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UN FOOD SYSTEMS SUMMIT + 4

STOCKTAKE

SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY COMMITTEE (SAC)

THEME 4: METRICS, DATA, AND EVIDENCE FOR FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

TRANSFORMING FOOD SYSTEMS, TURNING WRONGS INTO RIGHTS

KEY MESSAGES:

1. A rights-based framework for developing and implementing policies and programmes is fundamental for transforming food systems.

2. National pathways for food systems transformation are stronger when they embed the right to food, along with other related rights, into policies.

3. Policy makers should consider three interconnected dimensions of social justice – namely recognition of marginalised communities, redistribution of resources and representation in decision-making fora to dismantle structural disadvantages and promote inclusive governance that values diverse voices and perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

A rights-based framework has long been regarded as the ethical foundation for transforming food systems, a critical step toward achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and ensuring food security and nutrition for all. Central to this approach is the right to food. First articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it was later transformed into a legally binding International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The right to food emphasizes eliminating hunger and promoting the intrinsic link between human dignity and access to safe, adequate, and nutritious food.

This policy brief explores how systemic injustices within global food systems can be addressed. It amplifies foundational legal documents with other international rights-based instruments.

After a brief review that shows that rights are not prioritized in most actionable strategies from national pathways – national roadmaps from over 100 countries developed for the UN Food Systems Summit since 2021 – this policy brief provides an overview of the kinds of systemic injustices frequently found in food systems and the challenges they present to achieving food security and sustainable food systems. It then outlines various legal instruments that are designed to address these challenges.

In providing this overview, this policy brief highlights the urgent need for states to realign food systems strategies with principles of equity, sustainability, and justice, which are firmly embedded in the right to food. It makes the case that transforming food systems by implementing a rights-based framework is not only an ethical imperative, but also a practical pathway to turning systemic wrongs into actionable rights, ensuring a more just and sustainable future for all.

NATIONAL PATHWAYS OUTLOOK

As a follow-up to the UN Food Systems Summit in 2021, Member States have developed national pathways as the route to achieving food systems visions. Following the 2023 and 2025 Stocktakes – global summits to evaluate progress on food systems transformation – there are 128 available national pathways. Among them, 28 explicitly referenced key terms such as "Right(s)," "Right to Food," "Rights of Indigenous Peoples," and "Human Rights-Based Approach." This represents approximately 22% of all pathways analyzed (see Table 1 for examples).

Findings indicate that Latin American and European countries tend to place a stronger emphasis on the right to food, while pathways from other regions are more focused on food security without explicitly referencing rights-based approaches.[i] Additionally, regional summaries highlight varying levels of commitment to integrating human rights into food system policies, with some areas showing greater institutional recognition than others.

Moreover, national pathways primarily address sustainable agriculture, nutrition, and resilience, but they do not specifically address issues such as 'food in conflict,' 'food as a weapon of war,' or violation of rights/war crimes from deliberate infliction of hunger during conflicts.

Given growing understanding of structural inequities and power imbalances in food systems as key drivers of hunger, this policy brief explores the ways in which a rights-based framework can address these dynamics and turn 'wrongs' into 'rights.' The brief specifically aims to guide the development and/or updating of national pathways to (further) incorporate and implement a rights-based framework in food systems policies to address these dynamics driving hunger.

INTERLOCKING PATTERNS OF SYSTEMIC INJUSTICES

Labor Inequities

The efficiency and affordability of the modern industrial food systems are built upon the systematic devaluation and exploitation of human labor.[1] The low cost of food for consumers is effectively subsidized by the immense human costs resulting from the lack of enforcement of labor laws, denying fair wages and unionization. Agricultural and food workers endure hazardous working conditions, including exposure to pesticides, extreme heat, dangerous machinery, and toxic fumes from animal waste. They also frequently face harassment, and abuse by supervisors. Their work is often poorly paid, largely unregulated, and disproportionately undertaken by those with few other choices.

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i   India, as the most populous nation in the world, is an exception, which enshrined the right to food through the National Food Security Act in 2013. https://nfsa.gov.in/portal/nfsa-act

Migrant workers, who constitute an increasing share of the farm and food sector workforce in high-income countries, are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse due to a lack of social protections, lack of legal status, and a pervasive fear of blacklisting, which could prevent future employment.[2] These workers are essential to sustaining labor-intensive crop production in high-income countries.

The "feminization of agricultural labor" highlights a trend where women are increasingly taking on primary roles in agricultural production globally, most dominantly in Africa.[3] However, this trend often means women work long hours in difficult conditions without adequate compensation or recognition, facing limited access to training, capacity-building programs, credits and social protections.[4] Gender wage gaps in agriculture persist across all regions of the world and fall below specified minimum wages among women in East Asia & the Pacific and The Middle East & North Africa.[5] Furthermore, child labour in agriculture increased for the first time in 20 years in 2023, with 70% of the 160 million child labourers worldwide working in agriculture, particularly within global value chains like the coffee industry.[6] This significant increase underscores the deep-seated social costs embedded within the food supply chain, which are often difficult to quantify but represent profound human rights violations and a direct impediment to the realization of the right to food for these vulnerable populations.

Environmental Injustices

Environmental degradation further exacerbates contemporary food system injustices, denying individuals their fundamental right to dignified, secure and adequate food and livelihoods.

Industrial agriculture is a significant source of environmental problems in food systems, contributing to water pollution, air pollution, and soil degradation. This includes the intensification of food production, where increased fertilizer use leads to higher greenhouse gas emissions, and inefficient infrastructure contributes to substantial food loss.[7] The growing demand for livestock products has encouraged pasture expansion and increased production of soy for animal feed, which are among the primary drivers of tropical deforestation.[8] For example, beef and soy production are driving more than two-thirds of the recorded habitat loss in Brazil's Amazon and Cerrado regions and Argentina and Paraguay's Gran Chaco region.[9] Similarly, the expansion of industrial fishing fleets has led to the collapse and total exploitation of over 90% of the world's marine fisheries.[10]

The impacts of environmental degradation and climate-related disasters disproportionately fall on marginalized communities. This includes Indigenous Peoples, small-scale farmers, women, children, and rural populations – those dependent on the primary sectors – who often reside in close proximity to polluting operations and frequently lack the political and economic resources to advocate against the destruction of their communities.[11] Such scenarios show the urgent need for rights-based frameworks that integrate social justice and environmental sustainability.

Exploitative and environmentally harmful practices have also exacerbated land appropriation and the displacement of local communities from their territories.[12] The violent appropriation of land and natural resources from Indigenous Peoples remains a critical concern for the protection of collective and individual rights.

Solutions for environmental sustainability and the protection of resource rights in food systems must therefore incorporate environmental justice, ensuring that the benefits of a healthy environment are equitably distributed and that the burdens of pollution are not disproportionately borne by vulnerable communities, thereby safeguarding the right to adequate and safe food for all.

Concentration of Economic Power

Global food systems are shaped by entrenched economic inequities that privilege industrial agriculture and are characterized by corporate consolidation and export-oriented production. These forces often overwhelm localized and sustainable production and marketing practices.

Highly concentrated markets, where just a few large corporations dominate, are typical along global agrifood supply chains.[13] These high levels of concentration are of particular concern because of the potential adverse impacts they can have on food systems and food security outcomes.[14] It is widely recognized that firms in concentrated markets can exercise market power, which is the capacity to shape markets in contexts where there is little competition. Dominant firms in those markets can raise prices paid by consumers, lower wages and prices paid to suppliers, and erect barriers that prevent new entrants into markets. These kinds of practices can distort markets in ways that lead to sub-optimal outcomes and can affect food security by reducing food access and food choices.[15]

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Beyond influencing markets, food security and food systems are also influenced by other kinds of power available to dominant firms in concentrated markets. Those firms can influence material conditions within food systems. Because just a few large firms dominate key nodes in food systems, those firms play a prominent role in shaping science, technology and innovation strategies for agricultural production and processing, determining production and working conditions, and shaping product formulations and food environments.[16] This capacity for large and dominant firms to shape these contexts means that they often are the ones driving choices about farm inputs used to grow crops and raise animals, the working conditions faced by food systems workers, and the kinds of foods and retail environments in which food is available. Firms that dominate food systems tend to shape these material conditions in ways that further their profits, rather than in pursuit of the public interest, which can result in poor food security and nutrition outcomes.[17, 18]

Dominant firms in concentrated markets also have disproportionate voice in food policy and governance settings. Large firms tend to have extensive lobby and outreach budgets that they can use to influence public policy and wider discourse around food systems.[19] Transnational corporations are known to engage in lobbying activities and participate in industry associations that seek to influence both national and international governance forums that establish rules and regulations that affect their businesses.[20] Corporate actors also often sponsor scientific studies that support their interests.[21, 22]

Another structural dimension of food systems driving inequities is the export-oriented nature of many agrifood markets, which tend to prioritize large-scale industrial agricultural production. Such systems tend to benefit large agro-exporting firms and countries. Small-scale producers and small developing countries can be disadvantaged by the export-oriented system, especially when large-scale export agriculture is supported by subsidies that weaken prices to the extent that they can threaten the livelihoods of small-scale producers in poor countries.[23] Many of the world's poorest countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, have become food import dependent over the past 40 years in the context of these dynamics.[24] This greater import dependence has made the world's poorest countries more vulnerable to global food price shocks due to war, pandemics, and other market disturbances.[25]

Addressing these economic imbalances requires stronger market regulation, such as more comprehensive competition policies, as well as promoting inclusive governance that values diverse voices and perspectives.[26]

RIGHTS-BASED FRAMEWORKS FOR JUST FOOD SYSTEMS

The Right to Food

The Right to Food is codified under Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).[27] It encompasses the right of every individual to have physical and economic access, at all times, to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food necessary for a healthy and active life.

Embedding the right to food into policies requires states to adopt legislative, administrative, and judicial measures that protect, respect, and fulfil this right.[28] This entails recognizing the needs of different groups of people, ensuring equitable access to resources, equitable representation in governance and decision-making, and mechanisms for redressal if rights are not implemented.[29] A rights-based approach thus serves as a moral, normative and practical pathway to achieving food security and sustainability.

Nutrition is a fundamental feature of the right to food. However, multiple factors, from production to consumption, have led to a forced transition away from healthy, sustainable diets, resulting in an ever-increasing prevalence of hunger and micronutrient deficiencies, obesity, and diet-related chronic diseases globally.[30] These dietary shifts directly undermine the right to culturally appropriate and healthy food, as well as the ability of those affected to define their own food systems.

> Nepal provides a good example of framing food systems transformation as the right to food. As part of its action on accelerating the means of implementation, and aligning with the spirit of Nepal's constitution, the national pathway for food systems transformation prioritizes rights, to create food systems that serve the needs of both the people and the planet, ensuring long-term prosperity. The framework of "rights," particularly the right to food and food sovereignty, are recognized as fundamental to ensuring equity, resilience, and sustainability in the food system. By integrating these rights into national and local strategies, Nepal's transformation process ensures that all individuals, especially marginalized communities, have access to sufficient, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food. It also affirms that food systems are not only about providing food but also about respecting people's autonomy and dignity in food production and consumption (Nepal, 2023).

Right to Food in Conflicts: International Humanitarian Law

The use of food as a weapon in conflicts is a gross violation of multiple rights instruments.

The deliberate use of food deprivation as a strategy in armed conflicts has been documented in Palestine, Ukraine, Sudan, and areas in Latin America and Asia. Such tactics involve withholding supplies, destroying crops, and blocking access to food, leading to severe humanitarian crises including death, displacement, and destruction of agriculture and infrastructure.[31]

International humanitarian law prohibits the use of starvation as a method of warfare. Article 54 of Protocol I Additional to the Geneva Conventions explicitly forbids actions that destroy or render useless objects indispensable to the survival of civilian populations, such as foodstuffs and water supplies. Furthermore, the Article 8(2)(b)(xxv) of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court considers deliberate starvation a war crime. Despite these legal frameworks, enforcing accountability remains a significant challenge.[32]

Indigenous Peoples' Food Sovereignty: UNDRIP (2007)

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), adopted in 2007, represents a milestone in recognizing the rights of Indigenous Peoples worldwide. It acknowledges their distinct cultural heritage, traditional knowledge systems, and intrinsic connection to their lands, territories, and resources. Food sovereignty, which encompasses the right of Indigenous Peoples to define their own food and agricultural systems, is closely aligned with these principles.

UNDRIP emphasizes self-determination, land rights, and cultural integrity, which are foundational to achieving food sovereignty. Articles 10, 25, 26, and 29 are particularly relevant, as they highlight the rights of Indigenous Peoples to maintain their cultural practices, control their resources, and sustain traditional food systems. By affirming these rights, UNDRIP provides a framework for addressing the historical injustices that have undermined Indigenous food systems and promotes pathways for resilience and sustainability. For example, Brazil incorporates UNDRIP principles into its National Pathways, focusing on land rights and access to resources for smallholder farmers and Indigenous groups, promoting sustainable and agroecological practices.

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UNDROP (2018) and its Focus on Peasants' Rights

Adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2018, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) addresses the marginalization and exploitation of rural communities worldwide. It recognizes the critical role of peasants and small-scale food producers in global food security and biodiversity conservation.

UNDROP emphasizes rights related to land tenure, seeds, biodiversity, and equitable access to resources. By affirming peasants' rights to participate in decision-making processes that affect their livelihoods, the declaration seeks to correct systemic inequalities perpetuated by industrial agriculture and land-grabbing practices. It promotes agroecological approaches that are culturally appropriate, sustainable, and centered on community empowerment. Brazil and Canada are among the few countries with UNDROP principles explicitly incorporated into their national pathways.

Rights-based Instruments for Access to Land and Resources

The Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT) of the FAO´s Committee on World Food Security (CFS) are a set of non-binding principles and standards developed to improve how land, fisheries, and forests are managed. They provide a framework for developing policies and programs emphasizing the importance of protecting legitimate tenure rights to achieve food security and support the right to food. The VGGT are an important tool to address systemic inequalities in land ownership and discriminatory practices that stem from historical and ongoing processes of occupation, dispossession, and the extraction of natural resources by dominant actors. These dynamics result in the simultaneous violation of human rights and degradation of ecosystems.

National-level rights frameworks are also important in protecting the right to land and resources. South Africa, in its national pathway, integrates rights-based frameworks with a strong focus on land reform and equitable access to resources for smallholder farmers and Indigenous populations, focusing on food sovereignty.

The Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) prepared this brief. Prof. Barbara Burlingame, Jennifer Clapp, Hilal Elver, and Nitya Rao co-authored the draft.

Rights of Nature

The evolving concept of the Rights of Nature (RoN) challenges anthropocentric legal frameworks by recognizing ecosystems as rights-bearing entities with intrinsic value. RoN is described as a means for Indigenous Peoples to uphold their rights to traditional use of natural resources, while still preserving biodiversity.[33] This approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of human and ecological health, promoting the protection of natural systems upon which food security and resilience depend.

Applying the RoN to food systems involves safeguarding biodiversity, soil health, water quality, and ecological balance. Countries like Ecuador and Bolivia have incorporated RoN principles into their constitutions, setting precedents for integrating environmental integrity into food governance frameworks. Such approaches advocate for agroecological practices that align with natural processes, promoting resilience against environmental degradation and climate change.

DESIGNING POLICY SOLUTIONS TO COUNTER INEQUALITIES

Communities are not homogenous, but rather are differentiated by wealth and social group, gender, age and stage in the life-cycle, ethnicity, and geographic location, with different needs and priorities. Ensuring justice requires attention to three interconnected dimensions: recognition, redistribution and representation.

Recognition involves understanding the different needs, interests and vulnerabilities of differentially positioned people and supporting them in appropriate ways. For example, Indigenous Peoples and ethnic minorities are often at highest risk of losing their livelihoods due to unjust conservation or extraction policies; people living in contexts of conflict are likely to be subject to hunger and starvation as political weapons of war, and pregnant and lactating women may have special requirements in terms of nutritious food. Recognizing the multiple and intersecting forms of marginality and discrimination, as well as people's differential environmental knowledge and values is the first step in the process of achieving social justice.

Addressing these specific needs and vulnerabilities requires the **redistribution** of resources and opportunities, be it land to Indigenous Peoples or women farmers, social protection to the poorest, access to credit and finances, or education and skills. Women are often held responsible for household food security but lack access to and control over productive resources that can enable them to challenge inequitable power dynamics.

Representation entails enabling equitable participation in decision-making at multiple levels. At times, this requires legal reform, a good example being quotas for women at different levels of government, giving them a legitimate space in decision-making processes. The Bangladesh Climate Action Plan,

seen as one of the most gender-responsive globally, was formulated through a participatory process of consultations, including with women and third-gender persons at the local government level.[34] Similarly, in India, the reservation of half the seats in local government for women has contributed to more gender-responsive policies and programmes on the ground, contributing to reductions in women's drudgery alongside enhancement of nutritional security of rural communities.[35]

Achieving social and gender justice then requires change at various scales and levels, from the individual to entire systems, and from the enforcement of human rights to more informal social and cultural norms and power relations that often deny respect and dignity to those most marginalised. The national pathways for food systems transformation, like the National Action Plans for Climate Change, provide a good opportunity to address complex and intersecting inequalities faced by women, youth and other marginalised groups, advancing equitable livelihoods, decent work and empowerment.

In summary, systemic injustices represent forms of oppression that are pervasively and deeply embedded within societal systems, laws, written or unwritten policies, entrenched practices, and established beliefs. Contemporary inequalities in global food systems have deep historical, economic and geopolitical contexts rooted in colonialism, systemic racism and power imbalances.[36] These general circumstances have an enormous impact on all six dimensions of food security: availability, access, utilization, stability, sustainability and agency.[37]

Incorporating rights-based frameworks into national policies requires substantial effort to ensure inclusivity in decision-making processes, empowering marginalized communities to regain control over their food systems, emphasizing sustainability, and supporting the realization of human rights within food systems.

Country	National pathway and rights-based framework integration
Belgium/ Flanders	Combatting food inequality is explicit, and access to safe and healthy food is highlighted as a basic right. Measures for achieving healthy and sustainable diets by removing barriers for those in socially vulnerable situations and enhancing the role of schools as a lever against food inequality.
Belize	Measures to achieve food systems transformation include ensuring access to safe, local, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food for all in the progressive realization of the right to food. Systemic levers include building on existing local, traditional, and Indigenous/cultural food systems, reducing climate and environmental footprints, and enhancing resilient local, traditional, and Indigenous/cultural food systems.

Country	National pathway and rights-based framework integration
Bolivia	The constitution incorporates the Rights of Nature and Indigenous rights. The national pathway promotes agroecology and sustainable land practices, focusing on food sovereignty for Indigenous communities.
Brazil	Incorporates UNDRIP and UNDROP principles, focusing on land rights and access to resources for smallholder farmers and Indigenous groups, promoting sustainable and agroecological practices.
Canada	The National Food Policy emphasizes Indigenous rights and food sovereignty. It aligns with the UNDRIP to support Indigenous control over food systems, land access, and traditional knowledge.
Ecuador	Integrates the Rights of Nature into its constitution and food systems policies. The national pathway promotes sustainable, community-driven food practices that respect Indigenous peoples' rights and ecosystems.
India	Emphasizes food sovereignty for marginalized communities, focusing on local food systems, agroecology, and the inclusion of Indigenous farmers and women in decision-making processes.
Nepal	Establishes accountable food governance mechanisms through the implementation of right to food and Food Sovereignty Act to create an enabling environment for promoting local food production systems. Harmonizes agriculture, food and nutrition and health and other sectoral policies.
South Africa	Integrates rights-based frameworks, particularly in land reform and equitable access to resources for smallholder farmers and Indigenous populations, focusing on food sovereignty.

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