



BRIEF I

Taking a Food Systems Approach to Policymaking: What, How, and Why

Key Messages

- Existing food systems, shaped in large part by an array of piecemeal and even contradictory policies, result in widespread hunger, malnutrition, poverty, and environmental degradation. By taking a food systems approach to policymaking, governments can harness the power of food systems to benefit people and the planet.
- A food systems approach to policymaking maximizes the potential of food systems to support healthy diets and nutrition while also advancing prosperity and protecting the planet by aligning policy to leverage benefits and manage risks for multiple food system objectives.
- A food systems approach maximizes the ability to achieve multiple food system objectives by increasing the potential of finding the most effective solutions, helping identify the portfolio of policies needed, increasing the efficiency of policy in attaining multiple objectives, reducing the risk of unintended consequences, helping identify who needs to be involved in policymaking, and providing an inclusive framework for coordinating policymaking mechanisms.
- In practice, taking a food systems approach involves several processes, including:
 - Identifying policy options by looking for existing and/or new policy entry points across food systems, sectors and government departments.
 - Designing policies by considering how policy instruments designed to achieve one objective may deliver benefits or pose risks for other objectives, and combining policies into mutually reinforcing portfolios.
 - Establishing inclusive policy governance that brings together stakeholders from different parts of food systems and sectors.

Overview

Food systems have enormous potential to support healthy diets and nutrition while also advancing prosperity and protecting the planet. However, this potential is often left largely unexploited. Existing food systems, shaped in large part by an array of piecemeal and even contradictory policies, result in widespread hunger, malnutrition, poverty, and environmental degradation. By taking a food systems approach to policymaking, governments could harness the power of food systems to benefit people and the planet.

This brief defines a food systems approach to policymaking, briefly sets out how to take such an approach, and describes why it would make a difference. It is targeted at policymakers across government ministries and agencies with responsibility for any policy with the potential to influence diets and nutrition, such as policies on food, agriculture, the environment, health, transport, trade, education, and the economy.

While the focus of this brief is public policymaking and associated actions taken by governments, the what, how, and why can also be applied to actions outside of government, as well as to food system challenges beyond nutrition.

Why Do Food Systems Matter?

Food systems are central to the major challenges of our time. They shape not only people's diets but also the sustainability of the environment in which food is gathered, farmed, raised, distributed, traded, processed, and retailed, and the livelihoods of the people who depend on those activities. They are an important motor of economic development and influence peace and stability.

International agencies, academics, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and businesses are increasingly calling for a food systems approach to policymaking to address these interrelated challenges.¹ In September 2021 the United Nations Food Systems Summit, for example, pledged to deliver "progress on all 17 of the SDGs through a food systems approach, leveraging the interconnectedness of food systems to global challenges such as hunger, climate change, poverty,

and inequality."² Among the outcomes of the summit were national pathways for food systems transformation, in which countries plotted pathways for change through a food systems approach.³

Many types of policies shape and transform food systems.⁴ Some of these policies are explicitly about food. Agricultural policies and food safety policies, for example, are designed to support food security, food producers' livelihoods, and safe food. Other policies do not have explicitly food-related objectives but nonetheless influence food. For example, transportation policies can affect farmers' and traders' ability to get food to market; policies affecting women's working hours may prevent them from earning enough to buy food.

All of these policies can be delivered at multiple levels, from the local to the global. They can take many forms, including action plans, strategies, legislation, court decisions, licensing, approvals, directives, regulations, guidelines, standards, codes of practice, programs, and voluntary initiatives.⁵ The term "policy" thus ranges from overarching strategies (such as the Paris Agreement on climate change) to highly specific measures of implementation (such as a rule on the use of a particular food contaminant).

Because all the elements of the food system interconnect, policies that influence one part of the food system have ripple effects across other parts, with implications for impact beyond their immediate objectives. They thus bring both benefits and risks for a range of different system objectives (for examples of such benefits and risks, see "[Taking a Food Systems Approach to Policymaking: Evidence on Benefits and Risks of Five Policy Areas across the Food System](#)," in this series). Yet typically these interconnections are not leveraged, with policies made in separate sectors siloed from each other. History shows that this approach is no longer adequate to tackle the huge global burden of multiple forms of malnutrition. Recognizing and acting on these interconnections are at the core of the food systems approach to policymaking.

What is a Food Systems Approach to Policymaking

A food systems approach is “a way of thinking and doing that considers the food system in its totality, taking into account all the elements, their relationships, and related effects.”⁶ The approach emerges from the understanding of a food system as the “interconnected system of everything and everybody that influences, and is influenced by, the activities involved in bringing food from farm to fork and beyond.”⁷ A food system includes:

- The chain of activities from farm (food production and inputs) to fork (food consumption) and beyond (food disposal and waste), including agricultural production, distribution, processing, manufacturing, and retail; and
- The interconnections between the chain of activities; the elements, entities, institutions, and people involved; and the economic, political, environmental, health, and social outcomes produced.

A food systems approach to *policymaking* can be defined as the process of formulating policies to shift and align the whole food system toward a stated policy objective (or objectives) while leveraging the benefits and managing the risks for multiple food system objectives. It involves recognizing and taking account of:

- The activities and actors in different sectors throughout food systems;
- The connections between these different sectors and stakeholders, and;
- The repercussions—both benefits and risks—of implementing policy in one part of the food system for other parts of the food system.⁸

A food systems approach to policymaking thereby connects different policy agendas,⁹ recognizing that any policy relevant to the food system can bring benefits—both for the primary policy objective and for other objectives—as well as risks and identifying trade-offs between the two. For example, a policy to support agricultural extension can help farm households increase their agricultural production while also raising incomes and improving diets. If, however, extension agents fail to consider the repercussions of targeting male farmers, as they have traditionally done, female farmers will likely miss out on new knowledge and technologies that could raise their agricultural productivity, presenting risks to household food security.

A food systems approach thereby embraces complex questions about how to design and implement policies to bring benefits for multiple food system objectives while minimizing risks (for examples and documentation of risks and benefits, see [“Taking a Food Systems Approach to Policymaking: Evidence on Benefits and Risks of Five Policy Areas across the Food System,”](#) in this series).



How to Take a Food Systems Approach to Policymaking?

A food systems approach to policymaking involves taking specific actions during the processes of identifying, designing and governing policies (Figure 1):



WHEN IDENTIFYING POLICY OPTIONS

- **Look for existing and/or new policy entry points throughout food value chains, from inputs at the front end to waste and disposal at the consumer end.** Identify existing policies and programs that have potential to influence the policy objective while also seeking new entry points. For example, identify how current or new policies related to agriculture or food processing can be leveraged to improve people's diets. Identify either one entry point with the potential for positive ripple effects across the system, or multiple entry points that can enable coherent change across the system.
- **Look for existing and/or new policy entry points across government departments and sectors.** Identify relevant policies in different parts of government that could be leveraged to meet objectives. For example, incorporate nutritional elements into existing policies and programs primarily aimed at achieving economic development or climate objectives.



WHEN DESIGNING POLICIES

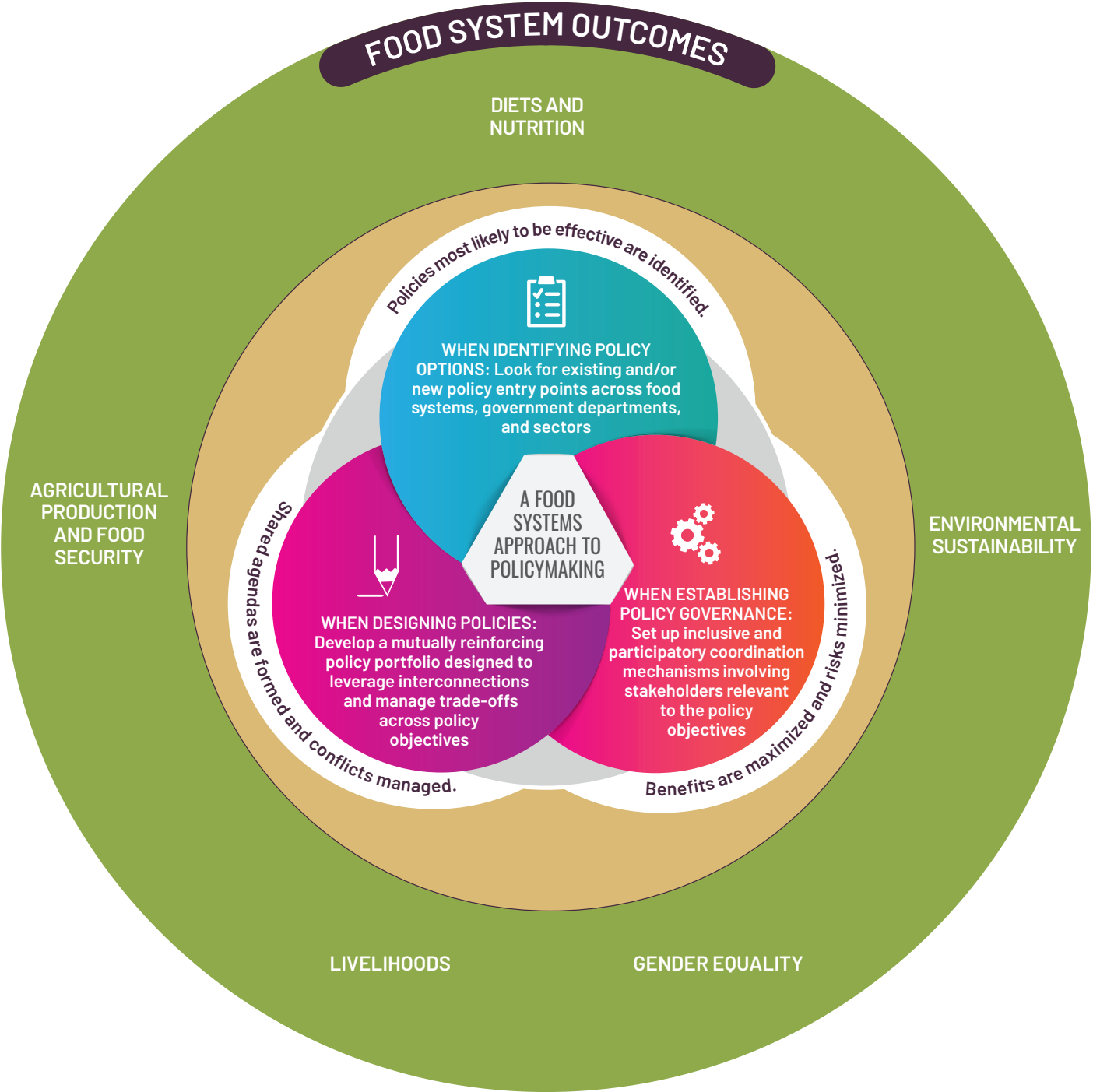
- **Consider how policy instruments designed to achieve one objective might interconnect with other objectives.** For example, how could policy instruments designed to achieve healthier diets benefit environmental sustainability? Is the policy instrument undermined or supported by other policies designed to achieve other objectives? How might the policy instrument create risks for other objectives? Engage with other sectors and stakeholders to limit incoherence between policies and to manage trade-offs between benefits and risks.
- **Combine policies into mutually reinforcing portfolios to align the system toward desired benefits while minimizing risks and managing trade-offs between objectives.** For example, a portfolio of policies and programs could be designed to support the economic benefits of agricultural production, food distribution networks and food markets in ways that synergise with healthier diets.



WHEN ESTABLISHING POLICY GOVERNANCE

- **Involve stakeholders from different parts of food value chains and from different sectors across the food system.** Include stakeholders who can influence policy objectives and whose interests might be affected by a policy positively (benefits) or negatively (risks). Clarify their roles and responsibilities in effecting change.
- **Develop inclusive coordination mechanisms to bring together the different stakeholders and sectors in a more coherent approach.** For example, draw on an existing nutrition coordination mechanism, or bring together a participatory mechanism specific to the purpose (for more examples, see Briefs II and III in this series, "[Managing Stakeholders and Identifying Policy Entry Points](#)" and "[Developing a Shared Agenda](#)"). Establish a common purpose and shared agenda and set up mechanisms for managing conflict.

Figure 1: A Food Systems Approach to Policymaking



Why Take a Food Systems Approach to Policymaking?

A food systems approach to policymaking maximizes the potential of food systems to support healthy diets and nutrition while also advancing prosperity and protecting the planet. It does so in the following ways during the processes of identifying and designing policies and establishing policy governance:¹⁷



WHEN IDENTIFYING POLICY OPTIONS

- **A food systems approach increases the potential of finding the most effective solutions.¹⁸**

By looking for entry points across the whole system between farm and fork, and in other government departments and sectors, such as environment or economy, a food systems approach increases the possibility of identifying where the underlying causes of poor nutrition (or another problem) really lie.¹⁹ For example, if the problem is low diet diversity among infants in a rural area, a food systems approach seeks to identify if the most effective policy solutions lie in addressing, say, insufficiently diverse agricultural production, inadequate access to local markets, food losses, gender norms, low household income, traditional cultural factors, or some combination of these. The scope of potential solutions thus extends way beyond just the more typical interventions, such as support for and promotion of complementary feeding for babies.

- **A food systems approach helps identify the portfolio of policies needed.**

In a typical sectoral policymaking approach, a well-intentioned policy may be implemented in one part of the food system but rendered ineffective by activities elsewhere in the system. What is often needed is a portfolio of policies operating in different parts of the system to ensure that food becomes safe, healthy, accessible, affordable, and acceptable to all people.²⁰

For example, one proposal to leverage the food system for nutrition is to increase the production of healthy foods,²¹ such as through subsidizing fruit and vegetable production. Yet achieving impact will likely take more than just changing food production. The fruits and vegetables must reach consumers through value chains, where they are often transformed in various ways (such as through processing or food loss). Subsidies would therefore need to be accompanied by actions to reduce losses during distribution, infrastructure to ensure food safety at local markets, and efforts to prevent the new production from being diverted to produce unhealthy processed products. To benefit producer families, too, policies would need to ensure producers are motivated to also eat some of what they produce or to use the income from selling them to buy a more diverse and healthy diet. Gender norms and women's agency can significantly influence household nutrition and diets. A policy portfolio could therefore additionally involve support for diversifying farmers' production along with gender-responsive social protection and behavior change communication to promote the consumption of fruits and vegetables.²²



WHEN DESIGNING POLICY

- **A food systems approach increases the efficiency of policies in attaining multiple objectives.** With its focus on interconnections, a food systems approach encourages the design of policy instruments that bring benefits across multiple objectives, such as improving the quality of diets while also supporting economic development and adaptation to climate change. It requires policymakers to consider the potential that a single policy can have multiple outcomes, whether positive, neutral, or negative, and then design the policy to maximize the benefits. A policy could be designed to promote production practices that both mitigate climate change and improve the diets of producer households. Or one could be designed to increase access to healthy foods in low-income communities while also creating jobs. This process of building multiple benefits can create alliances with others who also stand to benefit from a particular policy, potentially increasing support for the policy and thus its successful adoption.
- **A food systems approach reduces the risk of unintended consequences.** Policies in one part of a food system can bring risks as well as benefits. For example, a tax on sugary drinks could harm low-income street vendors who earn their livelihoods by selling such drinks. By explicitly identifying these risks, policymakers can recognize early where they need to mitigate the negative consequences (such as by creating other livelihood opportunities for small-scale vendors), where opposition to the policy might lie (such as in large businesses that use vendors to sell their drinks), and how to manage it.



WHEN ESTABLISHING POLICY GOVERNANCE

- **A food systems approach helps identify who needs to be involved in policymaking.** As part of a multisectoral approach to nutrition, a food system approach requires the involvement of multiple policymaking departments across government and the engagement of partners across society. It also clarifies who should not be part of the process because of negative vested interests. (For examples, see Brief II in this series, [“Managing Stakeholders and Identifying Policy Entry Points.”](#))
- **A food systems approach provides a framework for coordinating policymaking mechanisms.** Currently, government departments are generally structured vertically, with each department designed to perform a particular function. Each sector focuses on and defends its part of the food system without adequately considering other food system objectives. A food systems approach calls for governance structures that includes cross-departmental and sectoral boundaries to support a more holistic, coordinated way of working. (For examples, see Brief III in this series, [“Developing a Shared Agenda.”](#))

On paper, a food systems approach involves processes that may appear relatively straightforward. In practice however, taking these steps requires significant effort in bringing the relevant people together, developing shared agendas, establishing processes to address incoherence, conflicts and tradeoffs, and overcoming limits on resources and capacity for policymaking and implementation. The subsequent briefs in this series provide practical ideas based on real-life examples of how to navigate these challenges.

All of these processes also require evidence and analyses on the benefits and risks of different policy entry points for objectives across the food system (for examples, see “Taking a Food Systems Approach to Policymaking: Evidence on Benefits and Risks of Five Policy Areas across the Food System,” in this series). As a consequence, many of these processes will involve mapping and analysis, as illustrated in Briefs II and III in this series: “Managing Stakeholders and Identifying Policy Entry Points” and “Developing a Shared Agenda.”

Notes

¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Making Better Policies for Food Systems* (Paris: OECD, 2021), https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/agriculture-and-food/making-better-policies-for-food-systems_ddfba4de-en.

² United Nations, “United Nations Food Systems Summit 2021,” media advisory, June 23, 2021, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2021/06/un-food-systems-summit/>.

³ Food Systems Summit 2021, “Member State Dialogue Convenors and Pathways,” 2021, <https://summitdialogues.org/overview/member-state-food-systems-summit-dialogues/convenors/>.

⁴ S. van Berkum, J. Dengerink, and R. Ruben, *The Food Systems Approach: Sustainable Solutions for a Sufficient Supply of Healthy Food*, Memorandum 2018-064 (Wageningen, Netherlands: Wageningen Economic Research, 2018).

⁵ C. Hawkes and K. Parsons, *Tackling Food Systems Challenges: The Role of Food Policy*, brief 1 in “Rethinking Food Policy: A Fresh Approach to Policy and Practice” (London: Centre for Food Policy, 2019).

⁶ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), *Sustainable Food Systems: Concept and Framework* (Rome: FAO, 2018), <http://www.fao.org/3/ca2079en/CA2079EN.pdf>.

⁷ K. Parsons, C. Hawkes, and R. Wells, *What Is the Food System? A Food Policy Perspective*, brief 2 in “Rethinking Food Policy: A Fresh Approach to Policy and Practice” (London: Centre for Food Policy, 2019).

⁸ Hawkes and Parsons, *Tackling Food Systems Challenges: The Role of Food Policy*.

⁹ United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), Bioversity International, WWF, and One Planet Network, *National and Sub-National Food Systems Multistakeholder Mechanisms: An Assessment of Experiences* (2021), https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/sites/default/files/from-crm/211018_WWF_One%2520Planet%2520Report_FA_Full%2520Report_1.pdf.

¹⁷ K. Dekeyser, F. Rampa, C. D'Alessandro, and P. Bizzotto Molina, *The Food Systems Approach in Practice: Our Guide for Sustainable Transformation* (Maastricht: European Centre for Development Policy Management, 2020).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ FAO, *Sustainable Food Systems: Concept and Framework*.

²⁰ Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition (GLOPAN), *Food Systems and Diets: Facing the Challenges of the 21st Century* (London: GLOPAN, 2016); C. Hawkes and M. Ruel, *Value Chains for Nutrition* (Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2010).

²¹ World Bank, *Learning from World Bank History: Agriculture and Food-Based Approaches for Addressing Malnutrition*, World Bank Report 88740-GLB (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2014).

²² M. T. Ruel, A. R. Quisumbing, and M. Balagamwala, “Nutrition-Sensitive Agriculture: What Have We Learned So Far?” *Global Food Security* 17 (June 1, 2018): 128–53.

²³ Dekeyser, Rampa, D'Alessandro, and Bizzotto Molina, *The Food Systems Approach in Practice*.

In this Series:



Taking a Food Systems Approach to Policymaking: Evidence on Benefits and Risks of Five Policy Areas across the Food System

Brief I. Taking a Food Systems Approach to Policymaking: What, How, and Why

Brief II. Taking a Food Systems Approach to Policymaking: Managing Stakeholders and Identifying Policy Entry Points

Brief III. Taking a Food Systems Approach to Policymaking: Developing a Shared Agenda

Brief IV. Taking a Food Systems Approach to Policymaking: Costing and Financing

Full text of these documents is available here. [See Resources.](#)



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