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Harvesting change: Global South policy proposals for FAO

Southern Voice and European Think Tank Group (ETTGG)

Key messages



Food systems across the Global South face numerous internal and external challenges to provide sufficient, affordable, and healthy food to all.



Smallholder farmers play a significant role in food security and climate action, but are extremely vulnerable. Strengthening their agency can bring widespread benefits to farmers, populations at large, and the environment.



If investments in productive, climate-smart technologies are to be effective, they need to be suited to the needs of farmers. Therefore, local contextual evidence is key to empowering them.



Neither local and national governments nor the UN Rome-based agencies have clarity on the path to sustainable, inclusive food systems. FAO can play a leading role in fostering a shared vision, and a common understanding of crucial roadblocks.



Food systems transformation requires coordinated actions across many sectors. Reducing fragmentation within and between relevant UN agencies, including Rome-based agencies, will be crucial to support this process.

The transformation of food systems towards sustainable, inclusive, and coordinated mechanisms that are capable of consistently feeding current and future populations while safeguarding our environment has increased in prominence over recent years to become a priority in international development. Sustainable food systems have been highlighted in the 2019 and 2023 *Global Sustainable Development Reports* as one of six entry points to accelerate transformations to achieve the SDGs (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General, 2019; Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General, 2023). Commitment to food systems transformations has been evidenced, for example, through the convening in 2021 of the first UN Food Systems Summit. Many countries have since produced initial roadmaps for the transformation of their food systems.

Food systems transformation will involve a complex process of reforming various elements of local, national, regional, and global food system structures. This document identifies three particular areas of focus for cooperation between the UN food agencies and local actors at various levels, providing guidance to efficiently address the main challenges adversely affecting food systems across the Global South.

The first issue is that national and regional food systems across the Global South are unable to sustainably produce enough food to meet the needs of the populations. In Africa and Asia in particular, these populations are experiencing rapid growth, which is not matched by the growth and efficiency of the agricultural sector. In addition, climate change is threatening the sustainable production of food, such as: the increase in extreme and unpredictable weather events, including more droughts and floods that significantly disrupt production; unpredictable temperatures and rainfall making it difficult to identify ideal planting times; rising temperatures threatening the production of some staple crops; and rising sea levels demanding that coastal farmers work with increasing soil salinity.

The second issue is that the food produced is not affordable to all. Depending on the context, both internal and external factors create a high level of volatility in food prices, which means that sufficient food is inaccessible for many—in some cases throughout the year, in other cases dependent on the season. For example, the average Nigerian household now spends 60% of its budget on food, with 95.5% of the country's population unable to afford a healthy diet (Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa [CSEA], 2022).

This introduces a third prominent issue: nutrition. Indeed, the food that is available or affordable often does not contribute to a healthy diet for all.

As a result, populations with limited resources may substitute nutrient-rich foods for cheaper items such as rice and cereal, having a significant impact on nutrition and therefore, health indicators. In addition, limited regulation in food safety and the use of chemicals is a considerable threat to an individual's health in many contexts.

Broadly speaking, in the context of a whole-system approach to address these three issues, the research in this document discovered limited clarity across governments on how policies and measures will be effectively coordinated.

In the next section of this document, the approach to this initiative is described. Three specific levers are explored, which by enhancing the respective roles and capacities of smallholder farmers, local scientific communities, and UN agencies, may be activated to unlock the potential of international cooperation towards an effective, inclusive, and sustainable food systems transformation. These reflect some of the priorities that emerged at the July 2023 UN Food Systems Summit +2 Stocktaking Moment in Rome and will enable gains relating to the achievement of SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 1 (no poverty), SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), and SDG 13 (climate action), in particular.

■ Approach

This study emerged from a dialogical process led by Southern Voice and the European Think Tank Group (ETTG) from April–October 2023 involving various groups from the Global South research community, Rome-based UN agencies, and other organisations. The process started ahead of the new term for the Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)—a time which seemed opportune to reflect on key priorities for the coming years. In addition, the context of new and exacerbated threats to food security worldwide requires constant adaptation from the Rome-based UN agencies. Indeed, the recent food crises caused by armed conflicts, climate change, and the Covid-19 pandemic, exacerbated by the effects of the conflict in Ukraine, have been some of the latest testaments to the vulnerability of food systems across the Global South.

This process was designed as a follow-up to the first Open Consultation Forum that Southern Voice and the ETTG held with International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) running candidates in June 2022. This event brought together three out of the four candidates in an open discussion in Rome with more than 200 participants from various countries and sectors.¹ The success of the first forum motivated the

¹ See more: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqTHwhG9_B0&t=69s

organising committee to replicate the same exercise in July 2023 with FAO running candidates.

Southern Voice and ETTG approached this initiative with an effort to closely collaborate with the FAO, in particular by engaging their leadership and other key actors to seek feedback. This process started from the outset of the initiative, prior to the initial running candidates being announced, by approaching the office of the Director-General.

In order to design the agenda of the upcoming Consultation Forum in Rome in a way that is fully aligned with the needs and demands of the Global South, a first stage of the consultation process involved engaging researchers from various countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

This step aimed to understand firstly, the most significant threats to local food systems, and secondly, how FAO, in the context of these initial dialogues, could best support progress towards successful food systems transformations in the Global South.

In addition, the presence of two members of the organising team at the UN Food Systems Summit +2 Stocktaking Moment enabled a certain degree of responsiveness in the discussions held in Rome to identify areas of consensus and gaps in discourse.

Then, in July 2023—immediately after the UN Food Systems Summit +2 Stocktaking Moment—a Consultation Forum was held that was comprised of representatives of FAO, member states, and other stakeholder groups—including various civil society organisations—which focused on the types of transformations required within the UN system to support the desired progress.

A key challenge in the process was the limited existing interaction between external scientific communities and the Rome-based UN agencies, which was already highlighted at the outset of the June 2022 consultation with IFAD running candidates (ETTg, 2022). This limited the degree of exchange that the project team was able to have with the FAO leadership.

The final step in the process was the holding of an in-person workshop in Nairobi with experts from countries across the Global South in October 2023, prior to the drafting of this document. The workshop provided the opportunity to gather feedback on the emerging recommendations from the process, explore institutional changes beyond the specific realm of FAO, and identify any significant gaps.

■ **Food systems transformation will involve a complex process of reforming various elements of local, national, regional, and global food system structures.** ■

■ Priority areas of action for UN food agencies in Global South countries

The transformation of food systems demands both broad and profound changes. It will require the effective coordination of policies and measures across many sectors. It will also, as was highlighted in the Open Consultation Forum held in Rome, involve addressing some of the problematic economic incentives at the heart of food systems. Within a vast agenda, the approach described above highlighted three particular levers with potential to help address current and emerging issues at the local level today, while reinforcing the foundations of tomorrow's food systems.

Strengthening the agency of smallholder farmers

Smallholder farmers feed the majority of the world's population, yet represent some of the poorest and most vulnerable segments of society in many countries. Chief among the challenges they face are grappling with the numerous severe effects of climate change (Thiam, 2023; MacCarthy et al., 2021; Claessens et al., 2021; Oluwatimilehin & Ayanlade, 2023). However, evidence highlights their very limited control over production, prices, and the policies directly affecting their livelihoods, which have a significant impact on food security. In fact, researchers across the Global South confirm—in the consultations held to inform these recommendations—that improving the conditions of smallholder farmers is a crucial entry point to achieve gains in numerous areas, including poverty reduction, hunger and nutrition, health, as well as climate action and environmental sustainability. The following paragraphs outline some key ways in which UN agencies can help provide the conditions for smallholder farmers to exercise further agency.

Smallholder farmers' access and subscription to insurance services is very low, limiting their ability to maintain their activities in times of crisis. For example, less than 5% of Nigerian farmers are covered by insurance in case of shocks (CSEA, 2022). Therefore, partnering with the private sector may be required in order for countries to be able to provide these services as many of the countries concerned have a very limited fiscal space. A strong emphasis for this is provided for in Nigeria's *Agricultural Development Plan* from the year 2000 (Onyekwena, 2019). Therefore, the repurposing of some agricultural support—both at the national and international levels—towards the provision of these types of services, can be of significant advantage to the sustainability of smallholder farmers' activities (Martin et al., 2022).

In addition, improved access to markets can contribute effectively to stabilising food prices at the local level. Paths forward include significantly

expanding the provision of extension services to smallholder farmers, which are quite limited in many rural areas. These services provide small producers with important resources relating to trends in markets, options for the sale of their products, and value-addition practices (CSEA, 2022; REPOA, 2021). Providing them with these options may effectively curtail the excesses of intermediaries in the supply chain (CSEA, 2022); this was an issue that a number of the consulted experts stressed, as the use of intermediaries contributes to increased food prices. In addition to these services, significant investments in the physical and digital development of rural infrastructure are needed. Indeed, it is the limited connection to markets that typically hampers the ability of smallholder farmers to obtain a fair price for their products as well as market directly to consumers. At the physical level, this is due to the unsatisfactory road conditions in many rural areas, which disconnect producers from points of sale (Onyekwena, 2019).

Actively supporting organisations and networks of smallholder farmers was also highlighted in our consultations. These allow for collective bargaining, political organisation, as well as the sharing of expensive resources, such as technological equipment.

Finally, many smallholder farmers are limited in their agency over their production. Enabling more flexibility in their activities can provide them with a better opportunity to respond to shocks and changes in dietary trends. In Tanzania, for example, this would involve simplifying technical regulations that prevent sudden changes in choice of seeds, types of fertilisers, or other inputs (REPOA, 2021). Similarly, in Sri Lanka, this would involve revising outdated land laws that prevent certain farmers cultivating on parcels of land that were dedicated to the farming of paddy to allow the transition towards crops that are either more profitable or better suited to the current nutrition needs of surrounding populations. In the case of Indonesia, incentives (e.g subsidies) that significantly drive production towards a dominance of rice (Alta et al., 2023) could be further diversified.

Looking forward, there is clear evidence that improving the conditions of smallholder farmers provides a crucial opportunity to retain and develop the agricultural workforce while being able to feed future populations. Today, the limited opportunities for growth in smallholder farming discourage many young people—including talented young agronomists—from pursuing careers in agriculture (REPOA, 2021). In the current state of affairs, it is difficult to argue that farming is not in fact low-reward, “back-breaking work” (REPOA, 2021). Among positive examples, we found lucrative markets for organic products (Dixit et al., 2014), but such examples are the exception rather than the norm.

Another priority emerging from these engagements is the need for stronger investments in science and technologies. Investments in technology can significantly enhance the productivity of smallholder farmers, prevent waste along the food value chain, and strengthen the resilience of local food systems. These may include various types of suitable production, climate-smart and irrigation technologies, as well as post-harvest technologies, to reduce food waste and enable smallholder farmers to engage in value-added production. Further, integration of information technologies can strengthen their adaptability to climate events and other disruptions, by enabling access to accurate, up-to-date information.

However, it is essential that these technologies be suited to the needs of smallholder farmers. In Indonesia, for example, where significant investments have been made in seed technology, there is a low adoption rate among smallholder farmers (Alta et al., 2021).

This is also critical in the case of investments made in digital technologies for the agricultural sector, as many smallholder farmers will not be able to take advantage of them for two reasons. First, rural areas across the Global South have extremely limited digital infrastructure, often coupled with a poor electrical infrastructure. Secondly, many farmers may not have access to the type of devices and sustained connection required to take advantage of new digital opportunities emerging across sectors. However, there has been a positive example in Nigeria, which successfully utilised the delivery of seeds and other agricultural inputs through a system based on a basic mobile phone, rather than a smartphone (Onyewena, 2019).

The following paragraphs introduce some of the rationale why context-aware investments, the interface between local evidence, and various levels of decision-making need to be strengthened in order for food systems to be effective.

For example, a study in Benin found more than half (57%) of the municipalities surveyed said they were limited in practical ability to use the evidence made available by FAO and other international agencies, citing in particular that it did not take into consideration local specificities, while 89% recommended that a platform—providing information in a format and language easily useable for policymakers—be developed (Gbedomon et al., 2021). One example introduced was the assumption that proximity of a source would significantly reduce the time women

■ **National and regional food systems across the Global South are unable to sustainably produce enough food to meet the needs of the populations.** ■

spend on gathering water, when in reality, other social variables account for the time spent on this task (Gbedomon et al., 2021). In this context, the repurposing of agricultural investments towards local research and development is a possible pathway to strengthen the local knowledge base guiding agricultural policy at the national and subnational levels (Martin et al., 2022). This is an area of strong consensus among the experts we spoke with.

In addition, it is essential to strengthen the science-policy interface at the international level. The Open Consultation Forum in 2023 confirmed that non-state actors—such as civil society organisations, grass-root movements, academia, and think tanks—can play a decisive role in working with member states of the UN Rome-based agencies, to improve coordination between these agencies, and form more inclusive partnerships to enhance their effectiveness. They can offer independent brokering platforms that can build networks, broker knowledge, and facilitate agreements between groups of countries and among relevant stakeholders around food systems policy processes. However, the majority of these actors do not have the financial means to ensure a permanent or formal representation in Rome and this reduces the opportunities to ensure proper coordination among the vast ecosystems of non-state actors gravitating around the UN Rome-based agencies.

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Driving the transition to systems thinking

Findings across countries also highlighted the importance of strengthening the governance of food systems. Outdated laws, limited regulatory frameworks, and implementation deficits impact both the production and the consumption of food. Experts agreed that the support of the FAO would be crucial to establish a consistent food price structure, as well as to design and implement policies to guarantee that food meant for consumption is safe and provides adequate nutrition.

More broadly, the experts we spoke to overwhelmingly recognised the need for governments across the Global South to be supported by the UN food agencies, in particular FAO, in charting their transition away from a production approach—e.g. only targeting (calories) and food security—towards a more holistic food systems approach, multi-sector policy, and investment coordination.

However, as was subsequently highlighted in the debates held in Rome at the outset of the UN Food Systems Summit +2, there is a limited shared understanding at all levels—within and between governments, within

and between UN and other agencies, etc.—about the path towards inclusive, resilient, and sustainable food systems. This includes clarity on what such a system looks like, what its various components are in different contexts, and what factors influence its various dynamics.

In conclusion, it was recommended in the same event that FAO consider among its short-term priorities to provide all stakeholders with a clear understanding of what the food systems approach is in practice and what effective coordination of food systems entails. This latter point was of particular focus in the discussion.

Outlining this path will include understanding how to overcome challenges such as the overwhelming food waste along the value chain (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General, 2023). Only part of the solution can be found in utilising better technologies at the local level—it will also need to engage large private sector entities in the process of rethinking parts of their business model.

■ Conclusion

The transition from the current food systems towards inclusive, sustainable, and effective food systems has been acknowledged by all actors engaged—whether in the Global South or at the FAO headquarters in Rome—as a significant undertaking. While some common threats, like climate change and armed conflict, are widely acknowledged, the situation in various countries and across regions differs significantly. Differentiating factors include, for example, various existing policies relating export, import, local production; or the geography and rural-urban distribution of a country.

It is in this context that the series of dialogues held by Southern Voice and ETTG through 2023—with a broad range of researchers from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, as well as with representatives of FAO—have highlighted three essential entry points for FAO's efforts in the coming years to transition to inclusive, sustainable, and effective food systems. They are:

- **Strengthening the agency of smallholder farmers** who feed the majority of the world's population, by providing them with appropriate tools, services, as well as an appropriate policy environment to increase their productivity, make a decent living, sustain it in times of crisis, as well as contribute to mitigating of the effects of climate change.
- **Improving investments in science and technology**, in particular by promoting local evidence-based solutions, and reshaping education programmes to better tailor the implementation of new technologies to the needs of smallholder farmers. In

this transition—beyond their role as knowledge producers and brokers—think tanks across the Global South have a pivotal role to play as links between the Rome-based debates and other spaces driving food systems transformation investments and initiatives, as well as addressing the evolving challenges and needs of vulnerable local communities. This capacity can significantly support FAO in its anticipated role in the final point, below.

- **Driving the transition to systems thinking**, which will involve, among other things, fostering a shared understanding of an effective food systems approach and highlighting awareness to crucial obstacles to a successful transformation of food systems. This leading role suggests, at an internal level, the need to address the fragmentation that exists within and between the UN Rome-based agencies as part of a broader reform of the UN system that sets ambitious targets and clear directions (ETTg, 2022).

These broad recommendations highlight directions for the work of FAO to simultaneously address some of the common trends that emerged across contexts, and respond—timely and efficiently—throughout the process of food systems transformation, to particular and sometimes unique local challenges. As was already suggested at the outset of the consultation held in 2021 with IFAD running candidates, progress towards a successful transformation of food systems at the local, national, regional, and global levels will be best supported by the close cooperation of the UN Rome-based agencies with existing knowledge communities (ETTg, 2022). This will enable mutual learning among and between relevant non-state actors and the Rome-based agencies. This may also assist to depoliticise diplomacy and public-private discussions, towards reaching compromises faster, for example, in the language of formal Rome-based agency declarations and strategies.

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Founded in 2013, Southern Voice is a network of think tanks from Africa, Asia and Latin America & the Caribbean. It contributes to the global dialogue on the UN [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs). Southern Voice's ultimate aim is to address the existing 'knowledge asymmetry' and 'participation deficit' in the development dialogue. It does this by producing, promoting, and disseminating evidence-based policy analysis by researchers from Global South countries.

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