



联合国  
粮食及  
农业组织

Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations

Organisation des Nations  
Unies pour l'alimentation  
et l'agriculture

Продовольственная и  
сельскохозяйственная организация  
Объединенных Наций

Organización de las  
Naciones Unidas para la  
Alimentación y la Agricultura

منظمة  
الأغذية والزراعة  
للأمم المتحدة

# COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE

## Twenty-seventh Session

28 September - 2 October 2020

## Operationalizing a Food Systems Approach to Accelerate Delivery of the 2030 Agenda

### Executive Summary

More resilient, inclusive and sustainable food systems have been identified as a key entry point for accelerating progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, but the outcomes of many contemporary food systems fall short of the aspirations of the 2030 Agenda. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the significant weaknesses in many food systems when exposed to stresses and shocks that threaten future food security and nutrition and exacerbate inequities.

Food systems stakeholders have been making changes to improve the resilience and sustainability of food systems, but the many independent initiatives of governments, private sector and civil society have lacked a common framing of the complex choices that affect food systems, constraining the ability of societies with different priorities, observing different trends and having different agro-ecological and institutional potentials to identify and implement pathways towards more sustainable food system.

This paper introduces three discrete examples of mechanisms through which the Organization is seeking to ensure that a food systems approach can be more effectively operationalized: (i) the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit; (ii) the draft New Vision and Strategy for FAO's Work in Nutrition and (iii) a Global Knowledge Hub on indigenous peoples' food systems. The examples are used to illustrate how FAO is seeking to more systematically support Members in aligning food system actors' initiatives in support of more sustainable food systems through the provision of improved evidence, policy and regulatory guidance.

### Suggested action by the Committee

The Committee is invited to:

- Acknowledge the importance of adopting a more systemic and coordinated approach to supporting Members, where requested, in the transformation of their food systems to accelerate progress towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda.
- Highlight the added urgency of food systems transformation in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Acknowledge the role that the Organization is playing in supporting the preparatory process towards the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit.
- Invite relevant FAO Governing Bodies to provide guidance on how FAO can further support Members in achieving sustainable food systems.

- Comment upon the draft of the updated Vision and Strategy for FAO's Work in Nutrition to ensure that the potential of agriculture and food systems to enhance diets and prevent all forms of malnutrition is realized.
- Highlight the importance of indigenous peoples' food systems in protecting biodiversity and in providing inputs that can inform the development of sustainable food systems, through *inter alia* the Food Systems Summit and the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition, and in this regard, welcome the initiative of research, academia, indigenous and UN partners in forming the Global Hub on Indigenous Peoples Food Systems.
- Consider the participation of indigenous peoples at COAG, as recommended by the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), in relation to indigenous peoples' food systems and traditional knowledge.

*Queries on the substantive content of the document may be addressed to:*

Mr Jamie Morrison  
Director  
Food Systems and Food Safety Division  
Tel: +39 06 570 56251

## I. Introduction

### A. A key role for food systems in accelerating action towards 2030

1. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable development has heightened awareness of the key role that food systems transformation can play as an entry point for accelerating progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)<sup>1</sup>. It challenges countries to eliminate hunger and all other forms of malnutrition by ensuring that sufficient quantities of safe, nutritious and affordable food are available to all. Recognizing the interconnectedness of the SDGs, the 2030 Agenda also requires that countries achieve this while creating the growth and employment opportunities needed to eradicate poverty, sustaining biodiversity and the natural resource environment, and addressing the growing pressures of climate change.

2. Food systems encompass the entire range of actors and their interlinked value-adding activities involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal of food products that originate from agriculture, forestry or fisheries, and the broader economic, societal and natural resource environments in which they are embedded (FAO, 2018)<sup>2</sup>.

3. It is the interactions between the actions of these actors, shaped by the characteristics of the unique policy, institutional and agro-ecological settings in which they operate, that determine the extent to which a food system will deliver accessible, affordable, safe and nutritious food, their ability to generate and equitably share wealth, the intensity with which they use the natural resource environment, including inter alia water, land and energy, and importantly, their resilience and adaptability to trends and shocks.

4. As reiterated in a vast array of recent studies and high-level events<sup>3</sup>, the outcomes of many contemporary food systems fall short of the aspirations of the 2030 Agenda. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Special Report on Climate Change and Land highlighted the trade-offs between the need to meet projected food demands with current practices and the prospects of achieving global sustainability goals, noting that food systems contribute up to 29 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions, significantly contributing to climate change. A report by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services shows that one million species are now threatened with extinction, posing serious threats for human beings. Agriculture is responsible for up to 80 percent of biodiversity loss and continues to overuse increasingly scarce natural resources including water, forests<sup>4</sup> and land<sup>5</sup>. It is the largest consumer of the world's freshwater resources, and more than one quarter of the energy used globally is expended on food production and supply.

5. Reflecting such messages, the Global Sustainable Development Report (2019) states that “upscaling current food production practices to meet projected food demands in 2050 would be completely incompatible with meeting the Paris Agreement as well as many of the Sustainable Development Goals”. It argues that the transition to sustainable food systems will require not just technological innovations, but significant changes in food systems governance.

### B. Added urgency in light of the COVID-19 pandemic

6. The COVID-19 pandemic has reemphasized the significant weaknesses in many contemporary food systems that threaten food security and nutrition and exacerbate inequities. These include the challenges of accessing safe, nutritious food at affordable prices when borders close or when movement is restricted; the overdependence on a narrow range of crops; and the vulnerability of employees engaged throughout the food system.

---

<sup>1</sup> Global Sustainable Development Report. 2019. The Future is Now: Science for achieving Sustainable Development. [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/24797GSDR\\_report\\_2019.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/24797GSDR_report_2019.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> FAO. 2018 Sustainable food systems: concept and framework. [www.fao.org/3/ca2079en/CA2079EN.pdf](http://www.fao.org/3/ca2079en/CA2079EN.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> For example, HLPF (2019), UNEA (2019), UNGA (2019), COP25 and most recently, Davos 2020.

<sup>4</sup> FAO. 2020. State of the World's Forests, Rome. <http://www.fao.org/state-of-forests/2020/en/>

<sup>5</sup> See for example Curtis *et al* (2018) for a review of drivers of global forest loss in Science Vol. 361, pp. 1108–1111. <http://science.sciencemag.org>

7. The responses to and ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic are disproportionately affecting the availability and accessibility of high value, labour intensive, perishable commodities such as fruits and vegetables, animal protein, milk and dairy products, which are essential for healthy diets and as a result, good nutrition. Actions to catalyze food systems transformation need greater focus both on resilience to shocks and on ensuring individuals' health and wellbeing. Required actions will include organizational and social innovations, low- and high-tech innovations, digitalization, and technologies to protect workers, consumers, and those engaged in the recovery, redistribution, and food disposal.

8. The COVID-19 pandemic also recalls the connection between infectious diseases and malnutrition. Individuals with underlying diet-related Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) and children with undernutrition have a higher risk of death from infectious diseases. Prevention of undernutrition and of diet-related overweight and obesity resulting in NCDs needs to form an integral part of building resilience, especially among the most vulnerable segments of the population. Although COVID-19 is not a food-borne disease, the pandemic has also increased focus on the fact that food safety is integral to food systems transformation with contemporary issues of growing importance such as antimicrobial resistance, zoonotic diseases, climate change, new technologies and innovation, food fraud, and the digitalization of food systems having significant implications for the safety of food.

9. The importance of preserving environmental resources and biodiversity to maintain the buffer capacity of nature against diseases such as COVID-19 is essential. Taken together with the need to assure the availability of and access to a healthy diet, this has drawn attention to the significant levels of deforestation and destruction of natural habitats associated with land use change driven by food systems development and to the tradeoffs facing decision makers.

### **C. Approaching sustainable food systems development**

10. Food systems stakeholders have been making changes to improve the sustainability of food systems. Producers by experimenting with alternatives to broaden the food base, reduce externalities, and limit the impacts on biodiversity, natural resources and climate; the food industry by engaging in more sustainable sourcing<sup>6</sup>, product reformulation and reduction of losses; consumers, in seeking out better information about safe foods for healthier diets and advocating for more environmentally friendly food products and reduction and better handling of waste; governments in launching sectoral strategies and global action plans.

11. However, the many independent initiatives of governments, private sector and civil society that have emerged in support of more sustainable food systems have lacked a common framing of the complex choices that affect food systems. This has constrained the ability of societies with different priorities, observing different trends and having different agro-ecological and institutional potentials to identify and implement pathways towards more sustainable food systems.

12. More recently, several Members have launched strategies which aim, among other objectives, to provide such a framing with a view to fostering more joined up policy interventions across sectors and incentivizing collective action throughout the food system. The European Commission's Farm to Fork strategy<sup>7</sup> as part of the European Green Deal, and Norway's Sustainable Food Systems Action Plan<sup>8</sup> are among the more prominent examples.

13. In 2018, the Committee on Agriculture welcomed FAO's work on sustainable food systems. It acknowledged the need for a more integrated, multi-stakeholder approach to address the complex challenges of sustainable food systems development, taking into account the cultural dimension. It further requested FAO to support governments, upon request, in adopting a sustainable food systems

---

<sup>6</sup> See for example Lambin *et al* (2018). The role of supply-chain initiatives in reducing deforestation. *Nature Climate Change*, Vol. 8, pp. 109–116. [www.nature.com/natureclimatechange](http://www.nature.com/natureclimatechange).

<sup>7</sup> European Commission. 2020. A Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system. COM (2020) 381. Brussels 20/05/2020.

<sup>8</sup> Norwegian Ministries. 2019. Food, People and the Environment. The Government's action plan on sustainable food systems in the context of Norwegian foreign and development policy. [https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/departementene/ud/dokumenter/planer/sustainablefood\\_actionplan.pdf](https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/departementene/ud/dokumenter/planer/sustainablefood_actionplan.pdf)

approach by strengthening capacities in the design and implementation of enabling policies, regulations and technological innovations<sup>9</sup>.

14. The remaining sections of this paper introduce three discrete examples<sup>10</sup> of mechanisms through which the Organization is seeking to ensure that a food systems approach can be more effectively operationalized. Section II introduces the United Nations Secretary General's Food Systems Summit which will provide a process through which a food systems approach can be better articulated and an improved alignment of food system actors' initiatives in support of more sustainable food systems promoted. Section III introduces the draft New Vision and Strategy for FAO's Work in Nutrition which will frame FAO's future work to ensure that its direct and indirect impact on nutrition are better understood and reflected in FAO's provision of policy and regulatory guidance to Members. Section IV introduces a Global Knowledge Hub on indigenous peoples food systems designed to provide evidence that can inform food systems transformation.

## II. United Nations Secretary-General's Food Systems Summit

15. Recognizing the potential to make food systems work for the SDGs, the Global Sustainable Development Report (2019) argues that "transformative change differs from evolutionary or chaotic change, in that it is intentional change based on societal agreement and factual understanding, and achieves outcomes at scale". These are complex and systemic changes that require a combination of more interconnected actions at the local, national, regional and global levels.

16. The United Nations Secretary General's Food Systems Summit, to be convened in late 2021, provides a timely opportunity to forge these interconnected actions and commitments to create an improved and common understanding of the inevitable trade-offs that will be faced in the design of interventions to guide the future development of food systems. Interventions that ensure that a more appropriate balance between societal priorities in terms of nutrition and health, economic growth, inclusiveness, and the preservation of the natural resource environment is achieved in the design and implementation of collective and more coherent actions to deliver improved food systems outcomes that accelerate progress in achieving the full range of SDGs.

17. In aligning stakeholders around a practical food systems framework as a foundation for collective action, the process toward the Summit will be used to collect and develop strengthened evidence and tools to identify and manage trade-offs and potential synergies in specific contexts; to strengthen the science-policy interface to allow for the identification of realistic, inclusive and innovative solutions; and to catalyze and accelerate multistakeholder action for the transformation of food systems.

18. A central component of the process towards the Food Systems Summit are a series of five interdependent Action Tracks<sup>11</sup> which will offer a space to share and learn across constituencies with a view to accelerating progress by fostering new partnerships and amplifying existing initiatives. The Action Tracks will be informed by independently validated evidence and analysis and by the outcomes of dialogues at all levels of governance. They will drive the search for synergies and consider trade-offs from a holistic, SDG perspective.

19. In turn, they will build on and utilize strategic partnerships and platforms in which FAO is centrally engaged, such as the 10YFP/One Planet Network's Sustainable Food Systems Programme, CFS and through its collaboration with other United Nations agencies.

---

<sup>9</sup> COAG. 2018. Sustainable Food Systems. Rome.

<sup>10</sup> The examples presented are as requested by the COAG bureau, but are reflective of the many areas of FAO's work that are adopting a food systems approach, including key FAO corporate initiatives, inter alia *Hand-in-Hand*, the Urban Food Agenda and the associated Greening Cities Initiative, AgrInvest, and 3ADI+.

<sup>11</sup> At the time of writing, the following Action Tracks had been proposed: 1. Ensuring Access to Safe and Nutritious Food for All; 2. Shifting to Sustainable Consumption Patterns; 3. Boost Nature Positive Production at Sufficient Scales; 4. Advancing Equitable Livelihoods and Value Distribution; 5. Building Resilience to Vulnerabilities, Shocks and Stress.

### III. New Vision and Strategy for FAO's Work in Nutrition

20. Following the request by the FAO Council in 2019, FAO has prepared a draft of an updated Vision and Strategy for FAO's Work in Nutrition (ref. COAG/2020/23). This document frames FAO's work to ensure that its direct and indirect impacts on nutrition through a food systems approach are better understood and reflected in FAO's provision of policy and regulatory guidance to Members on issues related to agriculture, livestock, food safety, rural development and natural resource management.

21. The mid-point of the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition and the start of the Decade of Action for Sustainable Development provide opportunities to catalyze action for better nutrition. In the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, nutrition plays a major role in attainment of targets across the SDGs, such as ending hunger (2.1), advancing sustainable agriculture (2.3-2.5), reducing premature death from NCDs (3.4) and child and maternal mortality (3.1, 3.2), tackling poverty (1.1 and 1.2), reducing climate change, biodiversity and soil loss (14 and 15), and advancing gender equality (5) and inclusive economic growth (8).

22. While numerous other factors are critical determinants of nutritional status, a healthy diet is a cornerstone of good nutrition for today and for future generations. A healthy diet implies no deficiencies, excesses and imbalances in people's intake of energy and nutrients that impair human growth and development, and thereby supports achievement of the social, economic and environmental pillars of the SDGs. There is no single composition of a healthy diet since they vary geographically, with age and population needs, and culture, but all are made up of the foods needed for individuals to have a healthy life: adequate, safe, diverse, and balanced in quantity and quality. All elements of food systems development require deep and concerted action to ensure healthy diets are available, accessible, safe and culturally acceptable to all, and opportunities exist throughout food systems, and thus should be leveraged, to improve diet and nutrition outcomes.

23. As the UN agency primarily concerned with food and agriculture, FAO has a leading role in tackling malnutrition in all its forms by improving diets through a food systems approach that recognizes the interconnectedness of policy and programmes across the range of actors and institutions that comprise the food system.

24. Building on the recommendations of the 2019 Evaluation of FAO's Work in Nutrition, FAO defines and advocates for addressing all forms of malnutrition through food-based approaches, food systems and healthy diets.<sup>12</sup> The draft Strategy provides a framework for how FAO can work across all aspects of food systems; leveraging its expertise in food production, processing, distribution, trade, marketing and disposal, and in crop and livestock production, forestry, fisheries and aquaculture systems, value chain and agribusiness development, food safety, emergency preparedness and resilience building, and nutrition to enhance diets and prevent all forms of malnutrition.

### IV. Generation and use of evidence on Indigenous Food Systems

25. Evidence on Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems can play a significant role in informing the transformation of food systems making them more sustainable and respectful of nature. Indigenous peoples are gatekeepers of cultural diversity speaking 4 000 out of the 7 000 remaining languages in the world, they are more than 476 million people living in 90 countries and seven regions, and belonging to more than 5 000 different peoples<sup>13</sup>. Their food systems are among the most sustainable, having generated food in harmony with nature for hundreds of years while preserving the environment<sup>14</sup>. Indigenous peoples are the custodians to 80 percent of the world's remaining biodiversity<sup>15</sup>, and often their territories coincide with the best-preserved areas.

---

<sup>12</sup> FAO. 2019. Evaluation of the Strategy and Vision for FAO's Work in Nutrition. Rome. pp.119 ([www.fao.org/evaluation](http://www.fao.org/evaluation)). Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

<sup>13</sup> United Nations. 2009. State of the World's Indigenous Peoples. New York, UN.

<sup>14</sup> United Nations. 2017. Harmony with nature: report of the Secretary-General. New York, UN.

<sup>15</sup> Garnett *et al.* 2018: A spatial overview of the global importance of Indigenous lands for conservation. *Nature Sustainability* (1), pp. 369–374.

26. Indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge and customary systems guide these practices, allowing them to ensure continuity of their existence and well-being, sometimes in face of major environmental changes. Indigenous peoples' knowledge systems have proven to be dynamic, result-oriented, and site-specific to the people and environment. Indigenous peoples and pastoralists depend on collective rights to their ancestral lands and natural resources, as well as on their unique territorial management systems for their livelihoods and food security. Unfortunately, the speed at which indigenous peoples' knowledge is being lost is accelerating and needs urgent actions to preserve it, learn from it and reverse the trend.

27. Despite having prevailed for thousands of years indigenous peoples' food systems are now among the most affected by climate change, extractive industries, intensive livestock and agriculture production, displacement, resettlement, and land-use changes. Available data show that food insecurity is affecting indigenous peoples and pastoralists, many already among the 821 million food insecure people<sup>16</sup>, at a disproportionately high rate<sup>17</sup>. The higher mortality risk<sup>18</sup> of indigenous peoples, particularly elders and traditional knowledge holders, could accelerate the already rapid loss of traditional knowledge.

28. In November 2018, FAO organized the First High-Level Expert Seminar on Indigenous Food Systems gathering more than 200 participants, out of which 70 panelists were from 22 indigenous peoples and 20 research centers and universities<sup>19</sup>. The main outcome of the Seminar was the need to create a Global Hub on Indigenous Food Systems to improve knowledge sharing on indigenous peoples' food systems and traditional knowledge by providing a platform for knowledge holders and academia. The Hub will comprise a database gathering academic publications<sup>20</sup> and digital materials; and the Hub experts will provide advice to policy-makers in relevant forums and international ongoing processes, such as the 2021 Food Systems Summit and the CFS Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition. The Hub will promote enhanced recognition of indigenous peoples' food systems, and will inform the transformation towards more sustainable food systems.

29. In April 2018 UNDESA, in its Report on the XXVII Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, requested FAO to enhance the participation of indigenous peoples' representatives in FAO technical committees, in particular in the Committee on Agriculture.

---

<sup>16</sup> FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2019. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2019. Safeguarding against economic slowdowns and downturns. Rome, FAO.

<sup>17</sup> UNDESA. 2020. [The impact of COVID-19 on Indigenous Peoples](#). Policy brief #70

<sup>18</sup> UNDESA. 2020. (ibid.).

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/partnerships/docs/LAST\\_FINAL\\_REPORT\\_HLESIFS\\_2018\\_01.pdf](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/partnerships/docs/LAST_FINAL_REPORT_HLESIFS_2018_01.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> The launching of the Hub will be accompanied with the release of a new FAO publication on indigenous food systems, the third published by FAO since 2009.