Issue-based Coalition on Sustainable Food Systems

for Europe and Central Asia

TECHNICAL NOTE ON SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS

Shortened Version – targeting Member State dialogue
convenors and participants preparing
for the United Nations Food Systems Summit

- April, 2021 -

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Introduction

As part of the Decade of Action to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals, the United Nations Secretary-General is convening a Food Systems Summit to establish the future direction and accelerate action for sustainable food systems.

In preparation for the summit, each Member State is invited by the United Nations Deputy Secretary-General to initiate Member State Food Systems Summit Dialogues through June 2021. These national dialogues will result in the shaping of national pathways to sustainable food systems and in expressions of intent from a broad range of stakeholders to support these pathways.[1]

Member States' Food Systems Summit Dialogues are developed under the auspices of a Member State Dialogue Convenor, a government representative responsible for organizing the national dialogues.

Besides the Member State Dialogues, two more types of Food Systems Summit Dialogues can be convened: (1) independent dialogues, convened by individuals or organizations independently of national authorities but with the opportunity to formally connect to the summit process through an official feedback mechanism; and (2) global summit dialogues, set to take place alongside key global conventions on climate, biodiversity, environment, nutrition, oceans, economies and related issues within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that have connections to food systems.[2]

Five action tracks have been designed to guide the summit discussions. These are aligned with the Summit's five objectives: (1) ensuring access to safe and nutritious food for all; (2) shifting to sustainable consumption patterns; (3) boosting nature-positive production at scale; (4) advancing equitable livelihoods; and (5) building resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stresses. Importantly, the action tracks are not separate, nor do they sit in silos. Each action track is designed to address possible trade-offs with other tracks and to identify solutions that can deliver wide-reaching benefits.

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1. For more information, see: https://summitdialogues.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Food-Systems-Summit-Member-State-Dialogues-Getting-Started.pdf and https://www.un.org/food-systems-summit/dialogues.

2. For more information on planned dialogues, see: https://summitdialogues.org/explore-dialogues/.

Scope of the technical note

This document presents the United Nations' common understanding on key concepts related to sustainable food systems. It also provides a toolkit to dialogue convenors for the identification of key areas of interest and relevance under the five action tracks.

Its main goal is to provide government officials in Europe and Central Asia with support in preparing for the Member States' Food Systems Summit Dialogues. In addition to designated convenors of national dialogues, other stakeholders – such as NGOs, academia and private entities – also can find the document useful as contributors to national dialogues or organizers of independent Food Systems Summit Dialogues to raise awareness and trigger commitments to building the resilient food systems of the future. United Nations Resident Coordinators and United Nations Country Teams also can contribute to this process by advocating for new actions and amplifying existing initiatives.


Source: Food System Summit. https://summitdialogues.org/engage/dialogue-convenor/

What is a food system?

Food systems are at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and an essential driver of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The way food is currently produced and consumed is taking a toll on the health and well-being of populations, the environment and the natural resource base, with concerns over the loss of biodiversity, pressures on water, deforestation, increases in greenhouse gas emissions, and food loss and waste. Inequalities and imbalances that exist throughout the food system are caused by people's inability to access markets, the weak bargaining power of value chain actors, and difficulties among the urban and rural poor in accessing or demanding nutritious, diverse foods.

A food system encompasses the entire range of activities, goods and services involved in the production, trading, processing, marketing, consumption and disposal of goods that originate from agriculture, forestry or fisheries, including the inputs needed and the outputs generated at each of these steps. The core constituent elements of a food system are food supply chains, food environments and consumer behaviour (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of food systems
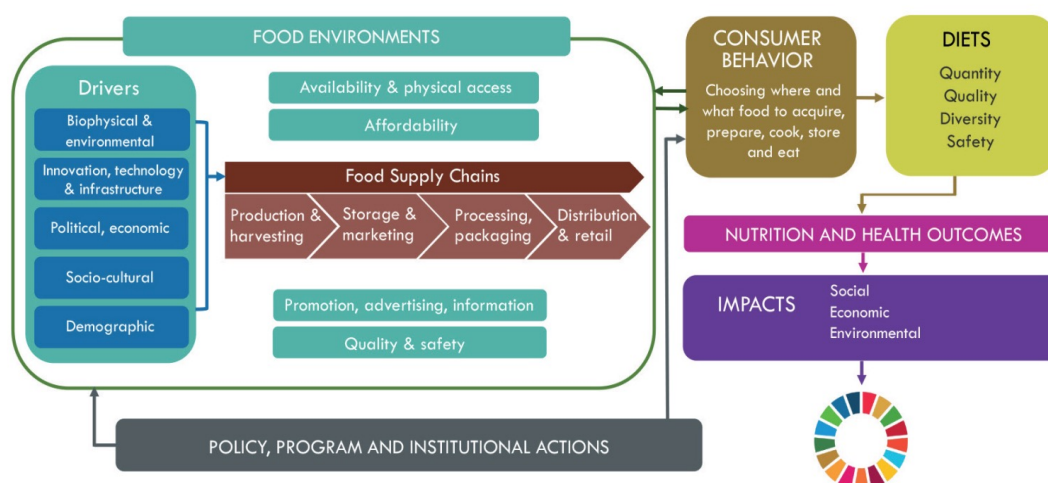
Source: HLPE. 2017. Nutrition and Food Systems. A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome.
http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/hlpe/hlpe_documents/HLPE_Reports/HLPE-Report-12_EN.pdf.

Why do food system need to be transformed?

In the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region, while hunger and undernourishment are hardly an issue, other forms of food insecurity and malnutrition continue to be prominent – notably, access to quality and nutritious foods, overweight and obesity, and micronutrient deficiencies[3]. As in other regions, vulnerable groups, including women, children and adolescents, do not receive the diets they need to survive, grow and develop to their full potential. Unsafe food affects all countries in the region. Every year, approximately 23 million people fall ill and almost 4 700 people die from eating contaminated food[4].

Additional priorities across the ECA region include, but are not limited to:

(1) the need to protect the natural environment, including water resources;

(2) prevent and restore biodiversity loss;

(3) mitigate climate change and improve the resilience of food systems to all shocks;

(4) develop economically viable and efficient value chains;

(5) support smallholders and family farms;

(6) provide decent employment opportunities;

(7) prevent food loss and waste;

(8) address inequalities in food systems; and

(9) help the vulnerable and marginalized access affordable healthy diets.

Due to their climate and environmental impacts and shortcomings in providing healthy, safe nutrition for all, current food systems are unsustainable. They need to be transformed to deliver the quality diets needed for men's, women's and children's health and to relieve pressure on the planet's natural resources while allowing inclusive economic growth.

While providing safe and nutritious food, sustainable food systems should foster inclusive economic development and social equality and provide adequate incentives and returns to food producers, processors and distributors. Sustainable food systems also should optimize the use of natural resources and protect the environment through sustainable food and agricultural practices, efficient and safe value chains, and reductions in food loss and waste.

In addition, a sustainable food system is a system that delivers food and nutrition security for all in such a way that the economic, social and environmental bases for the generation of food security and nutrition for future generations are not compromised. A sustainable food system needs to be resilient and adaptable to shocks and disruptions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has additionally exposed the vulnerabilities of food systems, their crucial role for societies, and the many interconnections among food systems and other delivery systems, including but not limited to social protection, education, health and water and sanitation systems.

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3. FAO. 2019. Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition in Europe and Central Asia 2019: Structural Transformations of Agriculture for Improved Food Security, Nutrition and Environment. Budapest. 84pp. http://www.fao.org/3/ca7153en/CA7153EN.pdf

4. WHO. 2017. The burden of foodborne diseases in the WHO European region. Copenhagen. https://www. euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/402989/50607-WHO-Food-Safety-publicationV4_Web.pdf

What can be done to make food systems more sustainable?

To achieve sustainable food systems, all three dimensions of sustainability – economic, environmental and social – should be addressed.

Economic sustainability	Considers the commercial or fiscal viability of activities conducted by each system actor and the benefits and costs to society as a whole (lower medical costs because the population is healthy thanks to healthy diets, for example, or increased productivity for economic development).
Social sustainability	Considers equity in the distribution of added economic value and ensures benefits for society at large, taking into account vulnerable groups categorized by gender, age, ethnicity, income/wealth and socio-economic status. Achieving social sustainability requires that food systems evolve in such a way that those who are the least advantaged are not left behind.
Environmental sustainability	Focuses on reducing contamination, managing waste effectively and ensuring that the impacts of food system activities on the surrounding natural environment are neutral or positive, taking into consideration biodiversity, water, soil, animal and plant health, the carbon footprint, the water footprint, and food loss and waste.

Various actors and processes can drive transformation towards a sustainable trajectory through responsible investment and decisions, policy and governance strategies, and consumer choices and preferences. Decision makers and actors from the public and private sectors, science and academia, consumers and NGOs all need to be involved in changing how food is produced and consumed.

What is challenging is to identify the right set of reforms needed and to generate evidence that helps stakeholders understand how changes will contribute to improving food systems and diets in a sustainable way.

Issues and entry points to be considered and addressed when building sustainable food systems

This list can be used by the convenors of the Member States' Food Systems Summit Dialogues to identify key areas of interest and relevance under the five action tracks[5]. In particular, the list aims to shed light on the key issues that can be considered under each action track during the national dialogues, leading to input to the Food Systems Summit Dialogues.

It is recommended that dialogue convenors select one or more issues of relevance (under one or more action tracks of their choice), depending on their national contexts and priorities. Food Systems Summit Dialogues should engage a wide range of stakeholders (e.g. line ministries, civil society and the private sector) to make sure that issues are addressed in a broader food systems perspective, looking at the three dimensions of sustainability.

The list provided below is not exhaustive[6]. In line with the principle of leaving no one behind, the proposed issues and entry points must all be addressed with a view towards ensuring that the needs and concerns of the most marginalized social groups are considered[7].

ACTION TRACK 1:
Ensuring access to safe and nutritious food for all

OBJECTIVE: *All people at all times have access to sufficient quantities of affordable and safe food products that together comprise a healthy diet that is nutritionally balanced and provides adequate daily nutritional intake.*

» Issues and Entry Points:

- Food security and nutrition challenges (hunger/undernourishment, overweight/obesity, micronutrient deficiency, child stunting, etc.) and the population groups most affected.

- The availability and accessibility of healthy and nutritious diets[8] to all population groups.

- Main dietary patterns in the country. Any specific concerns with dietary patterns (e.g. consumption of highly processed, high-calorie and low-nutritional-value food items; high consumption of salt, sugar and trans-fatty acids) and diet-related non-communicable diseases.

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5. For more information, see: https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit/action-tracks.

6. It is also key to consider the importance of the enabling environment when building sustainable food systems, i.e. establishing an adequate set of policies, regulations and investments conducive to sustainable food systems, in addition to institutional arrangements that allow intersectoral coordination and multi-stakeholder participation. Effective governance for transformational change promoted by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development also relies on national security and political stability being maintained as a key enabler for a functional food system.

7. When addressing the proposed issues and entry points, available gender and socio-economic analyses, Leaving No One Behind assessments, and disaggregated data (by sex, age, location and other available variables) must be considered to identify areas of inequality.

8. Healthy and nutritious diets are those that not only meet energy needs but also provide a diversity of foods of high nutritional quality, are safe to consume, are affordable, are accessible and are culturally appropriate.

- Policies and initiatives to ensure food systems lend themselves to providing nutritious diets for children and adolescents.

- Policies or initiatives in place to promote healthy diets and better nutrition, such as integrated school meals, nutrition education, regulation of advertising and marketing of certain foods not conducive to healthy diets (especially those targeting children and adolescents), regulation of breast milk substitutes, promotion of breastfeeding, food reformulation and large- scale food fortification (such as flour fortification and salt iodization) to improve the nutritional value of food, and food labelling.

- Food safety policies and control systems in place to assess the main sources of foodborne diseases and food safety risks and effectively manage and communicate with key stakeholders on these risks.

- Main challenges regarding animal diseases (including zoonoses), plant pests and diseases, and preventive management and surveillance systems.

ACTION TRACK 2:
Shifting to sustainable consumption patterns

OBJECTIVE: *Creating and building demand for sustainably produced food products, strengthening shorter value chains, promoting the circular use of food resources, and helping to reduce waste and improve nutrition, especially among the most vulnerable.*

» Issues and Entry Points:

- Policies, initiatives and the raising of awareness among public- and private-sector stakeholders to prevent and reduce food loss and waste[9] along the value chain.

- Short value chains that respond to consumer demands, providing diverse foods at affordable prices.

- Strengthening local food production by bringing unutilized land into production, improving farm structures, and enhancing advisory and extension services that target small farms.

- Educating and raising awareness among consumers, youth and children on these topics:

  - nutrition education and awareness on healthy diets;

  - food choices as drivers of sustainability;

  - food literacy and the prevention of food waste.

- Mechanisms for dialogue on the needs and expectations of the food system among consumers, policymakers and the private sector.

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9 Food loss results from decisions and actions by food suppliers in the chain, excluding retailers, food service providers and consumers. Food waste results from decisions and actions by retailers, food service providers and consumers.

ACTION TRACK 3:
Boosting nature-positive production at sufficient scales

OBJECTIVE: *Improving the performance of food systems through the optimization of resource use and better governance that minimizes deforestation, food loss and waste, and greenhouse gas emissions, avoiding chemicals that harm ecosystems and human health and curbing the further loss of biodiversity.*

» Issues and Entry Points:

- Nature and extent of land use for agriculture and other purposes.

- Policies to prevent land degradation; management of crop yields and the use of pastureland.

- Sustainable and efficient use of water in irrigation and food processing; water quality assurance.

- Analysis to understand the overall environmental impacts of the main agrifood value chains, including greenhouse gas emissions, nutrient losses, pesticide emissions, soil and water quality degradation, and estimated biodiversity loss due to food production.

- Investment in sustainable agricultural techniques (e.g. organic cultivars, agroecological practices).

- Promotion in rural areas of climate-smart agricultural practices, innovation and advanced and energy-efficient technologies.

- Functioning food supply chains with adequate infrastructure for value addition, storage, processing and distribution; connection and cooperation among various actors.

- Adoption of measures to strengthen the sustainability of food supply chains (circular economy, food formulation), resource use efficiency, eco-friendly food packaging.

- Reviewing support to agriculture, including subsidies, with a view to facilitate green transition.

ACTION TRACK 4:
Advancing equitable livelihoods and value distribution

OBJECTIVE: *Food systems developments are inclusive – leaving no one behind – and contribute to the elimination of poverty by creating jobs, raising incomes across the food value chain, reducing risks for the world's poorest, and improving value distribution.*

» Issues and Entry Points:

- Regulation of access and control of land, water and other productive resources.

- Security of tenure rights and development of agricultural land markets.

- Actual access to and control over productive resources.

- Current access to decent work, agricultural inputs, knowledge, cooperatives/associations and other services.

- Access to finance and credit for operators in the food and agricultural sector.

- Social protection measures such as input subsidies, innovative insurance solutions to manage extreme weather (e.g. weather index insurance) and climate variability risks on crop and livestock production. For those who may need to leave agriculture, as they cannot transition their small farms into commercial family farms, provision of alternative support through off-farm diversification and other social protection measures.

- Efficiency, connectivity, adequate infrastructure and technologies – logistics of value chains.

- Functioning markets for value chain operators at local, regional and international levels; organization of markets to meet needs; share of local green markets, supermarkets, direct sales and export markets.

- Targeted support to help small-scale, traditional producers and agri-enterprises access viable markets.

- Promotion of short value chains, farm-to-fork approaches and inclusive and green trade.

ACTION TRACK 5:
Building resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stresses

OBJECTIVE: *Food systems developments are inclusive – leaving no one behind – and contribute to the elimination of poverty by creating jobs, raising incomes across the food value chain, reducing risks for the world's poorest, and improving value distribution.*

» Issues and Entry Points:

- Measures in place to ensure that country food systems are prepared to avoid, mitigate and/or adapt to vulnerabilities, shocks and stresses (e.g. natural disasters, financial and political crises, pandemics).

- Emergency plans ready to be operationalized to address food safety, animal health and plant health threats and outbreaks.

- Establishment of climate watch and early warning systems.

- Risk transfer mechanisms (i.e. agricultural insurances) in place that promote disaster risk reduction and climate-smart agriculture as a means of better managing disaster risk and helping to build resilience.

- Food assistance programmes (on both demand and production sides) in place, when needed, to contribute to food security and nutrition.