

THE UNIQUE ROLE OF GOVERNMENTS IN FOOD SYSTEMS GOVERNANCE

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Key Messages

- For food systems to deliver on their promise to better nourish people and protect our planet, food systems actors require active steering in the form of food systems governance.
- Governments have a unique leadership role in transforming food systems, breaking down sectoral silos that hamper coherence, and providing priority and urgency to food systems transformation pathways.
- Coordination mechanisms for food systems transformation are set up in a variety of ways, and can sit in different government Ministries, Departments or Agencies (MDAs).
- Responsibility for implementation often lies with both national and subnational (e.g. district, provincial, city etc) governments, making vertical coordination at different government levels necessary for food systems transformation at all levels.
- Better understanding of the set-up of such governance mechanisms and how this influences the actions of food systems actors is needed to support governments in taking the food systems transformation agenda forward.



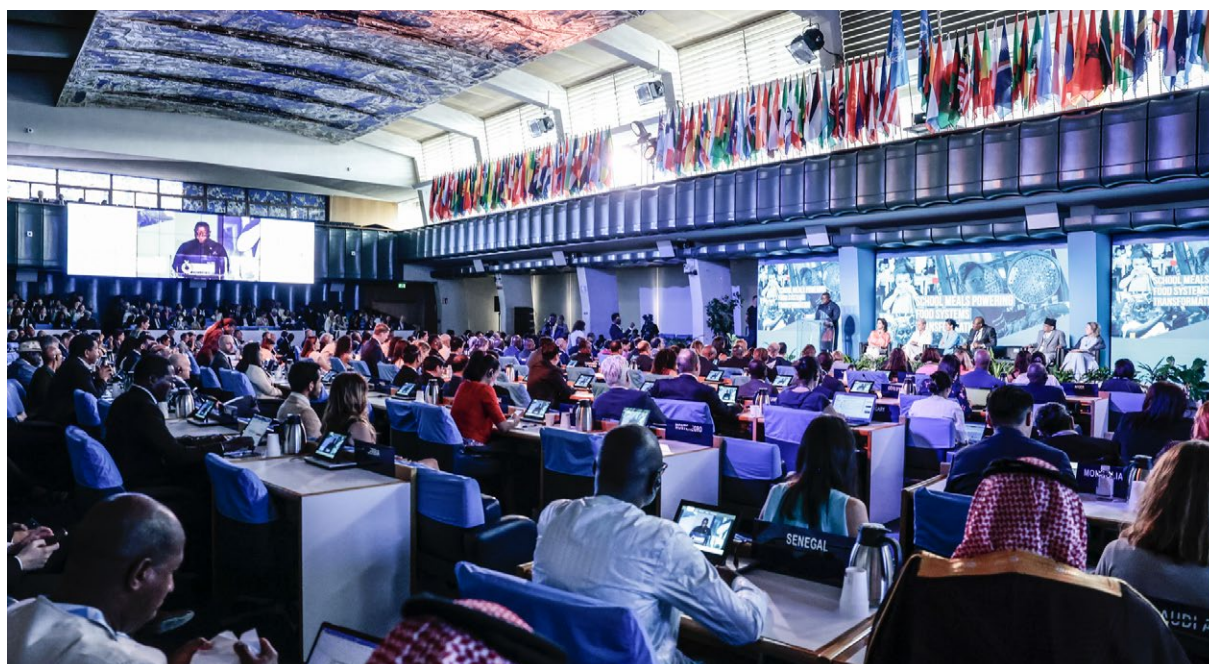
Introduction

In a perfect world, functional food systems would provide multiple benefits for everyone, including healthy diets, environmental sustainability, and improved livelihoods (1). Unfortunately, we live in a far from perfect world. Over three billion people cannot afford a healthy diet, some 735 million people face hunger, and obesity rates are on the rise (2). Food production accounts for over one third of global greenhouse gas emissions and at the same time is negatively affected by declining availability of fresh water and biodiversity (3). Many of those working in food systems are poorly paid and struggle to make ends meet. To reverse these negative trends, food systems transformation is necessary. This is crucial to meet global goals such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set for 2030, the 2025 World Health Assembly targets, and climate and biodiversity goals set out in Conferences of Parties (COPs) (4).

Food systems governance

With food systems comprised of multiple components and involving complex interactions across various sectors, scales and geographies, active steering from a policy perspective is required – also referred to as the process of food systems governance (1). Effective governance must optimise multiple societal outcomes, including addressing drivers and trends of unsustainable food production and consumption (5). However, siloed thinking, whereby the development and implementation of policies only considers the outcomes that one sector is mandated to deliver and ignores spill-over and trade-off effects, has too often been the default in policy-making. Such siloed approaches need to be broken down so that improved integration of strategies across sectors that is required for transformation can be achieved (5). Different actors involved in policy making and implementation, whether inside or outside government, need to be engaged to shape decision-making and better coordinate and align policies across sectors and levels to transform food systems

Global events such as the **UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS)** in September 2021 and its follow-up in 2023 have contributed to raising awareness of the importance of food systems and food systems governance to meet development goals. In preparation for the UNFSS, food systems dialogues were organised across the world, including by governments at national and subnational levels (6). Following from the dialogues, 126 countries submitted their national food systems transformation pathways (7).



The UNFSS+2 Stocktaking Moment that took place in July 2023 brought together member states and other stakeholders to discuss food systems transformation. © FAO/Cristiano Minichiello.

Two years on, many governments with the assistance of Ecosystems of Support¹ are developing the national pathways into action plans, with at least 70 countries indicating they are integrating their pathway document into national strategies or sector plans (7). Well-functioning governance structures are essential to ensure successful implementation of the pathways. This brief looks at key aspects of food systems governance and discusses real-life examples – primarily from GAIN’s work – of how these aspects influence progress in relation to food systems transformation.

Key factors for success in food systems governance

Government’s unique leadership role

Government leadership in the food systems space is key for the credibility and formal endorsement of the design and implementation of food systems transformation policies. Government also has unique responsibility for legal and financial matters. Clear planning and budgeting processes are essential to enable implementation.

Support from high-level officials also helps to drive progress (8,9). In **Ethiopia**, the decision (taken by high-level leadership) to share the UNFSS convenor role² between the Minister of Health and the Minister of Agriculture is a good example of breaking siloes, allowing for collaboration across sectors not historically seen as sharing a mandate to deliver food systems outcomes. Another example comes from **Bangladesh**, where the active engagement of the Honourable Prime Minister has been beneficial for legitimacy of food systems as a critical national concern.

The influence of elections on government leadership³

In **Nigeria** and **Kenya** elections resulted in some interruption to progress in of food systems transformation. After elections, new government officials required sensitisation on the national food systems transformation pathways. Disruptions in continuity, while inevitable, can negatively affect ownership over and understanding of the food systems



agenda. In such situations, non-government actors can help to ensure interruptions remain temporary and support governments to continue to transform food systems – as has been seen in both cases, with governments resuming strong commitment to this agenda.

Any change in leadership can also bring a change in policy and sectoral priorities. For food systems transformation this can be positive, negative, or neutral with respect to making continued progress.

1 The Ecosystem of Support consists of a range of organisations that have taken on roles to support governments in the implementation of the national food systems transformation pathways – see <https://www.gainhealth.org/resources/reports-and-publications/gain-discussion-paper-series-15-food-system-pathways-improving> for more detail.

2 The UNFSS Convenor was responsible for organising the Food Systems Summit Dialogues programme in their country, for more information see: <https://www.unfoodsystemshub.org/member-state-dialogue/dialogues-and-pathways/en>

3 The examples provided in this section draw on unpublished political economy analysis research conducted on behalf of GAIN.

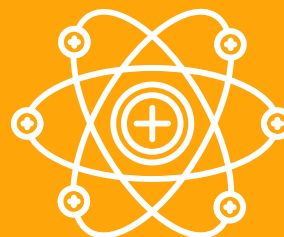
Horizontal coordination for food systems

Responsibility for the development and implementation of different components of food systems is usually spread across different Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs), with no single MDA responsible for most or all components. Food systems transformation needs such shared governance to ensure policy coherence (8). To avoid siloed working or dominance of a single department, which would increase the risk of policy incoherence, a mechanism for horizontal coordination is needed (5, 8). Such a mechanism at minimum coordinates the involvement of different government MDAs that have a role in food systems transformation, and ideally expands to include non-government actors as well.

Generally, governments organise their food systems coordination mechanism in one of two ways. Either it is embedded within an MDA that traditionally has a more coordinating position, or it is placed in a sectoral Ministry, often the Ministry of Agriculture. Sectoral Ministries generally have more in-house expertise but might lack authority to coordinate across ministries or to elevate the importance of food systems across government. An MDA with a more central position is likely to be better equipped to coordinate and work on policy coherence but might lack the technical expertise to design effective policies. To elevate attention for food systems transformation, it could be beneficial to shift the coordination to a high-level office (e.g. a prime minister's office). In many countries we see this for nutrition, where its coordination is housed in the office of the president, vice-president or prime minister, but we have yet to see a similar example for food systems.

In the context of food systems, policy coherence means

- a) ensuring that a policy designed to improve one food systems outcome does not undermine other policy goals; and
- b) allowing possible synergies to be realised. (10)



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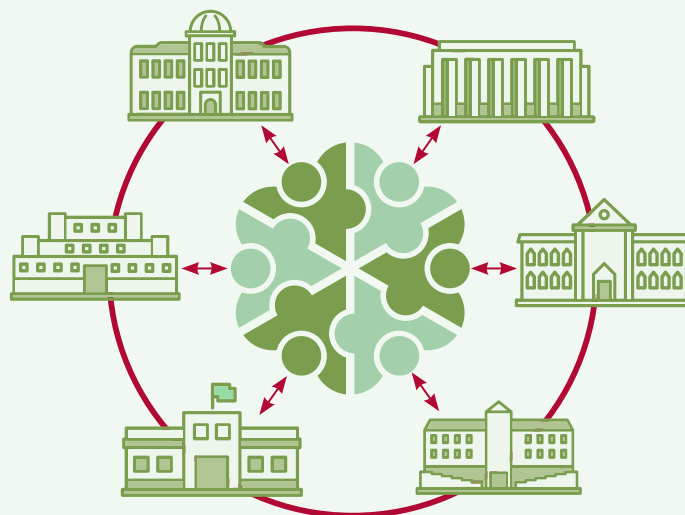
Examples of national governance mechanisms for food systems

As many as 23 ministries have been involved in **Bangladesh**, with the coordination unit sitting within the Food Policy Monitoring Unit (FPMU) at the Ministry of Food. Bangladesh is one of few countries with a Ministry of Food.

In **Indonesia**, at national level at least 12 ministries and agencies are explicitly tasked with the regulation and governance of food systems aspects, where the responsibility of coordination lies with Bappenas (the Ministry of National Development Planning). Subnational government (province, city, district, regencies etc) also plays a significant role in implementation, owing to Indonesia's strongly decentralised system.

The **Nigerian** Ministry of Finance, Budget and National Planning houses the coordination unit for food systems transformation.

In **Kenya, Mozambique** and **Tanzania** the Ministry of Agriculture houses the coordination unit for food systems transformation.



Food systems governance and coordination should encourage approaches that are inclusive of a range of non-government actors (e.g. youth representatives, indigenous groups, farmer groups, other private sector representatives, NGO representatives, etc), allowing for development of a common vision and understanding of the food systems transformation plans and a fair approach to implementation. Ideally the actions of all relevant groups should contribute to the shared goals (5).

Vertical coordination

Improved governance for meaningful food systems transformation lies not only with government at the national level. In decentralised systems, much of the responsibility for implementation of policies can lie at sub-national levels. Unfortunately, newly-developed policies at national level do not necessarily trickle down automatically, meaning that active engagement between national and sub-national levels is needed – called vertical coordination (11). Successful food systems governance thus depends on both horizontal coordination (across sectors and with non-government actors), as well as vertical coordination over different government levels.

The level of decentralisation can also impact the type of coordination needed. It is also worth noting that decentralisation can reduce clarity in terms of where responsibility or leadership lies. In **Mozambique**, for instance, following decentralisation reforms in 2017, provincial and district level bodies for food and nutrition were created. The operationalisation of these bodies is however yet to be completed, causing confusion about which responsibilities rest with which institutional bodies and at what level. Furthermore, decentralisation often means that a coordination mechanism is needed not only at national, but also at subnational level(s). In **Nigeria**, State committees on food and nutrition security have been identified to potentially take on this role. Moreover, for those seeking to support and advocate for food systems transformation, this means that efforts must be aimed at subnational levels.

Conclusion

Effective governance of food systems transformation can usher in improvements in economic, social, and environmental issues that are critical for development. Government has a unique position in such governance arrangements, both in terms of leadership and coordination. Governance structures are organised in a variety of ways across and within countries. As efforts to transform (national and sub-national) food systems progress, including through the development, realisation, and implementation of improved policies, progress on what works and why must be tracked so that examples of successful arrangements can be urgently replicated and accelerated.





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