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UN FOOD SYSTEMS SUMMIT + 4
STOCKTAKE

SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY COMMITTEE (SAC)

THEME 1: EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE OF FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

STRENGTHENING NATIONAL GOVERNANCE FOR ACCELERATING FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

INTRODUCTION

During the first United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) in 2021, representatives of over 190 countries affirmed five core "action tracks" for transforming food systems – ensuring access to safe and nutritious food for all, shifting to sustainable consumption patterns, boosting nature-positive production, advancing equitable livelihoods, and building resilience.[1] However, two years later, at the UN Food Systems Summit +2 Stocktaking Moment (UNFSS+2) in Rome, it was revealed that progress has been mixed and inadequate. It is clear that implementation is lagging, and more must be done to accelerate progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on hunger, nutrition, and sustainability.[2,3]

Governance is at the core of the food systems transformation.[4] While considerable work has examined reforms in global food system governance,[5] there is comparatively little guidance on how to strengthen governance at the national level to move from high-level commitments to on-the-ground actions and results.

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KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Establishing cross-ministerial coordination bodies to synchronize nutrition, climate, and agricultural policies.
- Explicitly recognizing rights-holders—including the Right to Food and rights of Indigenous Peoples—in governance frameworks to prioritize social justice and ecological integrity.
- Decentralizing authority to urban and local governments to address context-specific challenges like the "double burden" of malnutrition through tailored zoning regulations, waste-reduction programs, and public procurement policy.
- Investing in foresight training, science-policy interfaces, and communities of practice to foster "all-of-society adaptation".
- Deploying technology (e.g., AI, blockchain) for transparent monitoring while safeguarding data rights.
- Critically repurposing subsidies from unsustainable practices toward agroecology, smallholder support, and climate-resilient infrastructure, complemented by innovative financing (e.g., blended finance, South-South cooperation).

WHY NATIONAL GOVERNANCE

National governance encompasses the policies, regulations, and institutions that governments establish to manage food systems within their borders, as well as their trade in food with other countries and adaptation of national regulations to international regimes, such as food safety standards. Its most critical feature is the national government's responsibility to establish a unified vision and strategy for transforming food systems and to ensure that all stakeholders and rights-holders (public, private, civil society, particularly local or traditional, and Indigenous communities) are aligned toward common goals. Because food systems span multiple sectors, national governments can facilitate coordination across agriculture, health, environment, trade, finance and other domains to avoid siloed or even contradictory policies, and adopt integrated approaches.[6]

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One of a government's essential responsibilities is to allocate resources and investments in areas such as agricultural research and development (R&D), rural and market infrastructure, and social safety nets – all of which are vital for transforming food systems. Translating global commitments (e.g., the 2030 Agenda's SDGs, the Paris Climate Agreement, targets under the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity) into action also largely falls to national authorities: international frameworks provide guidance, but it is at the national and sub-national level that these goals are adapted to local contexts and implemented in practice, ensuring solutions are culturally appropriate and context-specific. Moreover, national governments have the convening power to bring together diverse stakeholders and rights holders (e.g., farmers, businesses, civil society, marginalized and vulnerable groups, academia). Bringing multiple stakeholders together on common platforms for dialogue and collaboration, facilitating informed decision-making in a participatory and inclusive manner, and giving voice to those most affected by food insecurity.

National governance presents a critical opportunity to integrate rights-based policy frameworks that can drive the transformation of equitable, accountable, and sustainable food systems. As signatories to international agreements recognizing the Right to Food, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and other relevant instruments, national governments have a legal and moral obligation to respect, protect, and fulfil access to adequate, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food for all.[7] Incorporating the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is equally essential, as their knowledge systems and stewardship over biodiversity-rich territories play a vital role in advancing resilient and sustainable food systems.[8] Furthermore, acknowledging the rights of nature strengthens governance frameworks by fostering ecological integrity and resilience, key pillars for achieving long-term food security.[9] By embedding these rights within policy frameworks and institutional mechanisms, national governance can ensure that food systems transformation prioritizes social justice, ecological sustainability, and meaningful participation from marginalized and historically underrepresented communities.

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TABLE 1: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND NEEDED ACTIONS OF FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION IN SELECTED COUNTRIES

Country	Key Challenges	Opportunities	Actions
Bangladesh	Lack of coordination among ministries at subnational levels; Inadequate infrastructure support for food supply chain; lack of data to support national-level decision-making	Rapid economic growth and dynamic migration to urban and international labor markets; well-developed sectors' strategies for food, agriculture, health; emerging capacity in data, policy analysis and advising;	Pass the National Food Systems Act; strengthen the inter-ministerial task force and establish a task force at the subnational level; implement a food systems dashboard; and expand the national nutrition council's mandate to coordinate between ministries, focusing on both nutrition-specific and sensitive policies, strategies, guidelines, and research.
Indonesia	Policy fragmentation in decentralized governance; financing constraints	High-level government commitments and political will; Strong agricultural universities and research institutions; Vibrant private agrifood firms	Develop national food systems action plan; enhance coordination between BAPPENAS and local governments; develop urban food strategies; leverage GAIN food and nutrition dashboards; scale fiscal transfers; enhance local technical capacity
Viet Nam	Fragmented multi-sector coordination; slow environmental, agroecological, and low-carbon transition; insufficient financing at sub-national levels	Strong national political will; approved National Action Plan on Food Systems Transformation; recent merger of the Ministry of Agricultural and Rural Development and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment	Form a national coordination entity led by the highest level of national government; mobilize the private sector through the Food Innovation Hub; Scale local pilots and consumer awareness

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Country	Key Challenges	Opportunities	Actions
Ethiopia	Sectoral Fragmentation, institutional overlap; donor-driven agenda; Policy Implementation and Capacity Gaps; insufficient stakeholder collaborations, limited data and evidence-based policymaking	Launched multisectoral policies and plans, including the Homegrown Economic Policy Reform agenda, the Seqota Declaration, the National Food and Nutrition Strategy, the National Disaster Risk Management Policy, the Livestock Master Plan; revised Agricultural and Rural Development Policy; developed Systems Transformation Plan (2021-2030), aligning with the UNFSS global action tracks and existing national policies and programs.	Enact Food Systems Act; build data-driven policies; integrate indigenous food systems; utilize AI and digital dashboards; establish a data and indicators system.
Ghana	Lack of dedicated food systems strategy and action plan; weak local government capacity, particularly in the North	Democratic and participatory political system; strong economic growth; established education system	Establish a Food Systems Transformation Technical Steering Committee at the Presidency with Multi-Sector Technical Working Groups at national, regional and district levels; strengthen inter-sectoral and inter-ministerial collaboration; and monitor and evaluate effective integration of the various food systems sections (food, health, environment, education); develop national food systems action plan; leverage digital tools.

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GUIDELINES FOR ACCELERATING NATIONAL GOVERNANCE

1. **Use a Systems Approach to Governance.** National governments should develop integrated policies that address the interconnectedness of food systems rather than treating each area in isolation. Mechanisms for cross-ministerial coordination (such as interdepartmental committees or joint planning task forces) must be established to guide coherent and aligned actions. For example, a country's national nutrition strategy, food loss and waste reduction plan, climate change commitments, ecosystem restoration efforts, and agricultural development policy should all be coordinated and viewed as part of one holistic food systems roadmap, rather than separate efforts. One noteworthy example is Viet Nam, where in 2025 the national government approved a merger of its Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment to create a unified Ministry of Agriculture and Environment. This consolidation supports the avoidance of institutional conflicts and enhances coherence between food security and environmental sustainability goals, such as coordinating climate-smart agriculture with low-carbon development strategies.[10] In Africa, under the top government leadership, Rwanda established inter-ministerial clusters on economic, social, and governance issues, by creating joint institutional performance contracts that engage multiple government organizations; setting up sector and sub-sector working groups that provide for regular consultations between the government and its development partners on agriculture, food, nutrition, and health; and forming joint action development forums at the district level that coordinate activities across public, private, and civil society organizations.[11]

2. **Adopt a Fundamental Rights Framework.** Many national pathways for food systems transformation documents refer to 'stakeholders', but few have explicitly referred to 'rights-holders'. Recognizing the *Right to Food* in national food governance frameworks as a fundamental human right emphasizes the obligation of governments to respect, protect, and fulfil access to adequate, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food for all people.[4] Upholding the *Rights of Indigenous Peoples* is also crucial, as their traditional knowledge systems and stewardship of biodiversity-rich territories contribute significantly to sustainable food systems.[5] Additionally, recognizing the *rights of nature* can reinforce governance frameworks by promoting ecological integrity and resilience, which are essential for long-term food security.[5]

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By embedding these rights into policy frameworks and institutional mechanisms, governments can ensure that food systems transformation prioritizes social justice, equity, ecological sustainability, and inclusive participation, particularly for marginalized and underrepresented communities. In Africa, the Right to Food is already recognized in the framework laws of several countries, including Mali, the Republic of Cabo Verde, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, and Uganda. However, countries must transition from recognition to actual implementation. In addition to securing their rights to land, water, and other natural resources, social protection programs, including direct income transfers, will help smallholder producers, foresters, fishers, informal traders, and migrants access nutritious foods all year round.

3. **Empower Urban Communities and Local Governments.** More than half of the global population now lives in urban areas, and this share is expected to continue rising.[12] Urban areas are major centers of food consumption and are critical to food systems outcomes; they also often experience a "double burden" of malnutrition, with undernutrition and obesity coexisting in the same communities.[13] Yet urban food issues have often been overlooked in national food system governance. It is essential to bring urban and local authorities into the fold of food systems transformation. Urban governments can implement policies to support sustainable food systems – for instance, zoning regulations that protect space for urban agriculture, incentives for retailers to offer healthy and affordable food in low-income neighborhoods, or programs to reduce and reuse food waste. As a C40 member, Nairobi has embedded urban agriculture into local governance through its Nairobi Food System Strategy (2023-2030), leveraging the C40 Food Systems Network's Climate Resilient Food Systems Project to drive institutional innovation.[14] The revised Urban Planning Regulations mandate new developments to allocate 5-15 percent of land (scaled by project size) for vertical farms or community gardens. With C40 technical support, the city launched the "Nairobi Food Map" digital platform, which integrates data from markets and cooperatives.

   A recent trend toward **decentralization** in many countries has given local governments greater autonomy and responsibility over key elements of food systems. This creates opportunities for local innovation and tailored solutions. Across the world, citizens and civil society are increasingly using tools to hold local authorities accountable for food-related outcomes. For example, community budget-tracking and expenditure monitoring systems, community scorecards to assess local service delivery, and inclusive multistakeholder forums that engage municipal officials, community groups, and the private sector in joint food policy **planning**.[8]

   Given the diversity of local governance contexts – the degree of local authority, the openness of civic space, and the stability of local institutions vary widely – any efforts to strengthen food systems governance at sub-national levels must be customized to local conditions and capacities.[8]

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4. **Strengthen Institutional Capacity.** Developing human resources (technical experts, extension agents, policy analysts, program managers) is one component. Equally important is improving institutional structures and processes – for example, clarifying roles and mandates, streamlining bureaucratic procedures, and fostering a culture of cross-sector collaboration. Over time, a steady increase in capacity will be necessary to reinforce and sustain investments and fully realize the transformation. Systems thinking recognizes that complex transformations require the ability to adapt and solve problems iteratively; therefore, building the capacity for all-of-society adaptation is crucial. Specifically, governments should invest in building the capacity of national and subnational ministries, departments, and non-governmental actors to utilize forward-looking approaches and data for informed decision-making. For instance, training officials in **foresight and scenario analysis** can help them plan for long-term food system challenges and opportunities (such as climate impacts or demographic shifts). Engaging a broad set of actors in shaping goals – and giving them the capacity to contribute – builds ownership of the transformation process. A priority is to strengthen the science–policy interface, which involves establishing processes for producing, validating, and disseminating robust and inclusive data and knowledge for food systems, and ensuring that policymakers can access and understand this evidence.[16] Countries should also focus on building the capacity of **communities and civil society** to engage meaningfully in policy dialogues and transition processes – for instance, by helping farmer organizations or nutrition advocacy groups develop the skills to participate in policy consultations, or by assisting youth and women's groups in organizing and articulating their priorities. Finally, capacity-building efforts should prioritize fostering innovation and scaling up successful solutions. This might involve establishing incubators for food system innovations, supporting research–extension linkages to bring new practices to farmers, and creating "communities of practice" where practitioners can learn from each other's experiences (nationally and internationally).

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5. **Enhance Data and Evidence-Based Decision-Making.** Governments should invest in robust data collection and monitoring systems that encompass all dimensions of the food system, including production (e.g., agricultural outputs, productivity), distribution (e.g., markets, supply chains), consumption (e.g., dietary intake, nutrition status), and waste management. Developing a set of clear, measurable indicators aligned with food system goals will enable the tracking of progress and help hold actors accountable.[17] Advances in technology offer new tools for data gathering and transparency: for instance, remote sensing and GIS can monitor crop conditions or land use change in real time; artificial intelligence can help analyze complex datasets or improve early warning systems for food security; blockchain technology can improve transparency and traceability in supply chains (useful for food safety and reducing fraud). At the same time, however, such technologies raise questions about data ownership, privacy, and control, especially in cases where large firms gain power from their privileged access to such data as well as the software and data storage systems necessary to utilize it. By leveraging such innovations and protecting data rights for farmers and consumers, countries can significantly enhance their ability to diagnose problems and target interventions more effectively. At the same time, accessibility to data and innovative methods should be available to all partners in food systems, including smallholder farmers and local communities, on their terms.

   Evidence-based decision-making also means that policies and programs should be designed and adjusted over time based on the data that shows them to be effective or ineffective. This requires building analytical capacity within governments to interpret data and conduct evaluations. It also requires a culture of transparency – data should be made publicly available whenever possible, so that researchers, civil society, and the public can engage with it and provide independent analysis or feedback. Ensuring that resource allocation and the enforcement of regulations are guided by data (rather than by ad-hoc or political considerations) will improve fairness and outcomes.[18] To

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support this, the international community, including the UN system, can provide assistance through **periodic reviews** and peer learning. For example, the United Nations Food Systems Coordination Hub is facilitating follow-up and reviews of countries' progress on their national food system pathways. Countries could agree to regular review processes, where they report on food system indicators and policies, identify gaps, and learn from each other's experiences. An analogy can be found in the **African Union's peer review mechanisms**: the AU's African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) was established to allow countries to voluntarily assess each other's governance and share best practices,[19] and recently there have been efforts to apply a similar approach to specific goals like ending hunger (with coordinated monitoring and accountability across countries). Such peer review or joint accountability exercises, whether at the continental, regional, or global level, can complement national efforts by highlighting areas for improvement and sustaining political commitment through gentle pressure and inspiration from peers. Ultimately, enhancing data- and evidence-based governance creates a feedback loop for continuous improvement: policies are formulated based on evidence, implemented and monitored, evaluated for their impact, and then adjusted in light of the findings, leading to increasingly effective strategies over time.

GHANA'S FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION INFORMATION SYSTEM

Ghana deployed the Food Security and Nutrition Information System (FSNIS) across the Northern, Central, Eastern, and Greater Accra regions under the statutory mandate of §3(1) of the Food Security Act 2020.[20,24] This system employs a tiered-response protocol: localized nutrition interventions (e.g., supplement allocation) activate when community-level child wasting exceeds 10 percent, escalating automatically to national emergency measures—including school feeding program mobilization—at >15 percent. By 2024, coverage achieved 50 percent of under-five children and women of reproductive age, successfully mitigating 37 nutrition risk incidents (23 crisis-tier cases).[22] Concurrently operationalized, the National Food Systems Dashboard (co-developed by the Ghana Statistical Service and IFPRI) integrates 12 data categories while implementing a blockchain traceability pilot for strategic commodities (e.g., maize, cocoa).[23] During the March 2024 drought, dashboard-driven early warnings of maize shortages prompted data-informed presidential action: suspension of maize export tariffs (previously 15 percent, HS 1005) while retaining the standing tariff exemption for rice, coupled with the release of 35,000 metric tons (MT) of maize (8 percent of national reserves) from strategic grain stocks.[21] These interventions secured access to staple foods for 2 million Ghana National Social Registry (GNSS)-certified low-income residents in Accra, Kumasi, and affiliated urban centers, as per *MoFA Announcement No. 027/2024*.

Source: *FAO & Ghana MoFA. (2023); Ghana Ministry of Food and Agriculture. (2024); Ghana Statistical Service. (2024); IFPRI. (2024); Ghana Parliament. (2020)*

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6. **Leverage Financial and Economic Instruments.** Governments should increase their capacity to mobilize **domestic financial resources** for food systems – for example, by improving tax collection including in the agrifood sector, introducing or raising duties on products that harm health or the environment (e.g., sugary drinks or fertilizers that cause pollution), and efficiently collecting fees or royalties from resource use. Given that public resources are always limited, setting the right spending priorities is essential. Governments should scrutinize and **repurpose** subsidies or expenditures that currently support unsustainable practices and the production of unhealthy foods.[25] For instance, many countries still spend large sums on subsidies for chemical fertilizers, pesticides, or the cultivation of staple crops in ways that can degrade the environment or crowd out more nutritious foods. Redirecting a portion of these subsidies toward practices that benefit smallholder farmers, promote sustainable and regenerative agriculture, and build climate resilience would yield huge dividends. In practical terms, this might mean gradually reducing or capping certain input subsidies or guaranteed prices that encourage overuse of agrochemicals or monocultures, and instead increasing investments in public goods like agricultural R&D into low external input farming methods such as agroecology, agroforestry, sustainable irrigation, extension services for climate-smart techniques, or support for diversified, nutritious crops. Similarly, **incentive structures** should be adjusted to encourage private-sector investment in sustainable food systems – for example, tax breaks or credit facilities for companies that invest in plant-based proteins, climate-resilient infrastructure, or rural food value chains that create equitable employment.

   At the same time, nations should explore innovative financing mechanisms and partnerships to complement public budgets. The recent foreign aid cutbacks by some traditional donors make this even more urgent.[26,27] Blended finance (mixing public, private, and philanthropic capital) can help de-risk sustainable agriculture projects and attract investment. South–South cooperation is another avenue – countries can share not just knowledge but also funding or in-kind support for each other's initiatives (for instance, a larger developing country investing in a neighbor's agricultural value chain development). Moving forward, governments should institutionalize the practice of **budgetary review and reform** in line with food system transformation goals: every few years, review how much is spent on different parts of the food system (e.g., agricultural subsidies, nutrition programs, emergency food reserves, R & D), evaluate the impact, and reallocate funds toward the areas of greatest need or highest return. International financial institutions and the UN can provide technical support for these reforms.

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NIGERIA'S CASE ON FINANCIAL INCENTIVES

Nigeria restructured its food system fiscal instruments through the Agricultural Fiscal (Amendment) Act 2023, redirecting 35 percent of former fertilizer subsidies (USD 1.05 billion per year) to smallholder climate resilience programs[28]. Under the federal National Climate-Resilient Agriculture Voucher Scheme (NCRAVS), Osun State farmers redeemed vouchers for drought-tolerant seeds, solar irrigation kits, or soil health services, resulting in a 28 percent increase in maize yields and a 25[32] percent reduction in synthetic fertilizer use in 2024.[29] Concurrently, the Central Bank of Nigeria's "Food Systems Transformation Dedicated Window" disbursed ₦28 billion (approximately USD 62 million) in concessional loans to upgrade agri-value chains.[30] For instance, a Lagos-based cashew processing cooperative increased export value addition by 28 percent through equipment modernization, benefiting 2,500 smallholder households.[31]

Source: *Federal Ministry of Finance. (2023); World Bank. (2024).Central Bank of Nigeria. (2024); Nigerian Customs Service-Lagos. (2024); IITA. (2024).*

UNFSS+4 will be a key milestone to assess progress and identify action gaps in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, at the end of July. It is urgent than ever to address the key role of the national governance in food systems transformation. Without strengthened national governance, the goals set at the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit will not be achieved.

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DISCLAIMER

This policy brief is developed under the thematic area Effective Governance of Food Systems Transformation of the Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) of the UN Food Systems Coordination Hub. This thematic area is led by Dr. Shenggen Fan, one of the four Co-Chairs of the SAC. The brief reflects the personal perspectives of the author(s), and the views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the positions, policies, or viewpoints of any affiliated organizations, institutions, or entities.


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