

FOOD SYSTEMS SOLUTIONS DIALOGUES

PLANNING for food systems transformation: Science, Technology, and Innovation

7 June 2023

Summary Report

On 07 June 2023, the UN Food Systems Coordination Hub hosted the “Planning for food systems transformation: science, technology, and innovation” session as part of the Food Systems Solutions Dialogues. The following represents a summary of the two meeting sessions held in the morning and afternoon to accommodate different time zones.

Introduction

In his opening remarks, Stefanos Fotiou, Director of the UN Food Systems Coordination Hub (Hub), recalled that science, technology, and innovation are fundamental accelerators of the 2030 Agenda. Explaining the rationale of launching the Scientific Advisory Committee of the Hub (SAC), he noted the SAC responds to many requests from National Convenors calling for more robust science-based interfaces and investments in means of implementation for food systems transformation.

Discussion

The dialogue followed with a presentation of the work of the SAC by its chair and co-chairs. Respectively the Chair Dr Shakuntala Thilsted – who moderated the sessions, and the four co-chairs. In the morning session, Dr Shenggen Fan and Prof Jean Francois Soussana informed participants of the work of the Committee, while Dr Hilal Elver and Prof Barbara Burlingame informed participants in the afternoon session. In their introductory remarks, the SAC elected members have stressed that evidence-based approaches are needed to transform food systems. Moreover, they have highlighted the importance of looking at science broadly to include multiple ways of knowing, such as considering Indigenous and traditional knowledge, when proposing solutions for more sustainable food systems. They also have expressed their commitment to supporting National Convenors in implementing their national pathways by facilitating knowledge synthesis and dissemination.

In the ensuing discussion, participants expressed gratitude and appreciation for the assistance of the SAC. The main themes highlighted by National Convenors included the importance of mobilizing research, as well as the need for scientific recommendations and data support. Many countries emphasized the significance of public funding in research for policy transformation, especially in resilient agriculture. The role of research, technology, and innovation in improving productivity and resilience was also emphasized.

Moreover, National Convenors stressed the importance of engaging with local communities since their participation is vital for long-term transformation. Therefore, many argue the SAC will be crucial in providing proper studies, accessible and reliable data, along with evidence-based decision-making, which is essential for effective policy implementation.

Participants have consistently highlighted that incorporating sustainable, ecosystem-oriented production models. Examples include agroecology, climate-smart practices and implementing innovative approaches, which can enhance the resilience of agricultural systems and mitigate the adverse effects of climate change, while respecting and protecting human rights and livelihood of local communities. Adopting sustainable farming practices, implementing prototypes, fostering collaboration among all stakeholders, and reducing environmental pressures across the entire supply chain were particularly mentioned. These measures are seen as instrumental in achieving sustainable agricultural transformation. However, the successful implementation of these initiatives requires strong political will from governments to prioritize and support sustainable agriculture.

Overall, countries sought support in bridging knowledge gaps and integrating science into national-level decision-making processes. Many countries emphasized the need for increased action at the subnational level and identified gaps in data collection, and interpretation related to food security and nutrition. They acknowledged that science and innovation can be crucial in addressing these gaps. Furthermore, they highlighted the importance of coordinating among UN agencies, recognizing that current level is insufficient.

Additionally, participants highlighted the need to bring science to the national level, ensuring that scientific research and advancements are effectively integrated into policy and decision-making processes. And yet, they noted translating complex scientific information into accessible knowledge for multiple audiences as a significant barrier. In this regard, the SAC was requested to support bridging this gap, facilitating the dissemination and translation of scientific insights to diverse stakeholders. This action would enable informed and inclusive decision-making toward sustainable agricultural practices.

Overall, Convenors argued that, to leverage the power of science, it is crucial to establish a connection between experts, production units, and decision-makers. They said, currently, valuable scientific evidence at the academic level often remains isolated and disconnected from practical applications. Therefore, facilitating collaboration and communication among these stakeholders is vital. At the same time, many stressed that adequate financial resources are needed to support evidence-based decision-making, ensuring that the knowledge generated by experts can reach the final users effectively. Moreover, it was noted that there is a wealth of regional experience that can contribute to improving the situation and driving progress. Thus, the SAC was requested to tap into this regional expertise to address challenges in transforming food systems.

The way forward

In his closing remarks, Mr Fotiou underscored that the work of the SAC is challenging but decisive in supporting countries to implement national pathways. He also recalled that the National Convenors have presented pragmatic demands, emphasizing the need for practical solutions and tangible outcomes and the SAC will assist them in this. He shared that during the UN Food System Summit + 2 Stocktaking Moment, specific sessions dedicated to both the National Convenors and the SAC will provide opportunities for sharing valuable information with a wider audience. Recognizing the significance of the science policy-society interface, it is crucial to foster effective communication and engagement among these spheres to drive sustainable agricultural transformation. He concluded that collaboration, knowledge sharing, and networking are vital for success.

Background

Composed of 29 nominated scientists, the Scientific Advisory Committee was officially launched at the World Food Forum on November 8, 2022, at FAO Headquarters in Rome, Italy. Functioning as a broker of science and evidence, the SAC brings forth its combined expertise to guide and support countries in implementing their national Pathways, supporting evidence-based policymaking. Its mission will be guided by the six strategic directions of the Hub's Work Plan, focusing on Key Function 2- Strengthening Thought Leadership. To ensure the operationalization of the SAC to support the upcoming 2023 United Nations Food Systems Summit + 2 Stocktaking Moment, the Hub will have a roadmap for an action plan that will review specific work and produce specific outputs. Meeting within this roadmap will determine the action tracks of the SAC, priorities, responsibilities, and the most appropriate timeline.