



SysFOOD—The Systemic Food Assistance Initiative

Leveraging Food Assistance for Improved Food System Performance

Seeking to deploy its strengths, capacities, knowledge, and partnerships in support of efforts to enhance the performance and sustainability of food systems in different contexts, and strengthen linkages between humanitarian and development investments, the UN World Food Programme (WFP) has launched the 5-year Systemic Food Assistance Initiative – SysFOOD.

Vision of Success

WFP's vision of success for SysFOOD is that by 2021 – the final year of WFP's Strategic Plan 2017-2021 – all countries in which WFP operates will be deliberately and systematically leveraging national and global food assistance investments and interventions to address identified systemic problems in food systems, and that by quantifiably and sustainably improving food system performance, these "systemic food assistance" measures will be generating similarly quantifiable and sustained reductions in vulnerability and hunger.

Food Systems: Transforming, Flawed, Disrupted, Broken

Food systems are changing rapidly and deeply as a result of such forces as urbanization, income growth, and shifting consumer diets brought on by broader structural transformation of economies. Supply chain integration, capital-intensive technology change, expanded use of digital devices and internet access, and emergence and enforcement of private standards of quality and safety are spurring and accentuating the upheavals. Many of these fast-transforming food systems are disrupted by a range of covariate shocks, including those linked to climate change and economic globalization; a significant number are

broken due to strife and conflict, sometimes for long periods. Disrupted and broken food systems are early indicators of humanitarian crises, often defining the depth and coverage of the crises, and signaling the locations and sizes of populations requiring assistance. But even in relatively stable contexts, food systems can be deeply flawed. Communication, transportation, and storage facilities are often poor. Commercial markets – which are the primary channels through which most food is accessed – can be sharply segmented, with access restricted for large numbers of people lacking purchasing power. Highly unequal social capital and financial bargaining power is often brought to exchanges between buyers and sellers. The specter of almost 800 million chronically hungry people across the globe suggests that food systems do not always function in ways that meet the needs of a broad cross section of society.

Food Systems in WFP's Strategic Plan 2017-2021

The Strategic Plan 2017-2021 aligns WFP's work with Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Strategic Result 4 (SR4) of the Strategic Plan is directly linked to SDG Target 2.4 to Ensure Sustainable Food Systems. Through SR4, therefore, improving the performance of food systems is one of WFP's primary aims. Better performing food systems should improve access to food (SR1), reduce malnutrition (SR2), and spur smallholder productivity and income (SR3). Further, enhanced public sector capacity (SR5) and greater policy coherence (SR6) should boost the performance of food systems. In short, the Strategic Plan makes clear that food systems matter to WFP, WFP matters to the food systems in which it operates, and food assistance delivered, facilitated, and supported by WFP and partners can help countries overcome many of the

flaws, disruptions, and breakages in food systems that contribute to hunger and food insecurity for vulnerable populations.

Systemic Food Assistance¹

Systemic food assistance – food assistance that improves food system performance by addressing systemic problems – is WFP’s strategic and operational framework for engagement and investment in food systems. By seeking to expand the capacity of rapidly transforming food systems to meet the needs of vulnerable food insecure populations, it takes the concept of food assistance to its logical conclusion. The core idea is leverage of food assistance interventions for wider gain in food systems through demand-driven, innovation-based, capacity-enhancing measures.

Why WFP?

Several attributes render WFP well suited to deliver, facilitate, and support systemic food assistance initiatives at multiple levels:

1. WFP’s new Strategic Plan and Country Strategic Plan Policy prioritize support to national efforts to implement the SDGs, with a focus on SDG2 and SDG17;
2. WFP’s partnerships, programmes, and capacities span food systems, with a concentration in the “mid-stream” food transformation segment that accounts for 40 percent of food system costs;
3. Through a \$5 billion food assistance portfolio serving almost 80 million people annually in over 80 countries, WFP has a presence in and understanding of a range of contexts of food system functioning, and a strong grasp of the characteristics and needs of the hungry poor in these many contexts;
4. WFP occupies a unique operational position at the intersection of commercial markets (for food and food system services) and the public interest (as captured by food assistance); and
5. WFP has unparalleled capacity to combine “hard” supply chain and “soft” programming interventions to address hunger and food insecurity.

Guiding Principles for Systemic Food Assistance

WFP’s pragmatic yet thorough approach to food assistance applies to systemic food assistance, with the added imperative to address systemic problems. Several principles are relevant:

1. Start with what WFP and partners are already doing in a country and leverage that for bigger impact;

2. Focus on particular food system functions, seeking to overcome or reduce inefficiency and dysfunction;
3. Remember that systemic leverage does not require direct intervention through resource transfers delivered by WFP and partners;
4. Focus on inclusion, especially gender equality;
5. Embrace and exploit the digital revolution;
6. Emphasize and promote production and consumption of quality (i.e., safe and nutritious) food as drivers and reflections of systemic change in food systems;
7. As far as possible, avoid lengthy “pilots” and seek instead to go as immediately as possible to scale;
8. Position WFP and partners as enablers of enhanced food system performance, not only as doers;
9. Remember that governments are the guide and glue of food system performance enhancement, with the private sector as driver of change and innovation, and civil society boosting participation, transparency, responsiveness, and consensus; and
10. Remember that while systemic potential is ubiquitous, context matters immensely to actual outcomes.

Strategic Alternatives

The Strategic Plan 2017-2021 points to three perspectives on food assistance-based investment and partnership toward enhanced food system performance:

Under Strategic Goal 1 – SDG 2:

1. Enhanced food system performance as a primary objective of SR4 (Sustainable Food Systems);
2. Enhanced food system performance as a means to achieving SR1 (Improved Access to Food), SR2 (Improved Nutrition), and SR3 (Increased Smallholder Productivity and Incomes); and;

Under Strategic Goal 2 – SDG 17:

3. Enhanced food system performance through improved national institutions and policies via SR5 (Capacity Strengthening) and SR6 (Policy Coherence).

Operational Framework

Table 1 presents the operational framework implied by the three strategic alternatives. Seven investment pillars are identified. Two pillars relate directly to sustainable food systems (SR4) through: (1) tailored investments in improved household and community adaptation and resilience to climate and other shocks; and (2) tailored investments in improved food market and supply chain

¹The concept of “systemic food assistance” is based on that of “food assistance” which includes instruments such as in-kind food, vouchers, or cash transfers that are used to assure access to food of a given quantity, quality, or value. These instruments can be used to pursue specific objectives for targeted populations, such as nutrition improvement, gender equality, education expansion, or disaster risk reduction. Several supportive activities and institutional platforms render the instruments successful and sustainable relative to the objectives, such as needs assessments, logistics, information management, or engagement in national safety nets and strategies for hand-over. Food assistance thus extends beyond transfers of food to include development and implementation of interventions to prevent hunger and address its myriad implications.

Table 1: Operational framework for systemic food assistance

Relevant SDG	SDG2 (Strategic Goal 1)				SDG17 (Strategic Goal 2)		
Strategic Alternatives	Enhanced food system performance as a Strategic Result under SDG 2		Enhanced food system performance as an enabler of other Strategic Results under SDG2		Enhanced food system performance as a focus area for Strategic Results under SDG 17		
Relevant Strategic Result	SR4 Sustainable Food Systems		SR1 Access to Food	SR2 End Malnutrition	SR3 Smallholder Productivity & Incomes	SR5 Capacity Strengthening	SR6 Policy Coherence
Relevant food system performance enhancing investment approach	<p><u>Pillar 1:</u></p> <p>Tailored investments in improved household and community adaptation and resilience to climate-related and other shocks</p>	<p><u>Pillar 2:</u></p> <p>Tailored investments in improved food market and supply chain efficiency</p>	<p>Complementary or incremental investments in capacities and partnerships that address identified systemic barriers to improved access to food</p>	<p>Complementary or incremental investments in capacities and partnerships that address identified systemic barriers to improved nutrition</p>	<p>Complementary or incremental investments in capacities and partnerships that address identified systemic barriers to increased productivity and incomes for smallholders</p>	<p>Investments in technical skills, organizational forms, and institutional innovations that increase capacities of national systems and agencies to address identified food system inefficiencies and inequities</p>	<p>Investments in policy reforms that address identified food system inefficiencies and inequities</p>
Examples of systemic initiatives (activities) ^{1/}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for community-based market-responsive asset building for protection and rehabilitation of natural resources • Support for design and implementation of digital resilience-enhancing risk management financial instruments • Support for women user groups for water and other natural resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for upgrading of market and supply chain physical infrastructure • Support for digital solution-based technical and organizational upgrading of supply chain service providers • Support for digital solution-based innovations in business development and financing of women food retailers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for enhanced financial inclusion of key beneficiary groups – especially women – within shock-responsive social protection systems • Support for linking urban food safety nets with local food market development • Support for digital innovations in beneficiary targeting, monitoring, and support in remote and insecure locations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for supply and uptake of locally fortified nutritious foods • Support for design and implementation of nutrition platforms in social protection systems • Support for digital platforms for nutrition education for vulnerable groups – especially women – linked to food and cash transfers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for purchase-based coordination and facilitation of supply-side, aggregation, and financing support for smallholders and small and medium scale agrifood enterprises (SMEs) • Support for non-purchase-based integrated support platforms for smallholders and agrifood SMEs, emphasizing digital solutions and innovations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for strengthening of food quality and safety standards • Support for digital platforms to enhance quantity, quality, and flow of food market data and information • Support for development and implementation of early warning and response systems in urban areas • Support for physical, technical, and organizational upgrading of national food assistance agencies and systems within national social protection systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for reform of market and trade policy standards and implementation • Support for reform of structure and functioning of public food reserves • Support for reform of laws and regulations affecting rural and urban agrifood SMEs

1/ These examples are illustrative, not definitive nor exhaustive. Country Offices may drop, rephrase, or add to them as appropriate to their contexts and partnerships. However, in all cases, the logical link to the relevant investment approach, SR, and SDG must be clear.

efficiency. Three pillars entail complementary or incremental investments in capacities and partnerships that address identified systemic barriers to improved access to food (SR1), improved nutrition (SR2), and increased productivity and incomes for smallholders (SR3). Two final pillars seek to address identified food system inefficiencies and inequities through investments in technical skills, organisational forms, and institutional innovations that increase capacities of national systems and agencies to (SR5) and policy reforms (SR6).

Investment Objectives

To support WFP Country Offices (COs) deliver under this operational framework, SysFOOD has three objectives:

1. Identify, describe, and quantify the impacts of systemic problems in food systems in different contexts and propose high-potential context-specific solutions involving systemic food assistance;
2. Strengthen the capacity of WFP COs to assist and support host governments and other food system actors to design and implement systemic food assistance-motivated policies, strategies, and programmes that enhance food system performance;
3. Develop strategic and operational partnerships and advocacy approaches to raise awareness and boost uptake of proven systemic food assistance measures.

Investment Streams

To meet these objectives, WFP COs and partners require support in three areas, which comprise SysFOOD's three investment streams (Table 2):

1. Analysis and knowledge management;
2. Policy, strategy, and programme development; and
3. Partnership development and advocacy.

Organization and Resource Allocation

SysFOOD's organization reflects its objectives and investment thrusts (Figure 1). Policy, strategy and programme development support to COs, host governments, and other national stakeholders will account for the bulk of effort, followed by analysis and knowledge, and then partnership development and advocacy. Over the course of the five-year effort, coordination costs will account for no more than 10 percent of total resources.

Figure 1: SysFOOD's organizational structure and distribution of effort

Analysis and Knowledge Management (25%)	Policy, Strategy, and Programme Development (50%)	Partnership Development and Advocacy (15%)
Coordination (10%)		

Partnerships

Commitment to partnership and collective action has long been central to WFP's operations and is at the heart of the Strategic Plan 2017–2021. SysFOOD affirms and deepens that commitment. The transformative power of systemic food assistance lies in the opportunities it opens up for otherwise disconnected actors in food systems to align incentives, potentially leading to pooled investments and scaled impacts. Strategic partnerships at global and regional level are under discussion. Operational partnerships at country level will vary by country. In addition to host government agencies that will be key actors in all SysFOOD initiatives, other country-level partners will likely often include country operations and initiatives of FAO and IFAD and a range of food system actors and investors from the private and civil society sectors.

Table 2: Investment streams, outputs, and outcomes under SysFOOD

Investment Stream	Outputs	Outcomes
Analysis and knowledge management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food system data bases • Food system typologies, models, and analyses • Best practice guidelines for systemic food assistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced capacity within WFP and national partners for food system analysis and impact assessment
Policy, strategy and programme development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High-impact systemic food assistance measures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quantifiable improvements in food system performance relative to benchmarks
Partnership development and advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnership and advocacy strategies and agreements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Networks of policy makers, technicians, and analysts supporting best practices in food system innovation and strengthening through systemic food assistance