

FAO Training Course on Developing Sustainable Food Systems and Value Chains in Asia and the Pacific

Concept Note

1. Background

Food systems thinking is increasingly embraced by the international development community, and rightly so. Food-related outcomes, such as nutrition, food loss and waste, and smallholder livelihoods, are connected to many elements that go beyond food production. All the activities and actors related to food aggregation, processing, distribution and consumption, as well as their respective interactions and interests, are crucial to ensuring positive and equitable outcomes. These activities and actors, in turn, are embedded in broader societal and natural environments. Together they constitute the food systems we find around the world, each with their own unique dynamics and feedback loops.

The Asia Pacific region has done remarkably well in reducing hunger and poverty over the past decades, but now it finds itself at a major crossroad, as pointed out by 44 countries during the 2016 FAO Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific (#APRC33). Despite successes, food systems in Asia and the Pacific still have a long way to go for facilitating agriculture and food processing that minimize health and environmental impacts; improved supply chain efficiency; interventions to reduce hunger and improve nutrition; new technologies to reduce losses and waste; effective environmental and health regulations; innovative approaches to shifting consumption; and reducing poverty through food systems.

Asian-Pacific Governments agreed upon the need to provide an enabling environment to support food systems and value chains that deliver on all the above. The FAO Regional Initiative in the Pacific Islands seeks to contribute to such efforts by developing local value chains for food and nutrition security. The initiative encompasses improvements in the countries' capacities to assemble, integrate, analyse and disseminate information on food, nutrition and natural resources; the development of regional policy and regulatory frameworks; and field projects to support the creation of sustainable and inclusive value chains.

This training course not only takes stock of the above mentioned regional situation, but looks beyond the agriculture sector to consider the food system in its entirety. Fostering systemic changes calls for a holistic way of thinking and a multidisciplinary approach that requires an organization-wide effort and extensive cross-divisional and cross-ministerial collaboration. Thus, any discussion on food systems has to go beyond agriculture and includes considerations of fisheries, forestry, employment, nutrition, gender, natural resources and other themes and areas contributing to the sustainability of food systems.

2. Rationale

As food systems thinking becomes central to FAO's work, there is a need to develop a clear framework to guide projects and policy recommendations, and to provide greater internal consistency to our work.

The sustainable food systems (SFS) approach allows us to assess the big picture. Rather than focusing on isolated components of a system, it facilitates a holistic understanding of their interactions, feedback loops and how they together affect systems dynamics. The SFS approach encourages us to probe deeper into underlying causes that can be far removed from initial symptoms, and to aim for transformational changes. Adopting systems thinking, consequently, can bring about significant improvements to our work in terms of project design and cooperation.

However, to render this systems approach useful for analysis and implementation, it is essential to “think big” yet retain a focus and know what to prioritize. A food system can be considered the collection of all food value chains, the markets through which they connect and the wider societal and natural environments in which they operate. To operationalize food systems approaches, the action needs to be brought to a sub-system level (a market system, a value chain, a territory). For example, starting from a holistic appraisal of the food system, we can identify those value chains that when upgraded, can bring about the greatest developmental impacts. As elaborated in the publication “Developing Sustainable Food Value Chains-Guiding Principles”, value chain development reflects systems thinking in that it looks at the way value is created and captured not only by producers, but also by other stakeholders, including governments, wage-earners, agribusiness entrepreneurs, and consumers. Essentially, the sustainable food value chain (SFVC) approach emphasizes systemic analyses and integrated interventions to effectively address complex food systems challenges.

In view of the synergy between the SFS and SFVC approaches, a training course on sustainable food systems and value chain development linked to the SFVC principles can provide a key foundation in the process of promoting food systems thinking within FAO. For this training course, exercises and examples will draw from experiences with the value chain approach to date, with a special focus on Asia and the Pacific.

3. Objectives

This regional course is designed first and foremost for FAO staff at the Sub-regional Office and the country offices, but will be open to country project counterparts and a limited number of colleagues from partner organizations working on food systems development. It aims to achieve three objectives:

- 1) To promote food systems thinking within FAO;
- 2) To operationalize food systems thinking through the sustainable food value chains development approach;
- 3) To advocate for integrated food system solutions and better-aligned programmes across technical disciplines.

The course will equip trainees with innovative and systemic ways of addressing food-related challenges. It will help them better comprehend their areas of specialization as part of a complex, adaptive food system, and thus increase their understanding of how they influence, and are influenced by, other parts of the food system. Furthermore, the course will provide the tools needed to measure, analyze and improve the performance of a food system using systems thinking.

4. Components of the training

Main content

The course has 12 modules and is five days in length, from 21st to 25th of May 2018, including a learning journey on the 24th of May. It begins with an overview of the food system as a complex, adaptive system that constantly evolves, and its interactions with many other systems. It introduces the food systems approach and advocates for more integrated solutions based on a holistic framing and analysis. An analytical framework is presented to understand the interconnected components of a food system with a focus on the concept of sustainability and value added. Four different approaches to operationalize food systems thinking are compared.

In the following modules, the programme shows the advantages of adopting the sustainable food value chain approach and provides an insight into how to use this approach to address food systems challenges.

Participants will be guided through the stages of value chain selection and analysis, as well as how to develop a strategy and implementation plan for value chain upgrading. Various case studies will be

presented, including from the region and beyond, throughout the training course to illustrate the concepts and approaches.

Participants' engagement

The training is delivered in a highly participatory manner, integrating presentations by the facilitators with group exercises, discussions and systems games. In order to optimize the learning experience, participants will be encouraged to contribute with their own knowledge and best practices. Special sessions have been set up to facilitate experience sharing of country-level projects.

Beyond the training

Participants will be invited to join the Technical Network and Knowledge Platform on Sustainable Food Value Chain Development. These online communities of practice will enable participants to continue the food systems- and value chains-related discussion after the training. Through multiple features such as webinars, newsletters and online discussions, Network and Platform members benefit from a unique space to exchange knowledge, information and experience, as well as stay updated on the latest value chain topics.