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Written inputs by Food and Agriculture Organization of United Nations (FAO)

Agenda Item 5: Principles of effective governance for delivery of equitable and sustainable development

The need for equitable governance to accelerate sustainable development

The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda established an ambitious set of priorities to tackle global challenges and human development. The central tenet of this agenda is “Leaving No One Behind”.

Achieving this requires an enabling environment and holistic approaches, with focus on vulnerable and marginalized groups, rural poor, small-scale producers, women and youth, many of whom are still being left behind in the global transformative dynamic. Today, although progress has been made in reducing the number of the poor, almost 700 million people (8,5 % of the global population) live in extreme poverty, and nearly one in five people are at risk of experiencing welfare losses due to an extreme weather event from which they will struggle to recover (WB, 2024). Of these nearly 75% live in rural areas and depend on agriculture for their subsistence. Yet, they are often constrained by limited access to resources, services, technologies, markets and economic opportunities, which lower agricultural productivity and income in rural areas. (FAO, 2017).

Back in 2019, the [Global Sustainable Development Report](#) had identified agrifood systems as one of the key entry points for transformative action across the SDGs. This is still the case today, as highlighted in the recently adopted [Pact for the Future](#).

Safe food is critical to contribute to the health of populations, by supporting their physiological functions (avoiding acute infections, intoxications or longer-term multifactor diseases such as cancers), allowing individuals to meet their dietary needs by not “losing” nutrients through impaired gut functionality, as in the case of acute diarrheal episodes (WHO, 2024).

Agrifood systems employ an estimated 1.23 billion people globally. They are a major employer of women globally. Empowering women can enhance their well-being and that of their households, reducing hunger, boosting incomes and strengthening resilience. Furthermore, closing the gap between men and women in farm productivity and the wage gap in agrifood-system employment would increase global gross domestic product by 1 percent (or nearly USD 1 trillion). This would reduce global food insecurity by about 2 percentage points, reducing the number of food-insecure people by 45 million (FAO 2023).

Despite their critical role in providing sufficient and safe food and employment, agrifood systems do not always ensure an acceptable standard of living and quality of life. Vulnerable populations, including the poor and food insecure, small-scale value chain actors, women, youth, persons living with disabilities, and Indigenous Peoples, often bear the greatest burden of social hidden costs in these systems. Inequalities and power imbalances are deeply embedded in our agrifood systems. (FAO, 2023a).

The drivers of this situation are a mix of structural inequalities in access to natural and financial resources and assets, weaknesses in governance and institutional capacities, and the intensification and interaction of conflicts, weather extremes and economic slowdowns. Currently, governance frameworks often function in isolation, with ministries and agencies pursuing sector-specific objectives without adequate coordination. This fragmentation impedes synergies and often results in competing policy priorities, inefficiencies, and missed opportunities for accelerating sustainable development.

The agrifood sector exemplifies this challenge, as policies related to agriculture, environment, trade, health, and labour frequently operate in parallel, rather than through a coherent, system-wide approach.

To bring about a transformational change called by Agenda 2030, we need to reduce hunger, poverty, and inequities, transform agrifood systems and invest in context-specific governance and institutional arrangements able to support that change (FAO, 2021a). This includes a comprehensive and integrated strategy that acknowledges the interdependence of human, animal, plant and environmental health.

A coherent multi-level governance approach

Governance coherence is needed across three levels: global, national, and local.

1. **Global Level:** International agreements, such as the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda, provide overarching frameworks, but their implementation requires national adaptation and alignment. Global institutions can support countries in integrating these frameworks into their governance systems, ensuring that international financing mechanisms and technical assistance are structured to promote inter-sectoral collaboration rather than reinforcing existing siloes.
2. **National Level:** establishing cross-sectoral policy frameworks and governance arrangements that facilitate coordination among different ministries are key. Mechanisms such as inter-ministerial task forces, integrated budgeting systems, and multi-stakeholder consultation processes can help align national strategies with global commitments while ensuring policy coherence across sectors
3. **Local Level:** subnational governments play a critical role in implementing SDG-related policies, particularly in agrifood systems, where local realities must inform national decision-making. However, local authorities often lack the resources and autonomy to translate national policies into action. Strengthening decentralization, capacity-building, and financial support for local governments will enhance the delivery of sustainable, inclusive development.

Solutions at scale are particularly needed to achieve tangible changes in gender equality and women's empowerment. While it remains critical to engage with communities and households, it is critical that governments, international organizations, civil society organizations and the private sector influence positive changes through national policies, campaigns and large-scale integrated programmes (FAO 2023).

FAO has provided support to several key global mechanisms (including the SDG Summit, COP 29, the G20 Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty, among others) seeking to advance holistic and integrated approaches to address complex global challenges and bring results at scale. FAO is hosting the support mechanism of the Global Alliance. This mechanism can help in operationalizing the transformative actions under the CEPA pentagram, and support the Alliance member countries in policy implementation, including through facilitating the brokering and nurturing of flexible partnerships between national governments wishing to deliver on their commitments to implement policies in the reference policy basket on one side, and other Global Alliance members that can provide financial or technical support, on the other.

With the aim of promoting greater alignment of policy and outcomes on gender, FAO has launched [Commit to Grow Equality \(CGE\)](#), a mechanism to accelerate equality and women's empowerment in agrifood systems through financing, investments and partnerships by enabling a diverse range of actors to report against a strategic set of commitments.

Policy and institutional innovation in agrifood systems for promoting social equity and wellbeing

Youth are three times more likely than adults to be unemployed, with a global youth unemployment rate of 15.6 percent – corresponding to 75 million youth. The majority of rural youth are employed in the informal economy, under casual or seasonal arrangements under which they earn low wages and face unsafe working conditions. Re-engaging youth in agriculture requires addressing the numerous constraints including: insufficient access to skills development and education; limited access to resources such as land; and low levels of involvement in decision-making processes. Rural youth are also typically excluded from those institutions that provide access to financial services – such as credit, savings and insurance – which further hinders their ability to participate in the agriculture sector.

Inclusive policies and cross-sectoral coordination to increase investments in Youth

Together with expanding broad-based productivity growth and economic opportunities for all, investing in youth with targeted strategies is vital for achieving SDG 8. Work-based learning, mentorship programs, peer support, and market access initiatives empower youth, while cooperatives and networks expand their resources and agency. Improved policy coherence, evidence-based and well-targeted programs, and labor market policies that address inequalities are essential for empowering rural youth and building resilient livelihoods. This requires joint interventions and policy alignment across various sectors, with social protection measures playing a critical role in providing a safety net and long-term support for vulnerable youth.

Social protection and labour-market programmes for women in support of work and productivity

Social assistance and labour-market programmes develop livelihood options through management of risks and facilitating liquidity (Perera et Al., 2022). Evidence from Lesotho, for example, shows that the Child Grant Programme led women to increase work on their own farms (Daidone et Al., 2014) and girls to reduce time spent on household chores in male-headed households (Sebastian et Al., 2019). The Ghana Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty programme increases the probability of transitioning from unemployment to employment for both men and women (Osei, R.D. & Lambon-Quayefio, M. 2021). In the Plurinational State of Bolivia, a nearly universal conditional cash-transfer programme for families with school-aged children increased women's employment, in particular in areas with low access to financial services, suggesting that overcoming liquidity constraints may play a role in improving women's employment opportunities (Vera-Cossio, D.A. 2022).

Promoting equitable access to resources

Increased and equitable access to water, land, fisheries, forests and other natural resources and assets is a basis for improving food and nutrition security, health and wellbeing and decent work and economic growth, while reducing inequalities. In the case of land, women often have much weaker tenure rights than men, and they suffer discrimination by social customs, as well as by legal systems. A more sustainable access to resources and more secured tenure rights of women increase food security while reducing social inequalities. This can be reached by supporting land reforms, engaging with parliamentarians, assessing legal frameworks, formulating land policies and building of multi-stakeholder processes for inclusive policy dialogue and by supporting reform proposals. (FAO, 2023b)

Repurposing and reforming agricultural support to drive transformation

Economy and finance are key levers for change. Globally, support to agricultural producers' accounts for almost \$540 billion a year, or 15 per cent of total agricultural production value. Support is often biased towards distortive measures, unequally distributed and harmful to environmental and human health (FAO, UNDP and UNEP, 2021).

Repurposing agricultural support could be a game-changer by optimizing the use of scarce public resources, with incentives for agrifood systems to be more productive and conducive to healthy lives

for all, while preserving natural resources and strengthening resilience. At the same time, directing financial capital to more sustainable technologies, industries and practices, and reforming the financial system with sustainable standards could encourage investment in agrifood system transformation.

Investing in human capital in agriculture sector

Investing in the skills and capabilities of small-scale agricultural producers to successfully manage farming enterprises, including technical agricultural skills as well as functional skills such as empowerment, leadership, and innovation is crucial to addressing challenges facing our global agrifood systems, from sustainably feeding the world's growing population with food that is safe, healthy and nutritious to finding innovative solutions for more resilient and climate-smart agriculture. (Davis, K et al., 2021)

Partnerships and collaboration at the policy level are critical, as investment is constrained or enabled by the existing policy environment. When investing in or designing an agriculture human capital investment model, it is crucial to understand first the cultural, societal and economic factors limiting the participation of young, indigenous, remote, poor or female farmers. Understanding what motivates farmers and getting them on board are also key to success. Incentives for learning should be rooted in the needs and aspirations of farmers, attainable and clearly communicated and explored with farmers in a participatory manner.

Sustainable agrifood systems as a model for integrated governance

The agrifood sector presents a compelling case for why breaking siloes is essential for sustainable development. Agrifood systems are inherently multi-dimensional, touching on economic growth, environmental sustainability, health outcomes, and social equity. By adopting a systems-thinking approach, governments can:

- Align agricultural policies with climate action goals to promote climate-smart farming and sustainable land-use planning.
- Coordinate between ministries of health, trade, and agriculture to ensure nutritious, affordable food access without compromising rural livelihoods.
- Strengthen rural development strategies by fostering cooperation between local governments, national institutions, and international development agencies.

By embedding cross-sectoral coordination mechanisms, digital governance tools, and participatory policymaking, governments can create adaptive, resilient institutions capable of navigating global challenges and ensuring that sustainable development is realized for all.

This transformation is particularly urgent in agrifood governance, where inter-ministerial collaboration and multi-stakeholder engagement are key to breaking siloes, minimizing trade-offs, and achieving food security and nutrition in a way that is both equitable and environmentally sustainable.

FAO work to catalyse using a systems approach for transformative action at country level¹

FAO provides direct support at country level to develop capacity and advances agrifood systems transformation through the adoption of a systems approach. For example, FAO provides support to a range of countries to establish institutional structures that enable system-wide governance to connect, coordinate and facilitate collaboration across agrifood systems. Examples include the Technical Committee on Food Systems Transformation in Costa Rica and the operationalization of Food Systems

¹ FAO, 2025. *Update on Food Systems Transformation work at the FAO*. PC 140/INF/2. [PC140/INF/2 - Update on Food Systems Transformation work at the FAO](#)

Transformation Steering Committee (CNTSA) in Morocco. The work in Morocco and other Mediterranean countries was part of the SFS-Med (Sustainable Food Systems in the Mediterranean) platform in place between 2021- 2024 as a multistakeholder partnership to advance sustainable agrifood systems in the Mediterranean region.

FAO also supports countries with policymaking to deliver better outcomes across agrifood systems by embracing the multicomponent, interlinked nature of systems and managing trade-offs and creating synergies. This includes support for the development and implementation of system-wide policies, such as the Comprehensive Agricultural Transformation Support Programme (CATSP) in Zambia, the Fourth Strategic plan for Agriculture Transformation (PSTA4) in Rwanda and the implementation of Jordan's 2021-2030 National Food Security Strategy and its Pathway document. Jordan is an example of how this policy support in some cases builds from the National Food System Pathways drafted in the lead up to the UN Food Systems Summit, converting vision and priorities into actionable policies.

FAO also works on a Financing for Shock-Driven Food Crisis Facility (FSFC) in coordination with WFP and UN OCHA, that can involve private capital from global insurance markets and provide rapid-response financing in anticipation of severe food crises. The FSFC will bring one of the preventive dimensions needed to enhance resilience among the most vulnerable.

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