



UNSDG SYSTEM-WIDE EVALUATION OFFICE

Towards Sustainable Food Systems

How to feed, not deplete, the world

Summary of United Nations evaluation evidence

Food systems are fundamental for the future, not only of each individual community and nation but also, of our world. Functioning 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. When food systems do not function well, the result is hunger, malnutrition and, often, fierce competition for natural resources. When food systems operate smoothly, families have sufficient, nutritious food, food-based businesses prosper, healthier populations are more engaged and environmental resources continue to be productive and protected.

This summary draws on the extensive knowledge and evidence generated by independent evaluations conducted across the United Nations development system between 2021 and 2024. It presents key issues and learning from evaluations for consideration in the context of United Nations system-wide and intergovernmental policy discussions. Its publication is timed to provide information to stakeholders involved in the 2024 Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (Q CPR), in line with the provisions of General Assembly resolution 78/166 (2023).

This summary is part of a series produced by the United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) System-Wide Evaluation Office (SWE0) which includes summaries of United Nations evaluation evidence on:

- I the resident coordinator system;
- II development system reform at the regional level;
- III funding quality;
- IV whole of system responses in complex settings; and
- V an interactive evidence map featuring United Nations evaluations, published between 2021 and 2024, mapped against priority areas of the 2020 QCPR¹.

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

Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review and Food Systems Summit

The QCPR is the primary policy instrument of the United Nations General Assembly to define the way the United Nations development system operates to support programme countries in their development efforts. It assesses the effectiveness, efficiency, coherence and impact of United Nations operational activities for development. A QCPR resolution is adopted by the General Assembly every four years with annual follow-up and guidance from Member States provided by the Economic and Social Council at its Operational Activities Segment and the General Assembly in its Second Committee. The 2020 QCPR resolution builds on the United Nations development system reform². The next

QCPR resolution will be negotiated in late 2024 to guide efforts from 2025 to 2028.

The 2020 QCPR reaffirmed the right to food in the context of national food security and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 and recognized the relationships between climate change, biodiversity and food security and nutrition. The annual follow up resolution in 2022³ further noted the disproportionate challenge of food security (and other issues) for developing countries. Following the QCPR 2020, the 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) strengthened the focus on food systems. The UNFSS was focused on SDG 2 (zero hunger) but widened to food systems to acknowledge the importance of interconnection with other Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDGs 1, 3, 5, 6, 12, 13 and 17.

Over 183 countries participated in a UNFSS pre-summit, and national food systems dialogues were held across 148 countries to chart pathways for human rights-based food systems. The summit built momentum and stimulated action to transform food systems by 2030. The Secretary-General's Chair Summary and Statement of Action from the summit emphasized the need to support nationally owned pathways for food systems transformations. It called for the establishment of a Food Systems Coordination Hub to strengthen coordination and leverage the United Nations resident coordinator system and the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCF) to facilitate policy and technical



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

support for food systems. In January 2022, the United Nations Food Systems Coordination Hub was established to act as a catalyst to accelerate food systems and galvanize knowledge and expertise on food systems.

In July 2023, at UNFSS+2, the dialogue called for national pathways for food systems, enabling private sector finance in food systems, investing in research, data, innovation and technology capacities for more transparent, traceable and resilient food value chains. It promoted incorporating sustainable food systems strategies into policies and stimulating actions linked to climate change, nature loss and just transitions in local and global food systems. In September 2023, the Secretary-General presented “food systems” as one of the six transformational factors that have potential to accelerate SDG progress. In November 2023 at COP28, food systems featured prominently, noting the need to mainstream protection of food systems within consideration of climate targets.

The Secretary-General’s statements from the Food Systems Summit affirmed that food systems are fragile and that drivers of food insecurity and malnutrition – including conflict, climate extremes, and economic volatility – are further exacerbated by poverty and high levels of inequality. Yet, food systems contribute around one third of greenhouse gas emissions, cause 80 per cent of biodiversity loss and use 70 per cent of

freshwater, therefore the reform of food systems is an existential imperative. Protection of all food value chain actors and consumers to ensure an equitable and safe flow of food to where it is needed requires an enabling regulatory framework across food systems, but this is still underdeveloped and fragmented.

The Food Security Information Network Global Report on Food Crises 2024 confirmed the enormity of the challenge of achieving the goal of ending hunger by 2030. In 2023, nearly 282 million people, or 21.5 per cent of the analysed population in 59 countries and territories, faced high levels of acute food insecurity requiring urgent food and livelihood assistance. This additional 24 million people since 2022 is explained by improvements in data analysis, as well as deteriorating food security in some countries outweighing improvements in others. Malnutrition levels, particularly among children and women, are escalating, especially in conflict-affected areas, with over 36 million children under 5 acutely malnourished. The report highlighted critical challenges facing food systems, particularly conflicts, climate change and economic shocks. The report emphasized challenges in data gaps and insufficient humanitarian funding that has not kept pace with rising needs, thus exacerbating food insecurity. The interconnectedness of these crises creates a complex cycle of vulnerability that necessitates comprehensive and coordinated interventions to ensure food security and nutrition.

Insights from United Nations evaluations

The following summary of evidence on food systems draws on 50 United Nations evaluations, including 34 country programme evaluations by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP) and 16 thematic evaluations⁴.

“Food systems” is used across the evaluations as a broad, unifying concept increasingly referred to as a means to integrate the specific focus of each evaluation into wider global sustainable food outcomes, for instance, evaluations from countries that had actively participated in the UNFSS paid greater attention to embedding food systems aspects into national policies and strategies, and evaluations in school feeding also discussed agrifood value chains. However, only 15 of the 50 evaluations



Bolivia. A woman farmer participating in a WFP production project shows the quinoa plants for the season © WFP/Daniela Navia

provided a significant depth of food systems analysis. This underlines the importance of building lessons across evaluations related to food systems.

The evaluations provided insights into future programming strategies and challenges, as well as opportunities to align interventions with national needs and global development goals related to different dimensions of food systems. This summary outlines four fundamental factors for food systems, three key factors for transformation in food systems and two factors for strengthening food systems financing and partnerships.

Fundamental factors

1 Addressing food systems challenges requires strategic and system-based approaches that are also strongly rooted in specific contexts.

Food systems support spans a spectrum from delivery of basic food supplies to people who are at the brink of starvation, including contexts where hunger is a seasonal factor, to complex societal aspects of food production, quality or nutritional balance. Each context often incorporates multiple technical matters of agricultural, environmental, social and commercial importance. WFP evaluations emphasized: strategic responses to hunger and malnutrition through food assistance and cash-based transfers in humanitarian contexts; school feeding programmes; and supporting development pathways in transition to sustainable food systems. UNICEF evaluations focused on: strengthening food system-related policies; sustainable food distribution mechanisms; and social protection systems to address malnutrition in vulnerable populations, including women and children. FAO evaluations centred on: enhancing governance; and promoting climate resilience and nutrition-sensitive agricultural practices. IFAD evaluations aimed to reduce rural poverty through empowering small-scale farmers by improving their access to markets, resources and technologies. Yet, all of the evaluations highlighted the need to understand the interplay between national policies and local food systems contexts before designing and implementing interventions. For all evaluations, particularly in humanitarian contexts, the need for programming to be responsive and adaptable to changing circumstances was considered essential.

2 Government action in legislation, regulation and strategic intervention is essential to enable and sustain food systems.

The evaluations strongly emphasized the important role of government in legislation and strategic processes that enable interconnected food systems. The evidence across the evaluations provided many examples of positive results in contributing to improved legislation and policies in order to support improved quantity and quality of food systems and reach into vulnerable communities and households for food security. Important aspects of government intervention include: planning of infrastructure for food systems such as irrigation; processing facilities and markets; legislation on post-harvest handling and food safety; and consumer protection. Disaster risk reduction and crises are increasingly featured, including climate-related policies. Common challenges raised in the evaluations included: changing government leadership and budget priorities affecting sustainability of interventions; insufficient coordination across entities; land tenure issues (Box 1); insufficient capacity assessment and specific capacity development support; and transboundary issues in import and export of food products.

BOX 1: LAND TENURE

Thematic evaluations by FAO and IFAD identified land tenure as an important factor to protect prime agricultural land from urbanization, erosion and flooding, among other issues. Innovations for regulation were assessed as effective, for example, Kyrgyzstan (pasture and veterinary systems restructuring), Madagascar (land regulatory framework), Bangladesh (securing land rights for women on accreted coastal lands). These reforms enabled positive change in production and social capital. Government action on land use for food production and processing needs to be proactive to protect important agricultural resources, as well as create opportunities for innovation, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas.

3 **Increases in food quantity and quality are critical but nutrition and health is also important.**

FAO and IFAD particularly focus on promoting sustainable agricultural practices to improve food production and food security, but increasingly implement nutrition-sensitive agriculture programmes, integrating food production with dietary needs in terms of adequacy and diversity. Reducing crop and nutrition losses through processing and distribution remain identified challenges. The delivery of WFP and UNICEF food assistance in crisis situations, their supply of specialized nutritious foods, and their support for school feeding all involve major food supply logistics. The evaluations demonstrated that a shift towards food assistance can effectively reduce short-term hunger but also build stronger systems for long-term food security including strategies for malnutrition reduction, social protection and enhanced community health services, such as engaging local farmers and food processors in school feeding programmes and building robust value chains to continue food supply (Box 2).

BOX 2: TARGETING DIVERSE NEEDS

In Egypt and Sudan, UNICEF enhanced national nutrition policies by supporting community-based management of acute malnutrition, particularly for children and pregnant women. The WFP thematic evaluation of resilience found that supporting anticipatory capacity contributes to food security outcomes at all levels but this needs to be targeted to specific needs. The FAO FIRST programme in the Pacific supported improved governance for food and nutrition security in Fiji, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands. These evaluations highlighted the need to understand food diversity profiles for different needs and to work with partners on how food availability and quality contributes to the well-being of the most vulnerable populations.

4 **Attention to human rights, gender and diversity in plans for food systems improvements needs stronger follow-through in implementation to achieve expected impacts.**

Strengthening equity and access for vulnerable people was largely positive across the evaluations but with challenges in targeting vulnerable groups, including refugees, displaced populations and persons with disabilities. Initiatives like cash transfers and local procurement increased access to food, though challenges in ensuring long-term market impacts and inclusivity persisted. All entities incorporate gender-sensitive approaches but there were few gender-transformative approaches identified across the sample. It was found that cultural barriers still limit women's roles in leadership and in asset building. UNICEF and WFP clearly target the most vulnerable groups, with explicit processes that protect human rights and support women and girls in nutrition and health programmes. IFAD and FAO have a less explicit approach to human rights and equity but still demonstrated strong evidence of promoting women's participation and empowerment in agriculture and value chains. Gender analyses were evident in most programmes but were inadequate in detail and resourcing for effective implementation. Youth-specific programming has increased but is still assessed as insufficient. There is little attention to ethnic minorities or human rights in food sovereignty or sociocultural practices, although IFAD in the Philippines supported innovative land right "covenants" for indigenous tribes, recognizing their role as protectors and stewards of watershed lands and indigenous rice varieties. Food systems-related awareness and behaviour change advocacy is incorporated into programming to a limited extent but has been noted in evaluations across the entities for future focus.

Transformative factors

5 **Strengthening resilience in agricultural communities and value chains can transform food systems.**

Initiatives in strengthening food systems that are successful are seen as transformational when they are incorporated or transformed into self-functioning,

self-regulated systems. The evaluations highlighted that systems with robust buffers (for example, access to finance, insurance and social systems) improve resilience and adaptation in the face of change. Climate change is negatively transforming food systems. Farmers report that climate change is affecting their production cycles and productivity. There has been a strong swing across all entities to consider and integrate climate-related action into programming, including climate risk management, water resource management and disaster risk reduction. IFAD and FAO are promoting agroecology research, sustainable water management, climate-smart agriculture and renewable energy solutions like solar-powered irrigation to help food producers and processors adapt to climate change, but as yet there is limited scale of impact. A specific lesson arising during the period of this summary are evaluation findings arising from innovations as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic that are now strengthening resilience and development outcomes (Box 3).

6 The power of data analysis and application can facilitate radical shifts in food systems.

Unprecedented levels of data have opened doors for the production, processing and distribution of food. A range of evaluations indicated that a higher level of knowledge supported through data gathering, analysis and use has allowed innovation exponentially to optimize all levels of food systems. One important initiative has been the zero hunger strategic reviews promoted by WFP, which have been used by governments to identify food deficit areas and food systems bottlenecks, often as part of the common country analysis process in UNSDCF preparation. Other work that has been strongly appreciated has been FAO support for improved statistical capacity for national statistics offices for agricultural census activities. WFP and UNICEF studies in nutrition and vulnerability are heavily referenced in project designs of their own and other entity projects and contribute to government strategic processes. IFAD technical studies on, for example, specific crops or microfinance contribute to national policy processes.

BOX 3: LESSONS FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

During the pandemic, food systems struggled. WFP adapted food distribution systems, using cash transfers and local procurement to reduce reliance on disrupted global supply chains. UNICEF provided emergency cash transfers and supported community-driven solutions to ensure that vulnerable children and families had sufficient access to food. IFAD promoted local food production and market resilience, helping farmers adapt to pandemic-induced disruptions. FAO worked with national governments to ensure continuity of agricultural inputs for food production. All entities turned more towards digital solutions for communication and monitoring. In each example, lessons learned were incorporated into programming for greater resilience for the future. Availability and quality contributes to the well-being of the most vulnerable populations.

7 Innovative technical solutions are increasingly important for transformational food production, supply and nutrition.

Foundational research and science of the targeted solutions for food systems can lead to transformational results. Investment in science and research in WFP has contributed to extensive distribution of nutritious food for improved nutrition, for example fortified rice in Bhutan, date bars in Jordan and fortified pre-cooked flours and biscuits in Niger and Senegal. FAO research on crop seeds, particularly in the face of climate change, is enabling higher yields, more robust crops in harsh environment conditions and improved tools and technology for production and processing. IFAD similarly researches innovations in approaches that are particularly adapted to vulnerable households. UNICEF has introduced innovative approaches to child and maternal health and nutrition that are widely adopted, making transformational system changes. In these examples, innovations

were tested in the field and adapted over a prolonged period to facilitate consultations on specific contexts and needs, build knowledge and capacity, advocate for behaviour changes and track and record the experience so that the actual technical innovation becomes systematically applied in practice.

Financing and partnerships

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

Private sector engagement is critical and public financing needs to be targeted to achieve critical shifts for sustainable food systems.

- I **Private sector financing:** Financing for food systems is generally related to a specific value chain, is consumer and private sector-driven and is self-sustaining. Where food systems function in a sustainable manner, no external intervention is required. In countries with a high level of food security, basic factors of food supply and demand are largely balanced through private sector value chains and are self-determined in terms of quantity and quality. The financing of catalytic actions for food systems transformation can be achieved by facilitating private sector engagement in more effective and equitable food systems (Box 4).

BOX 4: PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT

In Ethiopia, WFP contracted a factory supplier for nutritious foods and this led to wider private sector interest in improved food supply. WFP supply chain activities contributed to economic growth in the Berbera port area and stimulated wider prosperity in the locality. FAO support of the African Agribusiness Leadership Dialogue in Accra in 2020 and 2022 enabled public-private partnership investments to agribusinesses and a digital marketplace for agriproducts. Such initiatives generate financially sustainable improvements in food systems.

- II **Public sector financing:** Government investment and oversight is important in matters of safety and safe food supply. Where food supply is insufficient, humanitarian food assistance swings into operation and is funded through existing emergency budgets and funding campaigns. However, the resources necessary to support long-term interventions are seldom available. There are scarce funds to address food assistance or agriculture and value chain development support, so more risky, transformational innovations are grossly underfunded.

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

The United Nations plays a catalytic and normative role in assisting governments to consider, analyse and then support national and local food systems. The Food Systems Summit was mentioned as a determining factor in enhanced support to food systems and in improved collaboration in about a quarter of the evaluations. Preparation of national food systems strategies has been a catalyst to drawing data and partners to work together on more integrated approaches. There is increasing complementation in roles and responsibilities related to food systems but there are still major issues to be addressed. These are not often issues of overlap, given the minimal resources for such work in each country, it is more that potential multiplier effects are not seized. All four entities work on food systems in crisis contexts, endeavouring to improve and stabilize local food supplies, and are attempting to strengthen value chains and private sector engagement. Greater sharing of lessons nationally, regionally and globally could accelerate food systems outcomes. Issues that could be more proactively addressed collectively through the UNSDCF process are, for example: human rights in land and social and economic disadvantage; transboundary food chains; and linking of investments. Good examples include the support by both IFAD and FAO for roots and tubers value chains in Ghana that supply markets in many other countries. The WFP distribution hubs and transportation networks during food crises have been instrumental in bringing together entities to assist in coordinated approaches. In Bhutan, WFP and UNICEF worked together on joint advocacy for school feeding

and with FAO and IFAD on agriculture-related activities. These systems have engaged private sector actors that have in some cases (Box 4) been further supported beyond crises to build more sustainable systems.

were mainly conducted concurrently with the rise of food systems terminology, so food systems were not always explicitly mentioned. Nonetheless, dimensions of food systems were identifiable, sufficient for valid summation.

Approach and methodology

This summary, produced between July and September 2024, brings together evidence from 50 evaluations completed across the United Nations between 2019 and 2024. Of the most recent country programme evaluations (published since 2022), 34 were selected balancing across United Nations entities, regions and countries. A total of 16 thematic or strategic evaluations were selected based on the relevance of the evaluation subject to the wider concept of food systems⁵. Evidence was extracted and analysed against an analytical framework that identified key dimensions of food security based on FAO definitions, food systems summit literature plus inclusion of cross-cutting issues.

The sampling strategy, methodological approach, and draft report were reviewed by an inter-agency reference group including the evaluation offices of FAO, IFAD and WFP.

Limitations: Prevalence rates of extracted evidence against the analytical framework provided a high degree of confidence for the findings. However, as a rapid evidence scan, evidence was extracted based on keywords rather than forensic review. The evaluations

UNSDG SYSTEM-WIDE EVALUATION OFFICE

The United Nations Sustainable Development Group System-Wide Evaluation Office (SWEO) has been established by the Secretary-General to provide independent evaluation evidence to strengthen learning, transparency and accountability in order to incentivize joint work and collective learning and conduct and advance system-wide evaluation evidence on the United Nations development system's contribution towards implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. It aims to work with United Nations evaluation offices to draw on and augment their contributions and capacities, to fill critical gaps, to promote collaboration on joint and system-wide evaluations and to improve the quality and usability of United Nations evaluation evidence in relation to the SDGs, 2030 Agenda, and United Nations reform priorities.



Burkina Faso. Daguintoega village. Photomonitoring of a resilience site - (rice-growing lowland) © WFP/Cheick Omar Bandaogo

UTILIZING UNITED NATIONS EVALUATION EVIDENCE IN SUPPORT OF THE 2024 QCPR

This initiative is a collaboration between SWEO and evaluation offices across the United Nations. It provides user-friendly mapping and summary products of United Nations evaluation evidence to support engagement in the 2024 QCPR. The initiative is coordinated by SWEO, with substantive contributions from the following entities:

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MANAGEMENT GROUP



Endnotes

¹ A/RES/75/233

² A/RES/72/279

³ A/RES/77/184

⁴ The sample comprised 34 CPEs, (FAO-5; IFAD-5; WFP-17; UNICEF-7) and 16 thematic evaluations (FAO-5; IFAD-4, WFP-5 and multi-agency -2). See full list in Bibliography.

⁵ Most evaluations were published between 2021 and 2024, a small number were selected from the period 2017-2020 due to their quality and high level of relevance.

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For further information please contact:
United Nations Sustainable Development Group
System-Wide Evaluation Office
United Nations
New York, USA



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