

FAO Podcast *The Work We Do*
A Systems Approach for Agrifood Transformation

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Transcript

Katrin:

Our guest today is Corinna Hawkes, Director of Agrifood Systems and Food Safety Division. Corinna talks to us about adopting a systems approach to bring change in food and agriculture. Welcome to *The Work We Do*.

Corinna, thank you for coming.

Corinna:

It's great to be here.

Katrin:

So, we've been talking about transforming our agrifood systems for years now. Could you tell us about what that actually means?

Corinna:

It means transforming our current agrifood systems from a system that delivers quite a lot of harm to a system that delivers a lot of benefits. At the moment and throughout history, we humans have been treating our agrifood systems pretty badly. We've been mining the soil and producing greenhouse gas emissions from agrifood systems. We've been helping food systems produce a lot of unhealthy diets. We've been exploiting the people who work in agrifood systems.

But the power of agrifood systems is the power of producing, converting those harms into benefits. And that involves transforming the way that food is produced, processed, distributed and manufactured, sold, and consumed. So, we can work on the different parts of the system.

There is fantastic work done, that effort to improve soil health, to improve fisheries, to improve nutrition, to improve the climate effects of agrifood systems. But the trouble is that when you try and work on one of those goals or in just one part of the agrifood system — it might be farming, it might be retailing, it might be processing — you have an effect on another part of the system. And what we've created is agrifood systems that are not able to deliver all of these different benefits.

So, if they are perfectly designed to deliver more food and produce more food, that probably means that they're going to have negative impacts on the environment. They're going to exploit the people who work in them, and they might not be producing the healthiest foods.

So, we can't maximize one goal at the expense of others. We have to optimize across all the goals in the system. And to do that, you actually have to change the way the system works. We have to redesign the way agrifood systems work.

Katrin:

What is a "systems-based approach"?

Corinna:

It's an approach that requires us to look at the relationships between the many different elements and components of agrifood systems. It's an approach that when we take an action in a food and agriculture system that we recognize that unless we connect with another part of the system, we're not going to solve that problem.

It's an approach that recognizes that unless we understand the connections with other problems, that we might end up undermining someone else's concern and their approach, which is fundamentally about trying to reconfigure — or transform — food and agriculture. So, a systems approach is fundamentally about focusing on the relationships in food and agriculture.

Katrin:

How is a systems approach different from coordinating and integrating across sectors and ministries? Because it seems like that's what it is.

Corinna:

So, a systems approach is firstly about seeing the problem differently. You can coordinate, but you can still see the problem in a very traditional way.

If you think about a problem that we want to solve, and let's say that part of that solution is reducing food loss and waste. So, in order to reduce food loss and waste or food loss, we're going to put some cold chain activity in to build the capacity to reduce the loss of fruits and vegetables, for example.

So, you put in this technological solution and it seems like a great idea. And you coordinate. There's a lot of coordination involved in that. And then you find that consumers stop consuming what you're producing because it has a different taste and a different quality. And you find that these solutions are actually pretty expensive, and it doesn't actually stop the situation on the farm or on the boat that might be leading to excess production.

So, it might reduce the environmental problem of food loss and waste along the supply chain; but it doesn't actually reduce the problem of the overproduction in the first place. So, we coordinated, but we didn't solve the problem. What it shows is that a systems approach is about putting the problem in the context of the system, the agrifood system.

Secondly, it's about designing different solutions. You might need some cold chain, but you might also need solutions in cities, at the other end of the supply chain, as well as innovations in production. So, you need a portfolio of solutions.

And thirdly, it's about understanding that systems are dynamic.

And you need to monitor all the time. What changes are being implemented. But it's very difficult to predict that consumers might react in a certain way because you're experimenting all the time. So, you think, okay, this didn't work, but we've got a learning mechanism in place that we can learn from on how the system has responded.

Another really important aspect of a systems approach in food and agriculture is having this vision of multiple outcomes and looking beyond our own mandates. And again, you can coordinate very well over one particular problem. But you need to be thinking about multiple problems: my problem is nutritional; my problem is production.

I also need to care about other people's problems. And the kind of coordination that's needed is about considering a suite of solutions that address those problems with a system-wide vision.

Katrin:

Could you give us an example of how we should look at the problem differently? Another example perhaps.

Corinna:

Okay, so, let me give you the example of an issue that I worked on for many years, which is the issue of unhealthy diets among children. One of the dynamics that reinforces this is marketing of what we often called ultra-processed foods. Now, to children, this is a negative force. It creates an environment around children which encourages them to consume less healthy diets.

So, you say, okay, the solution to that problem is to cut marketing to children, to band advertising. I still believe, in fact, we know from the evidence base that can really bring some positive benefits. So, you're looking at the system, you're looking at the problem for what it is. And your solution is, okay, let's ban it now. Let's zoom out and look at that problem in its broader context.

And when you start to ask the question, why is it that perfectly good, nice people who work in our food companies are doing this with the negative outcomes? It's because the incentives are there for them to try and outcompete the competition in the marketplace. Why does that exist? Let's peel back another layer. Let's go deeper. It's because this is the corporate governance of large food companies, which requires benefits for shareholders.

So, there's no incentive to reduce anything that is going to help a company outcompete other companies. It means that when governments have put restrictions on marketing food to children, or when corporations have made voluntary efforts to do so, it's often like squeezing a

balloon. You might stop advertising on TV, but then you get more on social media. It just goes somewhere else because the incentives haven't been changed, the fundamental incentives. What that means is that we need to look for deeper solutions. We need to look at corporate governance. However, first of all, you need to try to restrict marketing to children and see what happens.

That's why I'm saying that we need to see the system as dynamic. We tried that, and then we saw the dynamics at play: advertising continued in different forms. So, the solutions to that problem are going to have to be different.

Katrin:

And since there are many participants in this solution, or solutions, it sounds like we're making compromises. So why would anyone want to do that?

Corinna:

Agrifood systems are full of people. That means the agrifood systems are full of power dynamics. That's an inherent characteristic of agrifood systems, an inherent characteristic of any system that has people in it. That's not going to change because it's the nature of the system. It means that when we take any action to change food and agriculture, we will face power dynamics that will not change. The question is how to navigate that.

In the example I just gave, the marketing of foods that don't promote children's health, there has been huge pushback against efforts to restrict those activities because it goes against the interests I just described: outcompeting competitors to deliver economic benefits. Navigating that is very, very difficult. It's one of the reasons change is so difficult in food and agriculture. That's one very clear example of large companies that are often trying to do good things but face their own constraints.

But it also happens at the micro level. Take women, for example. They are fundamental to food and agriculture. We can't produce food without women. Yet women are often not treated in ways that enable them to exercise their power and agency to make improvements and drive change. In food systems, they have to navigate power dynamics in whatever they're doing.

The issue of compromise — how do you actually, navigate all of those different power dynamics and rebalance those dynamics? — that's a really fundamental question. And compromise is always going to have to be part of that process.

Katrin:

How do governments navigate powerful interests that prefer the status quo?

Corinna:

One of the things I learned, which was very unexpected to me, was about the world of evidence and knowledge. When I was teaching students, we used to say that it's really important to have evidence-based policy, but at the same time, making policy is a political process.

It's a process that has to consider different interests, resource requirements, capacities, and all of these different issues that go into making policy. But there was one particular experience I had while working in Brazil that I learned a lot from. It involved a law adopted in 2009 that was designed to create a link between the country's huge national school meal program and family farmers, which at the time were a political priority for the president.

So, this law was adopted in 2009. And I was doing research at that time to understand the policy process that led to the adoption of that law. And there were a lot of opponents, a lot of political opposition. There were powerful interests against the adoption of that law, because certain groups wanted different providers to supply food for the institutions.

There were people who were always going to be against that law, and there were people who were always going to be in favor. But if you play your politics right, it's about getting the people who are wavering. And I saw them use evidence very effectively because they'd already had a food acquisition program in the past. That enabled them to neutralize one of the arguments being used against the law, which was that logistically, it was impossible — that logistically you'd never be able to get enough food from family farms into the school meal program, with 30 percent of the budget going to family farming.

But because they had evidence from the earlier program, they were able to show that it could actually work. The evidence wasn't necessarily going to convince those who were fundamentally opposed to the law. But it was very powerful in convincing the people in the middle — they said, "Okay, I believe in this now," and then voted in Congress to adopt the law.

So, even though it sometimes can seem completely daunting, when you're faced with these very challenging power dynamics, smart strategies that employ evidence in small ways do have a role to play.

Katrin:

How does this work when governments who have a really important role to play, they are very committed to short election cycles. How do you make sure that this long-term commitment is honored?

Corinna:

Actions that can be taken to try and bring this long-term view to bear. And one of those is the multilateral system. We work for the FAO. FAO has numerous country offices and presence in countries. It's very fortunate that FAO has been around for 81 years, because it has been a steady presence.

And I don't just say that because I now work for FAO. I'm talking about institutions outside of government but which are connected to government, which have been around a long time and do last a long time. One of the jobs we have, as part of our mandate of food security and nutrition for all, today and tomorrow, is to maintain that long-term view and continue

advocating it to government, while providing the right advice and technical support to encourage government to think long term.

So, the role of the multilateral system is really important here. I talk about FAO, of course, as a UN agency that can support this long-term view. It's about institutions beyond government that can take that long-term perspective and really help.

Another element is creating a culture inside government. What I've observed is that you can create a culture among really high-performing civil servants. We mustn't forget the role of incredibly smart civil servants who exist in countries all over the world. And when you create a culture among those civil servants of pride and commitment, it lasts.

High-level political commitment is always important for any change. History tells us that. But sustaining that commitment is more difficult. You can't necessarily rely on the next political leader to come in with the same level of commitment. In fact, they may want to move away from it because they want to pursue their own agenda, which is normal and should be expected.

But if the civil servants retain that commitment, they can help and reinforce that among their political masters. And I've observed that. I'm just about to go on Monday to a city in Brazil called Belo Horizonte. I am very excited about going to Belo Horizonte because I've worked for many years on urban agrifood systems, and they are a legendary city in that area.

For around 30 years now, the city has said that food security is paramount and that commitment has continued. Mayors have come and gone, but the commitment has remained. One of the reasons is the continued commitment among civil servants and the culture that has been created among them. That's also really important. So, there're a lot of things that can be done, to encourage a shift away from short-term thinking incentivized by political cycles.

The key investment that needs to be made is in what we call governance: how decisions are made and who makes them, and in the formal and informal structures that bring people together and build trust.

What we see in the world of development, but also in domestic budget allocation, is that investments are made in doing things, in producing particular goals that we care about. Good. You know, that's great. But, it's not good if those activities have short-term impact, because they're undermined by not considering other elements of the system. But what isn't happening is investment in the relationship building and the governance, informal and formal governance structures that are needed to do that.

So, we all need to get together and talk about how we're going to solve this problem. Let's bring people together from across the system. But to be honest, that can just become another meeting that people have to fit into their already busy lives. Remember, people are constantly

having to make trade-offs about how they spend their time. If you don't resource and invest in the governance and decision-making structures that bring people together, it doesn't happen.

So let me give I give you an example. There's a really exciting process going on across the African continent right now. It's called the Comprehensive Agriculture Agricultural Development Program.

Katrin:

That's CAADP?

Corinna:

Yes. And Strategic Priority Six of CAADP under the Kampala Declaration focuses on investing in stronger agrifood systems governance and more coherent policies. The first five objectives are about the goals and specific activities. And it's understood by NEPAD, the African Union Development Agency, that this is really, really important.

But is that where the investment is going? No. It often seems to be, "We'll get to that when we've fixed these other things." But we need to invest in this first, because that's what will enable the activities being undertaken to have real impact, to be sustained, and to lead to greater resilience.

So, one of the fundamental shifts that needs to be made is to encourage those who are investing, whether it's private investment, whether it's donor investment, whether it's domestic budget allocations, whether it's philanthropy, to actually invest in those enabling decision making, environments that bring people together. Because if we if we don't do that, then we will continue with this vicious cycle of doing and investing a lot, but it actually becomes inefficient.

Katrin:

How do you know when transformation is actually happening?

Corinna:

It's a big question whether that transformation is actually happening. And it's one of the questions we're most commonly asked by our countries and by external partners. There's a really great initiative called the Food Systems Countdown Initiative, which is co-chaired by my fellow director in our Statistics Division.

They're doing a fabulous job of tracking the outcomes of agrifood systems: dietary diversity, greenhouse gas emissions, farmers' incomes, and those kinds of metrics. Ultimately, those outcomes are what we're trying to change. And, of course, food insecurity. One sign of transformation is when more people are food secure.

And, of course, FAO does a wonderful job of tracking that. But those outcomes take a long time to achieve. So how do you know whether the system is changing in the right direction to

achieve them? That's the question we ask in my division. We're innovating with new ways of looking at this, while also learning from others who are taking different, more complex approaches to evaluation and more effective approaches to monitoring.

And the answer to your question really is about how do we see relationships changing. For example, has the Ministry of Agriculture got a relationship with the Ministry of Environment? Has the Ministry of Agriculture got a relationship with the ministry responsible for water?

That is an indicator of whether the system is moving in the right direction, because we need agriculture and water to talk to each other. And what that tells us is what we need to sustain, invest in, and continue. It's very, very important to have an ongoing process of monitoring, learning, and then adapting or strengthening what's working. Through that process, you can learn — is this relationship changing in the right direction? If so, we need to invest more in sustaining it. Or is this relationship going in the wrong direction?

So, let's see if we can invest in reorienting that relationship in a better direction, and then understand whether the structures and incentives around it are actually changing. For example, is the investment being made? That way, you can begin to pick up what we call early signals of systems change in the right direction.

Katrin:

Are there any successful country examples, like success stories that you can share?

Corinna:

There were lots of countries who have realized that in order to achieve the goals that they want in their countries for food and agriculture, they have to adopt systems ways of thinking, acting, working together. These countries are committed to making change. They realize they can't do it, unless they take a systems approach.

There are many different examples. For example, in Sierra Leone, the president realized just how important food and agriculture was to the economy of the country and therefore brought together a high-level presidential council of ministers, as well as other governance bodies where more shared decision could be made. And I was moderating a panel on agrifood systems at a conference last year, with the Minister of Agriculture from Sierra Leone.

And he said something very powerful. He said that because he was sitting with the Minister of the Environment, he realized that the government's policy goal of increasing domestic rice production was going to have a negative impact on the environment because it could lead to deforestation and so on.

Because he was sitting with the Ministry of the Environment, they were able to respond by bringing evidence into the process. They did some soil mapping to better understand where rice production could expand without being as destructive to the environment.

The challenge, of course, is continuing that approach, which we've already discussed, and making sure it carries into the future. That's why embedding this long-term view and learning into the system is so important. So that's one good example of change that's taking place.

Another example is what happened with FAO support in Tanzania, where they've had a major fisheries challenge. It's a really good example of why you need to sustain fisheries over the long term. You need fish to feed people. It's a very nutritious food, and you also need to support the livelihoods of fishers.

If you say, "Okay, in order to provide fish for people in the future, in the short term we need to restrict fishing to allow fisheries to recover," what happens to livelihoods? It's a classic example of a trade-off. If fishers simply move to the cities, they're gone. And when the fisheries recover, who is there to fish? If you're interested in long-term food security, you have to consider that element.

What happened in Tanzania was that they needed to think about alternative livelihood opportunities. But rather than simply imposing solutions from the top, they developed a community-based governance and decision-making structure called beach management units. Those units were there to come up with solutions that actually worked for the community. Some of those livelihood opportunities, for example, were beekeeping and producing seaweed.

And again, it's an example of taking a systems approach, because you're thinking about all the different goals across the system, while also bringing in people who really have knowledge of that system.

Another example I can share comes from a completely different environment: New York City. Urban agrifood systems have an incredibly important role to play in transforming food and agriculture because of growing food demand, the increasing number of people living in cities, and the growing power of cities.

New York City is clearly a hugely wealthy and unique city, so you might think, "Well, what can we really learn from them?" But what was really interesting was what they did with public food provision. The city provides millions of meals and has a significant budget, and they started to spend that budget differently.

They began sourcing food from businesses owned by minorities and disadvantaged groups. They also started spending more on foods with a lower carbon footprint. That's an example of how they began investing differently in order to produce co-benefits.

Because when you take action in a system, if you can produce co-benefits across multiple goals rather than creating trade-offs and costs, then you're being more efficient in the system. While New York is a very wealthy city, anyone procuring food, whether in the private or public sector, can start to think, whether I have a small budget or a large budget — how can I spend it a little differently to achieve multiple goals?

Katrin:

So, Corinna, you're working on making change happen. What brought you to do this work? It's very difficult work. And in your journey, what have you learned?

Corinna:

I came into this work many, many years ago with a real passion for food and a belief that food could make the world a better place. It was a wonderful multiplier because it could bring so many benefits. And I've learned many lessons along the way.

The first project I did on food after finishing my Ph.D. was actually on food waste. It looked at the increasingly common practice of redistributing food that would otherwise be wasted to people experiencing vulnerability. Looking back on that experience almost 30 years later, one of the things I learned was the importance of building coalitions.

At the time, I was working as a volunteer. I wrote a really nice report, got into the media, talked on the radio, and everyone was very happy. But the problems persisted. The concerns I was raising about institutionalizing food aid in a way that might deliver short-term benefits without providing long-term solutions weren't really taken up.

And when I look back on it, I think, what would have happened if we'd really built a broad-based coalition around that issue across the world? Because it was a global issue. There have been changes since then, and there are fantastic people working on it. In fact, people working in institutionalized food aid now understand these challenges and are working to address them.

So, it takes a long time. But this is a consistent lesson I've learned: change requires bringing together broad coalitions. And those coalitions shouldn't always focus on the number one thing that each group wants to achieve, but on a common objective, on what everybody can agree on, and on compromising a little along the way — because change takes time. Positive change in the direction we want takes time.

That's the second lesson that I've learned is around iterative change. Now obviously crises and big changes are welcome when it leads in the right direction. But often it's about creating a framework in which broader change can take place. And the need for those coalitions of people to come together and make some compromise toward a shared goal.