TRANSFORMING FOOD SYSTEMS: THE POWER OF YOUTH IN SCIENCE-POLICY-SOCIETY INTERFACES

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ABSTRACT

Current agrifood systems support the livelihoods of 3.83 billion people worldwide and produce 11 billion tonnes of food each year, feeding the world while sustaining economies. However, the negative externalities of agrifood systems remain prevalent, including extreme poverty and inequality, chronic diseases, conflicts, environmental degradation, and biodiversity loss. This paradox positions agrifood systems as both the driver of multiple global challenges and a key lever for achieving most UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Investing in more resilient agrifood systems can unlock multiple benefits for present and future generations. One essential ingredient for advancing this transformation is focusing on food systems governance as an entry point. This brief presents Science-Policy Interfaces (SPIs) with strong civil society engagement (Science-Policy-Society Interface- SPSI) as a crucial mechanism to 1) integrate knowledge into policymaking as the norm rather than the exception, and 2) institutionalize knowledge co-creation and widen civil society engagement in food systems transformation, ensuring that interventions are inclusive and adaptable. The analysis is grounded in the "*Guidance on strengthening national science–policy interfaces for agrifood systems*" published by the Chief Scientist Office of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN. Specifically, it explores country pilots under the SPSI workshops held by the Food Systems Youth Leadership Programme of the United Nations Food Systems Coordination Hub in The Gambia, Chad, and Cameroon. The goal is to illustrate practical applications and policy recommendations for practitioners that other countries can emulate to accelerate the transformation of food systems.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As challenges in agrifood systems become increasingly complex due to the interrelated impacts of climate change, socio-economic disparities, and biodiversity loss, governance systems have struggled to respond adequately.[1]

Greenhouse gas emissions from agrifood systems have increased by 10% between 2000 and 2022, with a 15% increase for farms and livestock.[2,3] While food production has also significantly increased during this time, global hunger has remained constant. In 2024, between 638 and 720 million people were undernourished, suggesting that prevalent responses have taken a siloed approach, focusing narrowly on boosting yields without sufficiently addressing how food is distributed, accessed, or integrated within broader ecological, economic, and social systems.[4] By reaffirming a science-policy-society nexus, this brief offers an approach to overcome policy fragmentation and develop more coherent, inclusive, and sustainable policies grounded in science and evidence.

Despite the rising salience of evidence-informed policymaking, there remains a disconnect in how knowledge-producers and policymakers define, interpret, value, and use evidence in decision-making processes.[5] This has been previously conceptualized as the difference between evidentiary uncertainty and evidentiary ambiguity. Uncertainty refers to all types of limitations in available knowledge that affect the range and probability of possible answers to an assessment question.[6] This is a technical challenge defined by the availability of information for addressing an already well-defined policy problem. On the other hand, ambiguity entails obscurity within interpretations of the policy problem itself. This is political in nature and raises questions about who has the power to frame the problem, whose knowledge is considered legitimate, and who prompts the demand for evidence.[7] In response to such complexity, rather than linear channels from science to policy, SPIs serve as “dynamic ecosystems of processes, actors and organizational structures” that integrate knowledge with social values to address policy challenges.[8]

Employing FAO’s research on the ‘Science-Policy-Interface' as a guide, this policy brief outlines the ‘Science-Policy-Society Interface’ as the functioning approach to achieving the Hub’s coordination cluster on **Science and Knowledge**. The Science and Knowledge cluster aims to operationalize collective intelligence and implement a collective response to global food systems challenges, with a focus on aligning directionality at the institutional (such as ministries and government bodies), stakeholder (including public and civil society actors, with emphasis on youth), and instrumental (financial and technical) levels.

Established in 2022, the Hub assists countries in implementing their national pathways for food systems transformation by recognizing that food systems are complex and require inter- and transdisciplinary solutions. The Hub supports the establishment of SPSIs as mechanisms for bridging the gap between scientific knowledge, policymaking, and societal needs. For the Hub, this occurs under the Youth Leadership Programme (YLP), supported by the German government, which invests in early career professionals, fostering cross-sectoral collaboration for more accountable, inclusive, and gender-responsive policies.

The Hub is working to establish and strengthen SPSIs in several pilot countries, ensuring policies are both science- and evidence-informed, as well as inclusive. One of the Hub's core strategies is to leverage fit-for-purpose science, meaning that it supports research, policymaking, and technological innovations that are nationally tailored. This is demonstrated by the demand-driven programs designed with insights gathered through consultations and surveys completed by National Food Systems Convenors to inform the Hub´s Biennial Work Plan.[9] By supporting the institutionalization of SPSIs, the Hub supports national pathway implementation by fostering interfaces that can better reflect and track progress towards more resilient and sustainable food systems.

2. GUIDING FRAMEWORK: KEY ELEMENTS OF FUNCTIONAL SPIs

Transforming agrifood systems requires more than knowledge alone. This is particularly important given the often-fragmented way in which food systems issues are understood and addressed by diverse stakeholders – from producers and distributors to policymakers and consumers. What is needed are institutional-level platforms that foster coherence and coordination across stakeholders and contexts.[10,11] FAO's *Guidance on strengthening national science–policy interfaces (SPIs) for agrifood systems* provides a practical resource to support this.

According to the guidance, **brokering** as well as **knowledge synthesis and policy-relevant recommendations** are the core functions of SPIs. By targeting the interplay of knowledge generation, use, and communication, they work to strengthen public policy decisions and set agrifood systems on a trajectory toward sustainability and equity. The brokering function centers on the relationship between knowledge producers and decision-makers. This includes facilitating access to knowledge or managing requests for evidence, creating common ground and building trust among various stakeholders, and fostering constructive dialogue to address diverging priorities. In the same way, knowledge synthesis involves identifying and conveying relevant evidence in ways that can directly improve policy design and implementation.

2.1. SPI Models

To help visualize the operational and design aspects of SPIs, the brief presents three broad theoretical models. A policy-oriented model centers on the role of evidence-users, where decision-makers define a problem and prompt scientists to deliver the type of evidence needed to address it. This approach rests on several assumptions, such as a strong emphasis on political decision authority, a view of science and policy as distinct social systems with clear boundaries, and an understanding of science as value-free. The policy-oriented model tends to privilege scientific forms of evidence over local or traditional knowledge.

The production-focused model assumes that integrating evidence into policy is both central and inherent, thus emphasizing the role of evidence-providers. Here, scientists identify a problem and push decision-makers to address it through available evidence. The production-focused and policy-focused models share the same underlying assumptions; their main distinction lies in the procedural balance between science and policy. Finally, the integrated model, which occupies the middle ground, emphasizes two-way communication between evidence providers and evidence users. This model embraces plurality and a diversity of knowledge forms and value systems. Each model presents varying implications for governance and power dynamics – not just between policymakers and scientists, but also for the legitimacy of local and Indigenous Peoples' knowledge, and its place within broader aspects of national policymaking.

All three models have merits. Nonetheless, the integrated model offers the greatest potential for operationalizing the science-policy-society nexus, since it presents a scenario where scientific objectivity is no longer value-free, and policymaking is viewed as participatory and dialogic rather than a top-down process. Therefore, it provides greater entry points throughout the policy design and implementation phase for the integration of scientific evidence, local and traditional knowledge, and socially inclusive strategies. Although the integrated model as an ideal can enable the inception of SPSIs, existing norms and dynamics can be slow to change, especially in contexts where policy-oriented models have been dominant.[8] National-level decision-makers therefore have a key role in advancing the uptake of integrated models and ensuring the inclusion of diverse sources of knowledge in policy design and implementation.

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2.2. Fundamental Principles of SPIs

Effective SPIs are built on four fundamental principles of CRELE-IT: credibility, relevance, legitimacy, and iterativity. Credibility refers to the rigor, transparency, and independence of scientific knowledge used in policymaking. It also reflects the extent to which stakeholders consider this knowledge to be accurate or believable. Relevance ensures that SPI activities align with national policy priorities and respond to societal needs. Legitimacy relates to the perceived fairness of the SPI process, emphasizing inclusive engagement with diverse stakeholders, particularly marginalized communities such as small-scale producers, women, and Indigenous Peoples. Finally, iterativity is a procedural principle that underpins continuous, multidirectional interactions between science, policy, and society. It emphasizes SPIs as evolving processes that can respond to changing policy needs.

These principles are applied in a fit-for-purpose manner depending on national context and the broader underlying SPI model. Balancing them often involves trade-offs and synergies. For instance, legitimacy might be strengthened through inclusive co-production with diverse stakeholders but be more time-consuming, whereas timely responses to policy requests can increase relevance.

2.3. Governance and Institutional Design of SPIs

SPIs require governance structures that are both inclusive and adaptable, reflecting the diversity of stakeholders involved and the complexity of the challenges they address. A central element in shaping these structures is the convenor – the individual, organization, or network that brings stakeholders together. Rather than imposing rigid governance frameworks, SPIs are co-designed with flexibility to accommodate national contexts and stakeholder configurations.

Governance mechanisms should enable coordination, shared accountability, equitable participation and strengthened integrity and independence across the three broad stakeholder categories: knowledge producers (including scientists, other knowledge holders such as Indigenous Peoples, and small-scale producers), knowledge intermediaries (such as boundary organizations and brokers), and knowledge users (including policymakers, private sector actors, CSOs, and consumers).

Agrifood systems transformation involves interlinked challenges that span multiple disciplines, knowledge systems, and sectors. Effective transformation, therefore, depends on cross-sectoral coordination and the creation of spaces where diverse actors can jointly identify priorities, share knowledge, and co-design initiatives. This approach should also foster collaboration across multiple scales, from local (for example, subnational entities such as local or provincial authorities) to regional (for example, SPIs in neighboring countries) to build on each other's strengths, align objectives, and generate complementary actions that advance national priorities in a coherent and impactful way.

The Brazilian Research Network on Food and Nutrition Sovereignty and Security offers a valuable example of an SPI at the national level. By bridging academic research with public policy, it fosters interdisciplinary collaboration and participatory knowledge production.[12] Through engagements with researchers, policymakers, and civil society organizations, the network has influenced national food and nutrition policies using citizen science approaches, ensuring that scientific evidence, Indigenous Peoples' knowledge, and local contexts inform decision-making. In particular, inclusive participation in agrifood SPIs requires targeted efforts to empower marginalized groups, who often face barriers like low literacy, mistrust, and power imbalances. While stakeholder workshops are common, genuine participatory approaches and adequate facilitation resources are frequently lacking. Visual and participatory tools – such as community-led photography initiatives in Timor-Leste's fishing communities to promote more gender-inclusive fishery governance – exemplify how these interfaces can effectively engage local voices in sustainability dialogues.[13] Moreover, integrating Indigenous and local knowledge through culturally appropriate methods, like the Local Indicators of Climate Change Impacts (ICCI) protocol, adds another example of how these interfaces can ensure that policies reflect diverse worldviews and support locally led adaptation.[14]

Overall, SPIs offer a conceptual foundation and empirical insights that can be adapted for practical use, especially in strengthening national interfaces that can facilitate the Hub's objective to serve countries through systemic country-driven support for food systems transformation.

4. THE SCIENCE-POLICY-SOCIETY INTERFACE: STRENGTHENING SPSIs IN PRACTICE WITH THE POWER OF THE YOUTH

The following section shares how SPSIs can advance more inclusive food system policies that are sound and responsive to both present and future generations.

While efforts and tools are being created, translating available knowledge into effective policies remains inadequate due to several factors that moderate policy uptake, including the level of collaboration across government ministries and the relevance or timeliness of evidence available.[15] SPSIs can respond to these challenges and lay the groundwork for long-term policy coherence in food governance. In relation to the Hub's mission, the emphasis of 'society' on the science-policy interface is significant in two ways. Firstly, from an actor-oriented perspective, it emphasizes the importance of including community groups, particularly youth, as drivers of transformative food systems at all levels, whether as early career researchers, advocacy leaders, or agribusiness entrepreneurs. Intergenerational transformation requires youth to be recognized not only as future stakeholders but also as present-day users and producers of knowledge. Therefore, positioning youth as central to SPSIs' attempts to go beyond surface-level representation and towards enabling inclusive and future-facing governance mechanisms.

Secondly, from a context-oriented perspective, an explicit emphasis on civil society in the SPI framework signals the need to account for the social realities in which food systems are deeply embedded. This includes acknowledging how structural inequalities and community-level disparities shape whose voices are heard and, crucially, expanding the sources of knowledge we incorporate into policy and decision-making. Without deliberately addressing these underlying conditions, food systems transformation will not be equitable or effective.

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3.1. Case Studies: SPSI Inception Workshops under the UN Food Systems Youth Leadership

In 2024, the Hub supported SPSI inception workshops in pilot countries as a deliverable of the Food Systems Youth Leadership Programme. Selected countries included Chad, The Gambia, Viet Nam, and Cameroon. Operationalization, agenda-setting, and capacity-building were three essential processes that laid the groundwork for strengthening national interfaces.

A major objective of the SPSI workshops was to support the inclusive implementation of national food systems pathways with the support of National Convenors and selected youth. To remain grounded in each country's overarching priorities, the workshops were designed by first assessing existing processes, including policy frameworks and action plans, identifying policy gaps, and examining ongoing efforts to ensure stakeholder inclusion. For example, in Viet Nam, the workshop drew on the approved National Action Plan for Food Systems Transformation (NAP-FST), which sets out an inclusive, responsible, and sustainable food system vision by 2030. By grounding the workshops to existing frameworks and actions, the SPSI process identifies strategic entry points to strengthen SPIs while targeting youth inclusion in decision making and knowledge production.

Operationalizing SPSIs entails the "integration of evidence and viewpoints through skilled intermediaries".[8] Consequently, alongside National Convenors, SPSI focal points were appointed whose efforts were complemented by members of the Hub's Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) and youth leaders from the Youth Leadership Programme. Agenda setting included a distinct yet coherent emphasis on youth- and science-related priorities. For instance, Chad's national pathway highlights both youth empowerment through access to resources and employment opportunities in agriculture, alongside a focus on the use of science and technology for sustainable food systems. This ensures that the civil society and science functions underpinning SPSIs are empirically sound and responsive to stakeholder priorities.

Finally, capacity-building initiatives are crucial for enhancing skills in science communication, policy analysis, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Mechanisms for learning and reflexive capacity, such as periodic assessments and stakeholder feedback loops, ensure continuous improvement and adaptation of SPSI strategies. Although ongoing, early implementation across select case studies indicates promising signs, suggesting the potential of the instrumental dimension of SPSIs to support a collaborative and evidence-informed approach to food systems.

3.1a. The Gambia

The Gambia's agrifood system is shaped by a web of interrelated challenges, including climate variability, low agricultural diversification, and weak governance of nutrition policies that contribute to food insecurity and suboptimal human capital outcomes.[16] To mitigate these challenges, the government and non-state actors, with support from the Hub, have established a National SPSI Platform to enhance national coordination. The platform serves as a multi-stakeholder forum where policymakers, researchers, and civil society organizations collaborate to address the interlinked drivers of unsustainable food systems through integrated, inclusive, and context-sensitive solutions.

A key intervention includes the formation of an inter-ministerial working group to improve policy coherence and align agrifood policies with national development goals. This ensures that relevant government ministries coordinate effectively, fostering consensus in planning national efforts rather than operating in isolation. According to discussions held during the inception workshop in December 2024, targeted initiatives will focus broadly on climate-smart agriculture, including integrated farming and improved irrigation techniques aimed at improving agricultural productivity and building resilience to climate shocks. In parallel, the government has introduced provisions of land, finance and productive resources to consolidate the role of youth and women in agribusiness, acknowledging these groups as central to agricultural transformation and economic development.

The Gambia's platform reflects a deliberate effort to institutionalize SPSIs as inclusive, systems-oriented governance mechanisms. The actor-oriented dimension of SPSIs, particularly through the empowerment of youth- and women-led agribusinesses, demonstrates an investment in building their qualitative capacity in the food system.

3.1b. Chad

Agriculture is a central aspect of Chad's economy, employing approximately 80% of the active population and contributing around 40% of the country's GDP.[17] However, the sector faces severe environmental challenges, including low and erratic rainfall, soil degradation, and desertification, which are exacerbated by a lack of access to appropriate resources. Additionally, national and regional (Lake Chad Basin) insecurities continue provoking major forced displacement crises.[18]

As part of a responsive SPSI, Chad has established a Multi-Stakeholder Task Force, a mechanism that promotes permanent dialogue between a range of government ministries, universities, research institutions, and farmer cooperatives.[19] Importantly, a ministerial decree is underway to institutionalize the SPSI within Chad's Ministry of Agriculture, including the establishment of a permanent secretariat. Given that youth make up more than half of the population, with poverty disproportionately impacting youth and women, a significant focus of Chad's SPSI strategy will be capacity-building for youth, women, and smallholder farmers. Progress has already been made through preliminary steps, including a needs assessment in peri-urban areas and the identification of target zones with participants set to be drawn from youth and women's associations, cooperatives, and startups.

These developments point to the growing institutional and instrumental alignment around SPSI goals explored during the inception workshop, particularly in fostering inclusive and responsive approaches to food systems transformation. Together, these interventions aim to strengthen the institutional and human capacities needed to integrate scientific evidence into policy processes more effectively. The Multi-Stakeholder Task Force has been working to institutionalize the SPSI model, a soon-to-be permanent feature of food systems governance in Chad. This incorporates the principle of reflexivity, which can stimulate ongoing dialogue to address evolving societal needs.

Moreover, Chad's focus on capacity building supports context-oriented inclusion by addressing specific vulnerabilities that target both civil society (with emphasis on women, youth, and cooperatives) and local needs (climate-smart agricultural practices) through comprehensive baseline assessments. By investing in these interventions through financial, technical, and political resources, Chad's SPSI is laying the groundwork for a more sustainable food system.

3.1c. Cameroon

Agriculture plays a dominant role in Cameroon's economy, with a significant portion of the population relying on subsistence farming for food security.[20] However, the sector is increasingly constrained by a range of interlinked challenges. Climate variability has led to declining agricultural yields, with 42% of farming households reporting income losses.[17] Despite this, access to essential support such as agricultural inputs, food assistance, and livestock infrastructure remains limited. Moreover, armed conflict and ethnic tensions threaten people´s right to food. To address these overlapping challenges, Cameroon's SPSI is advancing distinct interventions to improve coordination across research, policy, and local actors. One promotes agroecological practices and sustainable intensification of strategic crops. Another focuses on climate-smart rice cultivation by introducing low-emission technologies and capacity building throughout the rice value chain, for example, developing extension services for rice-fish farming. A third intervention targets import substitution to increase local production and reduce reliance on imports with a focus on engaging young people in aquaculture.

Each intervention emphasizes the inclusion of youth and women, strengthened coordination between research institutions and decision-makers, and the integration of food systems and climate change considerations into legislative processes. With SPSI interventions still underway, efforts are currently focused on mapping rice production basins and piloting lowland rice cultivation, with ongoing stakeholder sensitization to build understanding and attract investors. Overall, these efforts can strengthen knowledge exchange, improve sustainability, and foster inclusive participation across Cameroon's food system.

4. ESTABLISHING SCIENCE-POLICY-SOCIETY INTERFACES: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthening institutional collaboration is critical for enhancing SPSIs. Governments should establish inter-ministerial frameworks to ensure policy coherence across agriculture, health, finance, and climate sectors. Furthermore, partnerships between academia, public institutions, private sector actors, and civil society should be institutionalized to support the co-creation of knowledge and joint policymaking. Institutionalizing these processes ensures that inclusiveness criteria in food systems transformation are substantive, rather than symbolic, and lead to meaningful shifts in governance and decision-making.

This was exemplified in the Gambian case, where the SPSI workshop was followed through with critical institutional reforms. These included appointing youth leaders in key positions of government, investing in higher education, and launching land and capital access programs for youth.[21] By creating these enabling conditions, youth are empowered to influence policy development and participate in food systems both upstream and downstream, as knowledge users and producers. Ultimately, **prioritizing stakeholder engagement through participatory decision-making will ensure that diverse voices (including farmers, youth, and Indigenous Peoples) influence policy development**, making it more effective.

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SPSIs should operationalize capacity-building at different levels and in ways that are mutually supportive. In Chad and The Gambia, efforts to empower youth and women-led agribusinesses reflect targeted investments in individual-level capacity. These initiatives recognize the need for diverse skills and experiences to participate in agrifood system transformation. Additionally, organizational capacities should be strengthened through institutional changes. One example is the formation of multi-stakeholder taskforces that reinforce efforts to coordinate between various actors that can further governance and relational capacities. Finally, community-level capacity-building can foster more inclusive, responsive, and sustainable SPIs. It is also important to recognize that capacity-building efforts often prioritize technical or scientific solutions grounded in dominant knowledge systems. If not carefully addressed, such approaches risk marginalizing Indigenous Peoples and local knowledge, thereby reinforcing existing power imbalances. Without explicitly addressing this, SPSIs risk reproducing epistemic asymmetries that undermine inclusive governance.

At the country level, a practical framework can be used for strengthening SPSIs to support evidence-based decision-making. Such a model can include elements like agenda setting, securing international support, inclusivity, and effective communication. **Special emphasis should also be paid to activities such as baseline mapping and analysis of SPSIs that already exist, as well as capacity-building workshops that simulate interactions between scientists, policymakers, and community stakeholders.** This methodology has been further validated through regional workshops and produced into a framework published by the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia.[22]

To summarize, three key considerations for improving science-policy-society interactions include:

1) Institutional design, ensuring independence and inclusivity;
2) Knowledge co-creation and synthesis, integrating multi- and transdisciplinary research; and
3) Policy relevance, ensuring that evidence is accessible and actionable for policymakers.

In sum, investing in SPSIs is a promising step toward resilient and sustainable agrifood systems. Case studies from The Gambia, Chad, and Cameroon illustrate actions being taken to adopt a knowledge-based participatory approach in the implementation of national pathways. While these efforts are ongoing, they offer important insights into the process, strategies, and considerations involved. As global multifaceted challenges for food systems transformation continue to evolve, reinforcing SPISs can be essential for ensuring that agrifood policies remain adaptive, inclusive, and sustainable in the long run.


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