

Executive summary

Food systems are expected to provide food security and nutrition for a world population which is projected to grow to nearly 10 billion by mid-century. Food systems are also central to the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of households around the world. Moreover, food systems are not only highly dependent on the environment, but also exert important pressures on it. In all three dimensions, the world is facing important challenges:

- Globally, about 2 billion people do not have regular access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food; an even greater number are overweight or obese.
- At the same time, technical and structural change and the repercussions of COVID-19 are putting pressure on the livelihoods of people working on 570 million farms worldwide and along other stages of the food supply chain.
- The environmental damage from food production is also considerable. Around 80% of all threatened terrestrial bird and mammal species are in danger because of habitat loss due to agricultural expansion; food production (including pre-production and post-production activities) accounts for 21-37% of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions.

There have been increasing calls to adopt a “food systems approach” to simultaneously make progress on these three dimensions. A food systems approach asks that policy makers active in different areas (e.g. agriculture, fisheries, environment, public health) take a more holistic view on the set of objectives as well as on the set of possible policy levers, and coordinate to avoid incoherent policies. For example, agricultural policymakers have historically focused mostly on problems of primary agricultural production; a food systems approach places a greater emphasis on possible effects of agricultural policies on nutritional and environmental outcomes. Similarly, where environmental problems related to agriculture have in the past been considered an issue to be addressed mainly through agri-environmental policies, a food systems approach opens the possibility to use other instruments such as promoting changes in consumer behaviour or promoting voluntary standards among firms.

The growing demand for a more holistic “food systems approach” to policy making is based on the realisation that there are potential synergies and trade-offs between food security and nutrition, livelihoods, and environmental sustainability. Food systems are complex. For example, growing demand for some food products may benefit producers in poor countries but may also bring negative environmental consequences; and changes in food prices which benefit producers could simultaneously harm poor consumers. Adding to the complexity, food systems display heterogeneity, with important differences between smallholder quinoa farming in the Andes, extensive cattle grazing in Mongolia, and high-tech greenhouse vegetable production in the Netherlands. This complexity makes it hard to generalise, and highlights the importance of evidence: while it is easy to speculate about possible synergies or trade-offs, it is imperative for policy makers to scrutinise these hypotheses before using them as the basis for policy decisions. However, making better policies for food systems not only requires overcoming disagreements over facts, but also requires dealing with diverging interests and differing values. This can be achieved through inclusive policy processes which give stakeholders an opportunity to be heard, while avoiding capture by special interests.

This report contributes to making better policies for food systems by focusing on three sets of questions: What has been the actual performance of food systems around the world, and what has been the role of policies? How should policy makers go about designing policies that are coherent across different dimensions such as food security and nutrition, livelihoods, and environmental sustainability? What are common factors complicating the task of achieving better policies, and what can be done about them?

Chapter 1 describes the main expectations and achievements of food systems in terms of the “triple challenge” of food security and nutrition, livelihoods, and environmental sustainability. The actual achievements of food systems are not as black and white as is sometimes assumed, and there has been remarkable progress in some areas. At the same time, major shortcomings exist on all three dimensions. Much is already known about how better policies could contribute to improving outcomes. For example, agricultural policies around the world tend to use highly distorting measures, often creating incentives for overproduction and overuse of inputs. Such policies are inefficient ways to improve livelihoods or food security, and often have negative environmental effects. Reforming these policies would go a long way to meeting the triple challenge.

Chapter 2 gets to the heart of food systems approaches. It asks how policy makers can design coherent policies when faced with multiple objectives and multiple possible policy instruments where both synergies and trade-offs exist. Documenting and quantifying such potential spillover effects is an important first step, and can be facilitated by increased coordination between different policy making communities. Where synergies are found, one policy instrument will rarely be sufficient to meet all objectives; rather, a mix of instruments is usually needed. When trade-offs are found, experience shows that these can often be avoided by a smarter choice of policy instruments. But when trade-offs persist, the question is how society should choose between competing objectives – for instance, how to strike the balance between farmer livelihoods and climate change mitigation efforts. Robust evidence is needed to understand these trade-offs, but the final decision is not (only) a technical one.

Policies related to food systems have often shown themselves difficult to reform. Chapter 3 discusses the role of disagreements over facts, diverging interests, and differences over values. Although much is already known about which policy changes would be beneficial for food systems, information is still lacking on many issues. At the same time, any policy reform is likely to create both winners and losers, and groups with diverging interests will try to influence the policy process. It is essential to avoid policy capture (a situation where policy caters to a special interest rather than the public interest). Not all policy disagreements revolve around facts and interests, however. In many cases, there is no societal consensus on what the relative priorities should be, as people differ in the values they emphasise. To complicate matters, 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). The chapter identifies several good practices which can help prevent or manage such frictions around facts, interests, and values.

Case studies on the seed sector, the ruminant livestock sector, and the processed food sector provide an in-depth discussion of how these sectors can contribute to addressing the triple challenge, what kinds of synergies and trade-offs exist, and what kinds of policy processes have been used in different countries.

The seed sector makes an important contribution to meeting the triple challenge by supporting food security and nutrition, livelihoods, and sustainable resource use and climate change mitigation. However, there are several contentious issues. These include the role of private-sector investment in plant breeding; issues around access, benefit sharing and conservation of genetic resources; and the role of new plant breeding technologies. These issues are contentious because of the interplay of disagreements over facts, diverging interests, and differences over values. Implications for policy makers include the need for a better targeting of policies, greater support for competition, improvements in uptake of new technologies, better access to information and trust-building, improvements in communications tools, and strategies to support collaboration and coexistence.

Ruminant livestock is an important source of nutrition and livelihoods, but contributes to significant environmental problems, including climate change. The case study on ruminant livestock discusses its contribution to the triple challenge and illustrates how governments in Ireland, the Netherlands and New Zealand (countries with an important ruminant livestock sector) are navigating trade-offs and incorporate facts, interest and values in policy processes. Scientific facts, including from independent advisory groups, play an important role but are not always widely accepted by the public or stakeholders. Through consultation with stakeholders, policy makers hear from groups with different interests, including those with livelihoods at stake. Values play a role as well, including farmer identities and their sense of belonging to a rural community. Policy developments have also been influenced by court challenges and innovative mechanisms such as deliberative processes.

Processed food (defined as any food that has been altered in some way from its raw state) is essential to maintaining a steady global supply of safe, affordable, and nutritious foods, and the sector accounts for a significant share of income generation and employment. But some processing activities produce foods that are energy-dense and nutrient-poor and are associated with negative health effects when consumed in excess. To date, policies targeting the processed food sector have largely focused on improving health outcomes. Environmental impacts vary across different processed food products, and the processed food sector can influence the sustainability of diets through improving energy efficiency in processing, requiring stricter environmental standards of suppliers and conveying information on environmental sustainability performance to downstream consumers. Making better policies will require transparent engagement with industry stakeholders, protecting the integrity of scientific evidence, and strengthening the public's trust in public officials and scientific experts. Such processes can inform the design of policy interventions in order to minimise unwanted spill-overs, such as excessive regulatory burdens that impede industry innovations.

A recurring theme across these three case studies and the other chapters of the report is the importance of facts, interests, and values. Intuition can be a poor guide to policy making in food systems. Decisions should be based on the best possible evidence about the extent and characteristics of problems, their trade-offs and synergies, and the effectiveness and costs and benefits of different possible policy responses, including the status quo. Yet making better policies for food systems not only requires a rigorous understanding of how the world is, but also a shared view of how the world should be. The process thus inevitably involves not only facts, but also interests and values. In diverse societies, stakeholders may have diverging interests and differing values. Robust policy processes are needed to balance these diverging interests and to overcome value differences, while avoiding policy capture by special interests.



From:
Making Better Policies for Food Systems

Access the complete publication at:
<https://doi.org/10.1787/ddfba4de-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2021), "Executive summary", in *Making Better Policies for Food Systems*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/964b23c9-en>

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