



UNSDG SYSTEM-WIDE EVALUATION OFFICE

Towards Sustainable Food Systems

United Nations evaluation evidence brief

Effective food systems ensure food security and nutrition so that the food of future generations is not compromised. Food systems encompass environmental, economic and social linkages that are shaped by the context in which the food is produced, processed, distributed, sold and consumed.

This brief, one in a series of five, draws on the extensive knowledge and evidence generated by 50 independent evaluations conducted across the United Nations development system between 2021 and 2024.

Its publication is timed to provide information to stakeholders involved in the 2024 Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR), which is the primary policy instrument of the UN General Assembly. The QCPR defines the way the UN development system operates to support programme countries in their development efforts.

The complete version, including a bibliography, is available at: <https://ecosoc.un.org/en/what-we-do/oas-qcpr/2020-qcpr-status-reporting>.

Insights from UN evaluations

“Food systems” is used across the evaluations as a broad, unifying concept as a means to integrate the specific focus of each evaluation into wider global sustainable food outcomes.

1 Food systems support requires four foundational elements.

The evaluations highlighted that across all interventions there are four foundational elements that should be present in all interventions. These are: (i) strategically linked with national systems but context specific for each locality and food type; (ii) government policy and legislative interventions are required to enable and sustain food systems; (iii) all interventions in improving food quantity and quality should also consider health and

nutritional aspects; and (iv) greater attention is required to human rights, gender and diversity in food systems planning and implementation.

Additionally, evaluations highlighted the need to understand the interconnections and interplay between national policies and local food systems before designing interventions. Linked government interventions were essential to enable key food system regulations and legislation for post-harvest handling, processing, markets, and food safety, including consumer protection and disaster risk reduction policies. This helps to ensure that subnational programming is linked to national standards, yet also adaptive to changing circumstances. Challenges included changing government leaderships and budgets affecting sustainability; insufficient coordination across agencies; land tenure issues; insufficient capacity assessment and capacity development support; and transboundary issues in import and export.

Evaluations emphasized the importance of improving production, but also quality of nutrition and health. Direct food assistance reduced short-term hunger but there is a shift towards building stronger systems for long-term food security. Entities were increasingly implementing nutrition-sensitive programmes but reducing crop and nutrition losses through processing and distribution remained challenges, especially with logistics.

Evaluations noted attention to human rights, gender and diversity in plans for food systems but insufficient resource allocation and implementation action. Strengthening equity and access for vulnerable people was largely positive but with challenges in targeting. Gender analyses were evident but inadequate in detail and resourcing and, while all agencies had gender-sensitive approaches, few were gender-transformative. Cultural barriers limited women's roles in leadership and asset building. Youth-specific programming has increased but is still insufficient. There is little attention to ethnic minorities or human rights in food sovereignty or sociocultural practices.

2 Food systems transformation can be accelerated with focus on resilience, data analysis and application and investment in technical innovations.

Evaluations recorded that: systems with robust buffers (such as access to finance, insurance and social systems) improved resilience and adaptation; and a higher level of knowledge, supported through data gathering, analysis and use, has optimized all levels of food systems. With regard to adaptation, climate change has negatively transformed food systems so there has been a strong swing across agencies to integrate climate-related action into programming, but with limited impact.

Unprecedented levels of data flow have opened doors for improving the production, processing and distribution of



Kenya: Hydroponic farming in Kenya's Urban areas © WFP/Brian Wanene

food, with initiatives such as the real-time tracing, zero hunger strategic reviews and the improved statistical capacity of national statistics offices.

3 Sustainable financing for food systems changes is scarce and rarely strategic.

Evaluations emphasized that private sector engagement was crucial to achieve critical shifts for sustainable food systems. Private sector financing is generally related to a specific value chain and is consumer driven and self-sustaining. Specific strategies are required to facilitate investments for more effective and equitable food systems. Government investment is particularly important in matters of safe food supply. Where food supply is disrupted, humanitarian food assistance is funded through emergency budgets and funding campaigns. However, resources to support long-term sustainable interventions were seldom available. Potentially transformational innovations were grossly underfunded in terms of required testing and field application for scale-up.

4 United Nations collaboration on food systems is improving but with major steps still to make.

Evaluations found that: UN collaboration on food systems was improving; the Food Systems Summit was a determining factor in enhanced support to food systems; preparation of national food systems strategies has drawn partners to work together on more integrated approaches; there has been increasing complementation in roles and responsibilities related to food systems. Good examples include distribution hubs and transportation networks during food crises and agencies working together on joint advocacy for school feeding and agriculture-related activities. These have engaged private sector actors that have been, in some cases, further supported beyond crises to build more sustainable systems.

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