterproductive measures would have important benefits, but effectively addressing the triple challenge will also require additional pro-active policy efforts.

In developing better policies for food systems, policy makers must grapple with possible synergies and trade-offs across the dimensions of the triple challenge. A food systems approach has the advantage of creating awareness about interactions between policy domains which have historically often been treated in isolation, including interactions which spill across international borders. As discussed in Chapter 2 of this report, these interactions create both difficulties and opportunities. As any suggested policy could affect other dimensions of the triple challenge, policy proposals need to be assessed with the possibility of spill-overs in mind. This complicates the process of policy development, but it also creates opportunities, as such spill-overs might offer new levers to address problems by exploiting synergies or adjusting policies with unwanted negative spill-over effects. In other words, policy makers should aim for policies that are coherent with respect to the triple challenge, and should therefore coordinate across policy making communities. An important first step is to rigorously evaluate and where possible quantify the extent of interactions for proposed new policies, as well as for existing policies. Many plausible effects may not be large enough to warrant adjustments to policies. Where synergies exist, a single policy rarely delivers the

optimal outcome across several dimensions: usually, a mix of policy instruments is needed. When there are trade-offs, no set of policies will provide the ideal outcome for every objective: choices must be made. While those choices need to be based on the best possible evidence, they involve value judgments and need to be made in a way that commands broad support across society, is consistent with international obligations, and effectively addresses the triple challenge.

Policies related to food systems have often proved hard to reform. Chapter 3 has shown that achieving better policies requires overcoming frictions related to facts, interests, and values. Although much is already known about which policy changes would be beneficial for food systems, for many policy questions there are still significant knowledge gaps about the extent and characteristics of problems; about synergies and trade-offs; or about the costs and benefits of various policy options. There may also be gaps between popular beliefs and scientific evidence, and policy debates may be hampered by myths, misperceptions, or outdated views. Yet facts are not the only source of friction in the policy process. Policies typically create winners and losers, creating diverging interests. If not all stakeholders are equally vocal or well-organised, the result may be suboptimal policies favouring special interests.

Moreover, differing values may come into play. For example, new plant breeding techniques (discussed in the case study on seeds) may be seen by some as a promising innovation which could lead to sustainable productivity growth, but may be seen by others as a “technological fix” pushed by corporations seen as concerned more about financial gain than about environmental or human health. Similarly, the ruminant livestock sector may be seen by some as providing essential animal-sourced proteins and contributing to livelihoods and rural landscapes, while others might object in principle to eating meat or dairy because of concerns with animal rights or climate change. And as discussed in the case study on processed foods, measures to reduce the sales of e.g. sugar-sweetened beverages may be seen by some as a reasonable policy to improve public health, but may be criticised by others as an unreasonable restriction of freedom of choice.

Such differences over values are ubiquitous and cannot be settled by facts alone. To complicate matters further, frictions in one area (e.g. differing values) can reinforce frictions in another area (e.g. by making people less willing to consider facts that go against their initial beliefs). As emphasised in Chapter 3, policy-making processes should thus be designed to generate trusted evidence, to avoid policy capture by special interests, and to mediate between differing values.

Making better policies for food systems thus requires overcoming data and knowledge gaps, resistance from interest groups, and differing values. In particular, there is a need to urgently reform those agricultural and fisheries policies which are most distorting and create negative environmental effects. Many of these policies also limit the flexibility of producers, and hence reduce the resilience of food systems to adapt to new technologies, changing consumer demands, and climate change; but the policies themselves have often proved hard to reform. Doing so will require political leadership, as well as cooperation and communication with stakeholders and across policy communities at the local, national, and international level.

Faced with this difficult task, the easy option for policy makers would be to maintain the status quo. But better policies for food systems hold tremendous promise for meeting the triple challenge of food security and nutrition, livelihoods, and environmental sustainability.



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