

Country	Cameroon
Thematic focus	Governance
Type of the product	Strategic note
Title of the product	UN Strategic Note on Food Systems Transition in Cameroon
Subtitle	N/A
Year	2025 (not published yet)

Body/ description

UN Strategic Note on Food Systems Transition in Cameroon

Introduction:

This Strategic Note outlines the rationale, alignment, opportunities, and way forward for supporting the transformation of food systems in Cameroon, recognizing its critical role as one of the six key transitions to accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

1. Strategic Rationale and Cameroon Country Context

Transforming food systems is fundamental globally to address interconnected challenges like climate change, biodiversity loss, food security and nutrition, planetary and human health, poverty, and economic resilience. Sustainable food systems underpin multiple SDGs, including SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDGs 14 and 15 (Life Below Water and On Land) and SDG 17 (Partnerships). The 2021 UN Food Systems Summit emphasized the need for resilient, inclusive, and sustainable food systems to address hunger, malnutrition, and environmental degradation. In Africa, food systems transformation is critical for economic growth, job creation, and climate resilience, with the African Union’s Kampala Declaration and Action Plan (recently approved in January 2025) setting ambitious targets for food systems productivity and food security; and including a pillar devoted to “resilient agri-food systems”. The food systems transition involves transforming food production, processing, distribution, marketing, and consumption to ensure environmental sustainability, economic viability, and social equity.

Despite its enormous agricultural potential, Cameroon faces significant food and nutrition security challenges. In late 2024, over 3 million people (10% of the population) experienced acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or worse), with projections indicating over 2.7 million people could remain in this situation through mid-2025. Chronic child malnutrition (28% after latest DHS) is also jeopardising the development of human capabilities as almost one third of children arrived handicapped to adulthood. Moreover, climate change impacts (more frequent droughts and floods), post-harvest losses due to poor storage and transport infrastructure, land degradation due to ill-practices and monocropping, socio-political conflicts (especially in the North-West, South-West, and Far North regions leading to massive forced displacement), and economic factors like high inflation (7.4% in 2023) exacerbate the situation. Agriculture, employing over 60% of the working population. Rural areas, particularly in the North and Far

North regions, are the hardest hit. Transforming the food system is thus crucial for national stability, human development, and economic resilience.

Food systems and agricultural production are vital to the economy of Cameroon, employing half the workforce with about two million small family farms. 62% of households depend on agriculture for their livelihood of which 24% are purely subsistence, 2% are commercial and 75% both consume and sell their produce. 74% of smallholder live in the rural areas, 19% in urban and 7% in semi urban (Fin Scope survey, 2017). Cameroon is currently ranked 151st out of 193 countries, with a Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.58. The poverty rate reached 37.7% in 2022 (10 million people), including 55% of the rural population. The last Cameroon Household Survey (2007), conducted by the National Institute for Statistics revealed significant disparities in the evolution of poverty in Cameroon in the 2000s. In urban areas, poverty has declined significantly (about 5 percent), unlike in rural areas, where it increased by almost 3 percent, especially in the northern regions. Women are the most affected, accounting for 52% of poor households, half of them under the age of 15 (ECAM II Cameroon Consumption Household Survey). The Gender Inequality Index, which incorporates three dimensions of human development (reproductive health, empowerment and the labor market) was 0.62 in 2022 (1 being the point of total inequality), placing Cameroon in 138th place in the sorting.

Various factors, mainly in terms of access, diminish Cameroon farmers' ability to exploit market opportunities:

- a) Most farmers do not have access to appropriate facilities to store food commodities, resulting in significant post-harvest losses. This also forces farmers to sell low-quality crops shortly after the harvest, often at low prices. Existing warehouses are poorly managed, insufficient, and/or far from production sites.
- b) Farmers' associations/organizations and traders cannot access credit since financial institutions do not operate in most rural areas, and when they do, they require collaterals that farmers and traders are unable to provide. As a result, smallholders often seek credit from the informal market which is usually characterized by low transaction costs (no collateral is required) but high interest rates.
- c) Limited mechanization: Cameroon has a low mechanization ratio, with few tractors each serving several hectares of arable land; (Program of Accompanying Research for Agricultural Innovation (PARI).

Since two in five adults rely on farming as a source of income, the monthly income for farmer households translates to about \$6.32 per day. This reflects low income due to a lack of commercialization and diversification. Farming is the most common livelihood source for the Cameroonian adults. With a low proportion of adults in the mainstream formal economy, farming presents a way of food provision, earning an income and means to transition from poverty. Farming and agriculture in Cameroon from a household perspective is - small scale, informal and subsistence - on small pieces of land, and relying on limited infrastructure, very limited access to finance, and low value chain linkages for final produce or markets.

There are numerous opportunities for transforming food systems in Cameroon. The country possesses significant agricultural land (7.2 million ha arable, 2 million ha pasture), forests (22 million ha), water resources, and biodiversity. About 60% of the population is under 25 years, offering a workforce for agribusiness innovation. There is potential to improve productivity, reduce post-harvest losses, enhance value chains, and leverage agroecology. Recent initiatives like the Convergence Initiative and the Science-Policy-Society Interface (SPSI) signal a commitment to leveraging science, multi-stakeholder

collaboration, and youth engagement for transformation. Finally, membership of CEMAC and AfCFTA opens markets for Cameroonian staples (rice, maize, cassava).

There are several **cross-cutting implications** for transforming national food systems in Cameroon:

- Women play a crucial role in agriculture but face barriers in accessing land, finance, and decision-making processes. They constitute about 70% of the agricultural labour force but own only 10% of land. Food system transformation must empower women and address gender disparities.
- Engaging youth is vital, given the aging farming population and the need for innovation. Initiatives like ENABLE YOUTH Cameroon aim to support young entrepreneurship in the agroindustry, as part of the Agricultural Value Chain Development Project.
- Digital platforms for market information (MIS) enhance market transparency and financial services offer opportunities but face challenges in accessibility and infrastructure.
- Conflict and displacement severely impact food security. Integrating humanitarian aid, development programs, and peacebuilding efforts through the HDP Nexus approach is critical, particularly in crisis-affected regions like the Far North, North-West, and South-West. Cameroon is a pilot country for the N approach.

2. Alignment with Government Vision and National Priorities

The Government has elaborated a National Food Systems Roadmap/Pathway and action plan which aligns with the National Development Strategy (NDS30) which serves to implement the National Vision 2035 which aims for Cameroon to become an emerging economy, with agriculture as a key driver, being able to feed their own population adequately and also becoming the food basket of the Central Africa region. The NDS30 prioritizes structural economic transformation, emphasizing agro-industry development, import substitution, food self-sufficiency (Producing Cameroonian, Eating Cameroonian), and export promotion. It includes strengthening climate change adaptation and mitigation as a core priority. Other agricultural sector programmes are aligned to the NDS30 like the Rural Sector Development Strategy (2020-2030) and National Agricultural Investment Plan which outline investments in production and market of transformed staple crops (with value added), infrastructure for transformation, storage and circulation of food products, resilience to climate extremes, violence and economic shocks, and governance (in a decentralized state, where regions and municipalities are meant to get more competencies). Moreover, the Rural Electrification Master Plan will also be pivotal to facilitate the NDS30 and the NAIP, as electricity is essential to undertake raw food transformation (grinding, husking, peeling, cleaning, packaging, mixing, sorting, etc). Cameroon's updated Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) and National Adaptation Plan align with the NDS30 and identifies agriculture and land use as key sectors for climate action, including adaptation and mitigation measures like sustainable land management and promoting renewable energy in agriculture.

The Government has demonstrated leadership through the development of the National Food Systems Transition Roadmap, active participation in the UN Food Systems Summit processes, and engagement in global coalitions such as Agroecology (set up of the Network for the Promotion of Agroecology in Cameroon - NEPAC), School Meals, Zero Hunger, HDP Nexus, Sustainable Livestock and Social Protection and Food Security and Resilient Local Food Supply Chains. Actually, the Government has already designated seven focal points in five ministries to follow up the food system priorities with a multi-sectoral governance approach. Recent high-level participation in launching the Convergence Initiative and the Science-Policy-Society Interface (SPSI) further underscores this commitment. The three priorities for Convergence of Agendas (in line with the COP28 Dubai Declaration on Sustainable

Agriculture, Resilient Food Systems and Climate Action) will guide the investment priorities of the government in 2025-26. Those are: (a) Rice Value Chain, (b) Agroecological production of staples and livestock, and (c) Import Substitution. The designation of a National Convenor who is very active in coordinating these efforts has been very crucial. Policies promoting local production ("Made in Cameroon") and import substitution also reflect this ambition.

3. UN System Value Proposition

The UN system in Cameroon brings significant value to the food systems transition in Cameroon through:

- Technical expertise across agencies (FAO, WFP, IFAD, UNICEF, WHO, UNDP, etc.) in agriculture, nutrition, climate change, resilience, market development, social protection, and HDP Nexus programming.
- Convening power through facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogues, coordinating actors (government, civil society, private sector, donors).
- Normative Guidance by providing access to global best practices, standards (e.g., Codex Alimentarius - a collection of internationally recognized standards, codes of practice, guidelines, and other recommendations published by FAO and WHO relating to food, food production, food labelling, and food safety). The UN Food Systems Coordination Hub provides global coordination and support, including initiatives like the Convergence Initiative.
- Financing through mobilizing resources, connecting the government with global funds (e.g., Joint SDG Fund, climate finance such as GCF, GEF, AF or food security funds such as GAFSP), and supporting innovative financing approaches (i.e. debt swaps, climate bonds, de-risking private sector investments).

Within the country, the UN also enjoys some comparative advantages given its neutrality, long-term presence, established relationships with government and diverse stakeholders, field presence (especially in all the crisis-affected regions), and ability to link humanitarian, development, and peace efforts.

Some examples of UN support to food systems transformation in Cameroon include:

- Support for school feeding programs (WFP reaching more than hundred thousand children in 2025), resilience building and emergency food assistance in crisis zones (WFP, FAO, UNHCR), support to smallholder farmers and value chains (IFAD, FAO, WFP, UNIDO), promotion of nutrition-sensitive agriculture and social protection (UNICEF, WFP, FAO, World Bank).
- Policy Support: Facilitation of the national food systems dialogues and roadmap development (FAO, WFP, IFAD), technical assistance for aligning policy strategies and investment plans (i.e. National Development Strategy, NDS30 Rural Sector Development Strategy, RSDS), National Agricultural Investment Plan, NAIP) with the SDGs and international commitments (UNDP, FAO), support to develop the National School Feeding Strategy and the Convergence Action Blueprint for climate action integration with food production, biodiversity conservation and nutrition.
- Field support to activate local demand and reduce the food import bill through public procurement of locally-produced food for humanitarian assistance and connecting local producers with schools through the Home-Grown School Feeding programme (WFP, FAO).

4. Identified Entry Points for Acceleration

There are ongoing or upcoming Government Initiatives that can be leveraged by the UN to accelerate food systems transitions in the country:

- Continued roll-out of the food systems roadmap provides a primary vehicle for promoting food systems actions, and support the multi-sectoral governance of food systems involving several ministries and different administrative levels (central, regional, local)
- The import substitution policy, very dear to the Government, is an opportunity to support local value chains prioritized under this policy: rice, maize, cassava, fish and milk.
- Supporting Decentralised Local Authorities in planning and implementing local food systems initiatives, including infrastructure development
- Integrating food systems into the revised NDC, the National Climate Adaptation Plan, and the National Biodiversity Strategy and action plans.
- Deploy a M&E system to track the progresses of the Food Systems Transition Route Map, adapting the Food Systems Countdown Initiative list of indicators, and articulating those indicators with the new CAADP Action Plan (Kampala Declaration 2026-2035) and the coming UNCDF process.

A number of programme areas are currently being explored or expanded with UN support:

- Convergence Initiative and SPSI: Piloting integrated food system-climate actions and strengthening science-policy-society linkages, focusing initially on agroecology, rice value chains, and water management.
- School Feeding Program Scale-up: Supporting the government's ambition to reach 1 million children, linking it to local procurement and smallholder farmers ("Home Grown School Feeding").
- Agroecology Promotion: Supporting the Network for the Promotion of Agroecology in Cameroon (Réseau de Promotion de l'Agroécologie au Cameroun) and scaling up agroecological practices for staple food and livestock products.
- Youth Agri-entrepreneurship: Scaling up youth-led entrepreneurial initiatives (like ENABLE YOUTH) in rural area, facilitating access to technology, better practices and micro-credits for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, de-risking investment by Finance Service Providers and connecting the products with predictable markets (school feeding and humanitarian food).
- Agroforestry: Integrating trees into agricultural landscapes to enhance sustainability, sequestering carbon, improve biodiversity landscapes and producing food, fuelwood and revenues.
- Digital Agriculture: Leveraging technology for improved agricultural practices and market access through mobile applications.
- Generating evidence on best institutions, investments and actions to achieve multi-purpose goals of the food, climate, biodiversity and nutrition agendas. Currently, the National Convenor has engaged Cameroon in several global research initiatives around food systems transition pathways led by the OnePlanet Network, CGIAR-FAO, UNFSS Hub, GAIN and University of Sydney.

There are equally opportunities for multi-stakeholder partnership that could be explored:

- Private Sector: Engaging agro-industries, MSMEs, and financial institutions in value chain development, innovative finance, and technology adoption.
- Civil Society and Producer Organizations: Partnering with NGOs, farmer organizations (e.g., PLANOPAC, CNOPCAM), women's and youth groups for implementation, capacity building, and advocacy.
- Research Institutions: Strengthening collaboration with Institute of Agricultural Research for Development (Institut de Recherche Agricole pour le Développement -IRAD) and universities for research, innovation, and M&E.
- Working with IFIs and Climate Funds to include more food systems-related interventions in the mega-projects submitted to climate funds. At global level, less than 2.5% of total climate funding targets smallholder farmers in rural areas, and Cameroon epitomises this disconnection between climate funds and food systems.

5. Opportunities for Joint Resource Mobilization

The estimated funding gap for transitioning to sustainable food systems in Cameroon is significant, requiring investments in infrastructure, technology, and capacity building. The budget for the implementation of activities in the National Food Systems Roadmap is around 1,900 billion CFA francs.

Some potential Sources for resource mobilisation include:

- National Budget: The 2025 national budget allocates only 2.18% to the Ministries of Agriculture and Rural Development (MINADER), and Livestock, Fisheries and Animal Industries (MINEPIA), falling far short of Government's commitments in the Malabo and Maputo Declarations to allocate at least 10% of the state budget to this sub-sector.
- Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs): World Bank, AfDB financing for infrastructure, agriculture projects, ISDB and BADEA (that supports a new initiative called Global Flagship Initiative for Food Security).
- Bilateral Donors: Existing partners (e.g., France/AFD, Germany/GIZ, EU, UK-FCDO, Netherlands) supporting agriculture, climate, nutrition and resilience. Potential to align with donor priorities on climate finance, sustainable agriculture, and resilience.
- Vertical Funds: Green Climate Fund (GCF), Global Environment Facility (GEF), Adaptation Fund and Global Agriculture and Food Security Programme, – potential for climate-resilient agriculture and agroecology projects.
- UN Pooled Funds like the Joint SDG Fund.
- Private Sector Finance: Mobilizing private investment through PPPs, impact investing, blended finance mechanisms, Islamic instruments for the private sector (BADEA, AGFUND), although challenges remain regarding perceived risk and enabling institutional environment. There is a need to provide guarantees to de-risk the private investments in food systems.
- Innovative Finance: Exploring options like credit guarantee schemes, debt swaps, climate bonds, blended value chain financing, crowdfunding, and insurance mechanisms.

Alignment with Donor Interests: Strong alignment potential exists with donor priorities in climate action (adaptation and mitigation), resilience building in fragile settings (i.e. crisis zones), sustainable agriculture/agroecology, youth employment, gender equality, and private sector development through

food transformation and value added. Demonstrating convergence between food systems, climate, nutrition and biodiversity agendas can unlock further funding.

6. Way Forward

To strengthen food systems transition in Cameroon, the following immediate steps could be helpful:

- **Coordination:** Strengthen the National Convenor's office and the multi-sectoral coordination mechanism involving relevant ministries, UN agencies, decentralised local authorities, private sector, CSOs, and research institutions. Formalize participation of focal points from key ministries in coalitions. To support the regular meetings of the high-level platform (Sub-Commission of Rural Development) that coordinates the food systems transition route map. Streamline the reporting and accountability mechanism from the coalitions to the National Convenor, and the bilateral alignment between food systems (MINADER) and climate/biodiversity (MINEPDED).
- **Technical Work:** Finalize and operationalize the national School Feeding Strategy. Advance the Convergence Action Blueprint implementation. Support the revision of some sectoral instruments to fully integrate food systems, namely the NDC, NAP and NBSAP, as well as the FS Transition Route Map. Develop concrete joint programs based on identified entry points, and prepare Bankable Proposals. Strengthen M&E systems (with the Countdown Initiative), and establishing a network of regional correspondents.
- **Political Engagement and Advocacy:** Secure high-level endorsement for integrated approaches (like the Convergence Action Blueprint), which should include engaging parliamentarians on food security and climate legislation, as well as MINREX for international events (i.e. UNGA, Summit on Finance for Development, Climate COPs), MINEPDED for the joint collaboration between climate/biodiversity and food system agendas, MINSANTE to link food and nutrition, and MINEPAT to propose Convergence priorities as key domains for international finance support (through ODA). Advocate for increased national budget allocation for agriculture as per the Malabo and Maputo commitments, and the recent Kampala Declaration. The 3FS initiative to track financial flows to food systems (led by IFAD and WB), both for domestic and international allocations, could be undertaken in Cameroon^[4].

Efforts should be made by the UN to anchor the food systems transition agenda into existing UNCT mechanisms:

- Utilise existing UNCT Results Groups (e.g., related to resilience, economic transformation, climate action) to coordinate UN support and ensure alignment with the national food systems roadmap and Convergence Blueprint. Perhaps, a Result Group could be proposed to follow Food Systems, more specifically the implementation of the Food Systems Transition Route Map and the Convergence Action Blueprint.
- Ensure regular reporting and discussion on food systems progress within UNCT and PMT and other UNCT coordination mechanisms. There is a regular PTF meeting where some UN agencies and donors are participating
- Integrate food systems transformation explicitly within the UN Country Analysis and subsequently into the UN Cooperation Framework.

- Foster continued engagement with relevant stakeholders to ensure the sustainability and scalability of food systems projects
- Leverage the HDP Nexus Task Force structure for coordination in crisis-affected regions.

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