

Rethinking Food Policy: A Fresh Approach to Policy and Practice

Brief 6: Public sector global food governance

The governance challenge

Food governance structures, including at the global level, are no longer fit for purpose, and need to be redesigned to achieve deep systemic change in the food system.

Responsibility for decision-making about the food system is shared between many different public, private and civil society organisations globally. This creates challenges for a more integrated and coherent approach to food policy (see Brief on Integrated Food Policy).

This brief uses a case study of global-level public sector decision-makers on food to illustrate these challenges. It describes who is involved in global food governance, how they are connected and the changes those involved in global governance believe are needed to help them work more effectively across food systems issues.

The case study is based on a literature review and an informal round table discussion, held in Rome in October 2018. The round table was organised by the Centre for Food Policy to gain insights into the governance structures and processes in place at the global level and involved fourteen representatives from key United Nations (UN) agencies and other stakeholders from civil society and academia.

The current decision-making system: who does what?

Responsibility for food governance is shared between many different government agencies and other organisations. Some of them work explicitly on food, while others have a more implicit, but still significant, relevance to the food system.

In the public sector, the existing system of global institutions and agreements that concern food is dominated by UN agencies. Which of these are considered to play a role in food governance depends on what definition of the food system is being applied; if we take a narrower definition as the food chain, key organisations with food as their primary mandate include the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Applying a broader definition of the food system as “the interconnected system of everything and everybody that influences, and is influenced by, the activities involved in bringing food from farm to fork and beyond”, and including the chain’s economic, political, environmental, health and social dimensions,¹ reveals many other organisations associated with more indirect impacts and policies to be important. While they may not explicitly focus on food in their primary mandate, they nevertheless have a significant impact on policy related to the food system. Examples include the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Bank.

The key public sector organisations involved in global food policy are listed in Table 1. There are also a number of other global food organisations, spanning the private, third and financial/philanthropic sectors, which work closely, and sometimes in formal partnership, with public sector institutions such as the UN agencies, creating a “complex global web of government networks”.² With governments increasingly reliant on such partnerships to provide additional knowledge and resources, these arrangements create a blurred line between public sector and other organisations in the system, which can make it challenging to understand where public sector decision-making stops. For example, organisations such as the World Economic Forum (WEF) and EAT Foundation cooperate closely with governments through multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs). WEF is an international organisation for public–private cooperation aimed at “improving the state of the world” and runs a Shaping the Future of Global Public Goods project on food systems. EAT Foundation is a non-profit organisation founded by the Stordalen Foundation, the Stockholm Resilience Centre and the Wellcome Trust to “catalyse a food system transformation”. Its initiatives include the EAT-C40 Food Systems Network and the EAT–Lancet Commission on Food, Planet, Health. Many different MSPs working on food systems issues (though rarely tackling the entire system, but rather focusing on particular dimensions such as nutrition)

exist at the global level.³ Scaling Up Nutrition, for example, is an MSP involving the UN, donors, NGOs and businesses, working across sixty countries.⁴

In addition to these public–private partnership arrangements, various economic groupings of states have an increasingly active role in global food systems, including the G7 and G20, which have engaged in food security issues since the food price spike of 2007–8, and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which is influential in agriculture policy. Regional free trade agreements, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and South American trade bloc Mercosur, are also part of the global governance of food and can influence the capacity of national governments to intervene in their food systems.

Other non-public sector actors which are not featured Table 1, but nevertheless influence the food system at a global level, include global food companies (e.g. Unilever, PepsiCo and Cargill); philanthropic foundations which fund food-related projects and research (e.g. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; Global Alliance for the Future of Food); international NGOs working on food (e.g. La Via Campesina; WWF; Consumers International); and research organisations working in collaboration with national governments, NGOs and private business (e.g. the Consortium of International Agricultural Research Centres (CGIAR), a group of fifteen food research centres, including the International Food Policy Research Institute and International Livestock Research Institute).

Along with the public sector organisations in Table 1, there is a range of coordination mechanisms, agreements and joint programmes that connect agencies and issues (Table 2, page 5).



**Table 1: Key public sector actors in global food governance**

Organisation	Role in food governance
Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leads international efforts to fight hunger Forum for dialogue between member countries Source of technical knowledge and information to aid development
International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Works with poor rural populations in developing countries to eliminate poverty, hunger and malnutrition, and raise productivity and incomes
World Food Programme (UN/FAO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> World's largest humanitarian agency, which delivers food assistance in emergencies and works with communities to improve nutrition and build resilience
World Health Organisation (WHO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Directing and coordinating authority on international health within the UN Aims to attain the highest possible level of health for all people
UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides long-term humanitarian and development assistance to children and mothers Aims to prevent or treat all forms of malnutrition
United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Voice for the environment within the UN Food-related activities include a major study, "The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity for Agriculture and Food"; and Sustainable Food Systems Programme
UN Development Programme (UNDP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aims to eradicate poverty, reduce inequalities and build resilience so countries can sustain progress Agriculture and fisheries are key sectors
United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotes integration of developing countries into the world economy Includes programme on "trading food for sustainable development"
United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food (reporting to the Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mandated to promote the full realisation of the right to food and the adoption of measures at the national, regional and international levels
World Trade Organisation (WTO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Forum for governments to negotiate trade agreements and trade issues Agreements on Agriculture and on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures directly affect actions that governments can take in relation to food and agricultural sectors
Codex Alimentarius Commission (Codex)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responsible for the Codex Alimentarius set of international food standards, guidelines and codes of practice
World Bank	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides low-interest loans, interest-free credit and grants to developing countries Prioritises investment in agriculture and rural development to boost food production and nutrition
Global Environment Facility (GEF)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> International partnership of 183 countries, international institutions (including UN agencies), civil society organisations and the private sector that addresses global environmental issues

How connected is global food governance?

As at national and local levels of government, global food governance structures are fragmented, though some efforts are being made to connect particular issues and organisations working on food.

The decision-making framework described on pages 2–3 has evolved idiosyncratically and the organisations within it were designed independently of one another and created in response to particular challenges at the time (such as hunger). More recent challenges – notably environmental sustainability and the many forms of malnutrition – were not part of the picture when these different bodies, and the overarching governance framework they are part of, were conceived.

The result is that governance structures for food lag behind what we know about contemporary food-related challenges: that they are multiple and can impact on one another (see Brief on Food Systems). Yet the way decision-making is currently organised treats individual problems and parts of the system in isolation.⁵

The need to take a food systems approach to better connect different policy issues and sectors has recently been given fresh impetus by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their emphasis on interactions and coherence (see Brief on Coherence). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s work on delivering the SDGs strongly emphasises the role of governance structures and processes in delivering the goals coherently.⁶

A number of fragmentations in the governance structures – “governance gaps” – are undermining the ability to create policy related to food systems holistically. The two main fragmentations are between **policy areas** at the same level of governance (horizontal governance); and between **levels of governance** (vertical governance). However, efforts are being made to forge new connections.

Horizontal governance challenges

Food policy is fragmented at the global level, with responsibilities for different food-related issues such as economic and environmental sustainability, or parts of the food system such as agriculture and trade, divided across separate agencies.

A critical agency responsible for food globally is the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). The FAO itself has noted that policymaking is siloed and sector-specific,⁷ and called for integrated policy approaches which better recognise how the challenges (and opportunities) around food are interconnected and which address inconsistencies and tensions. For example, agricultural departments in

government may be isolated from trade departments, leading to incoherence between their policy approaches; trade departments may focus on the export of cash crops while agricultural policy-makers prioritise small-scale producers of traditional crops at home.⁸ Similar gaps have been documented between governance of trade and nutrition, and between agriculture and climate change policies (see Briefs on Tensions and Coherence).

The FAO has acknowledged that the 2030 Agenda requires it to evaluate its contribution to, and collaboration with, the many other actors that constitute the UN development system, in particular the Rome-based agencies, IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development) and WFP (World Food Programme).⁹ Similarly, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) has called for much closer cooperation of the governing bodies for climate (the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change), health (WHO) and land use (FAO) to address existing gaps.

A different type of fragmentation happens when a particular policy issue – such as food security – is spread across a wide range of organisations and agreements, leading to multiple mandates and actions, and potential conflicts between interests and visions.¹⁰ For example, global nutrition governance involves many nutrition commitments made in international forums and tracked through many indices.¹¹ Academics Von Braun and Birner have argued that global nutrition policy would benefit from a more distinct organisational home rather than the current split across many agencies and organisations.¹²

Vertical governance challenges

There are also tensions because food issues cross global, regional, national and local levels of policy and action, but the governance framework is not designed to support coordinated activity between these levels.¹³ This can result in a “triple disconnect” between the global, national and local scales of food policy,¹⁴ and a need for multi-level policy to help avoid conflicts, overlaps and duplications.¹⁵ Work to connect food-related policy and action is biased towards addressing one level of government at a time, though the empirical evidence of this type of vertical fragmentation is currently weaker than that on horizontal disconnects. There is a general tendency for organisations to focus on either global governance, or national or local level sector coordination, but with less action directed at making sure there is coherence between levels.

New connections

Though food governance undoubtedly suffers from fragmentation, various organisations are making links between food system challenges and policy sectors (Table 2). These can involve working jointly on research or more practical joint projects. Joint working may involve a single issue – such as food systems sustainability or nutrition – being linked across multiple organisations or linking two previously siloed policy areas or issues. An example of the latter is the project between the UN Environment Programme and the WTO to identify complementarities between trade and environmental policy goals. Along with these links across the UN system, several multi-stakeholder partnerships focus on food systems issues more broadly.¹⁶

These examples demonstrate the foundations are already in place for a more integrated approach to food at a global level across food systems issues.

Along with the examples of global food-related policies and joint programmes outlined in Table 2, there are also many agreements which are not specific to food. These may not strictly be considered food governance, though they are highly relevant to the governance of the food system in its broader sense, in light of the food system's connections to the ecological system. Examples are the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Sustainable Development Goals and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).

Table 2: Examples of cross-cutting food-related mechanisms, programmes and projects

Example of cross-agency working	Agencies	Food systems issues being connected
UN Committee on World Food Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FAO IFAD WFP 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> International and intergovernmental platform on food security and nutrition High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition provides advice and analysis
High Level Task Force on Global Food and Nutrition Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aims to promote comprehensive and unified international community response
United Nations Standing Committee on Nutrition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviews overall direction, scale, coherence and impact of UN response to nutritional problems, and harmonises policies and activities in UN system
One Planet Network/10 Year Framework of Programmes' Sustainable Food System Programme	Led by Switzerland, Costa Rica and WWF with support of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> UNEP FAO IFAD WEF 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multi-stakeholder partnership on sustainable food consumption and production Developed a Collaborative Framework for Food Systems Transformation to build capacity of governments and stakeholders to apply food systems approach
Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) work on pollinators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> UNEP UNESCO FAO UNDP 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work on pollinators and food production, which linked science and indigenous knowledge
Rural Development and the Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IFAD GEF 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnership to promote “win-win solutions to deliver both global environmental benefits as well as business-friendly gains for rural poor people”
Trade and the Environment Report: “Making trade work for the environment, prosperity and resilience” (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> WTO UNEP 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Joint project to identify how governments can ensure trade and a healthy environment are mutually reinforcing
Integrating Agriculture in National Adaptation Plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> UNDP FAO 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Project to integrate climate adaptation measures into national planning in developing country agriculture
International symposium on sustainable food systems for healthy diets and improved nutrition (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FAO WHO 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Symposium to increase awareness of food and nutrition challenges, and discuss strategies for food-system reform

What would a new approach to food governance look like? Listening to the policymakers

The existence of multiple organisations, and fragmentations between food-related issues, suggest a new approach is a priority to address the multi-dimensional challenges related to food and bridge governance gaps.

For some observers, this will require bold new global governance structures and agreements. The International Food Policy Research Institute, for example, has argued that historically “the common response to the world’s unresolved food, nutrition, and agriculture challenges has been to seek solutions in meetings at the global level, often with large-scale conference events, that leave the governance structures untouched. Consultations are overdue on what a well-functioning global institutional architecture and governance of agriculture, food, and nutrition should look like, and how it could be achieved.”¹⁷

One possibility is for a global IPCC-style international panel on food, nutrition and agriculture.¹⁸ Another is a new framework convention on food systems, based on the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.¹⁹ Much like the creation of a cross-cutting national or local food policy (see Brief on Integrated Food Policy), such an agreement could bring food-related issues and interests together in one place, and provide an opportunity to create an evidence base, a vision and a programme of activities, along with the structures to support them.

A global IPCC-style mechanism focused on food systems is an ambitious aim, which will need significant resource and political will to implement. But – as those working in the global food governance system describe below – new structures and agreements alone are unlikely to provide a strong enough bridge between issues and interests. For the round table participants working on the ground in policy bodies, a holistic approach to food also raises important questions about what additional structures, processes, accountability procedures, national level support and consensus around issues and solutions are needed. The four main questions which emerged as requiring answers were:

How can organisations be redesigned to connect policy issues?

The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) told the round table about its attempt to “break policy silos” with a division (ECG) which encompasses issues of environment and climate change, gender, nutrition and youth, and indigenous peoples.²⁰ Multiple disciplines, including climate change specialists, are part of the division. More work is now needed to explore the potential for similar integrated structures at a department or division level. Other possibilities to explore are integrating governance through bilateral arrangements and creating space for policy issues within other policy forums. For example, the International Panel of Experts on Food Systems has recommended building capacity within the WTO’s Trade and Environment Committee and other research has recommended creating space for nutrition specialists in trade policy forums.²¹

“There are actors that have direct and indirect impact on nutrition. There are many actors that have an impact on nutrition but without mentioning it in their mandate. And that complicates matters. Coherence is going to be an issue”

“The governance system for food seems to have been designed with a certain objective, and that objective has not been environmental sustainability ... or nutrition”

“Everybody is talking about silos, but they’ve been talking about silos for more than twenty years, and they still do it”

“There is a whole world of development that doesn’t believe in systems thinking and coordinating”

“There are some good reasons we are working in silos, one is definitely we are competing for budget”

How can policy processes support more integrated working?

Redesigning structures can ensure the right people are around the table, but equally important is how they work together, according to one round table participant, who said a priority should be “building process models that would allow government and nations to deliver in an integrated way”. This is because, even if they are convinced of the advantages of taking an agenda forward together, most people don’t know how to do that, “so we all continue with our traditional way of working”. Indicators and budgets were two key aspects pinpointed as problematic, and in need of further investigation, because “falling back to your own indicators from your own subject” is not conducive to cross-cutting projects. Could indicators be developed “which don’t just show nutrition outcomes or environment outcomes, but show outcomes of integration”? And could shared responsibilities and connected food systems outcomes be better mirrored in a more flexible approach to donor funding?

How can a common language on food systems be created?

Different definitions are a barrier to integrated governance, said a participant; different “narratives block our understanding of reality”. There are multiple definitions of the food system in use, with some organisations defining their work on “food systems” in relation to food security, while others focus also on ecosystems. Thus another question is how the different visions and perspectives on food systems can be brought into alignment. A related challenge is that people “don’t really see how we can support each other, complement each other.” It is problematic that those working in nutrition and those working on food security “don’t seem to have the same language and there are misunderstandings”; for example, the idea that higher income and higher productivity automatically lead to better

nutrition. Addressing this will involve finding new ways – for instance workshops on particular policy issues, systems mapping, increased cross-sector fertilisation – of increasing understanding of how food systems issues are interconnected and explaining to the different actors “how they can have a positive impact” beyond their own policy areas.

What are the implications of a new approach for national food systems governance?

Better connections at the global governance level can only do so much; countries also need to clarify and coordinate their work on food. One participant argued “there is no food system governance” at a national level, because it is so rare to see “a food system policy, a national policy, that brings together all the sectors and connects all the dots. It does not count as a policy in most countries”. The question for global organisations is how they can help support more integrated national level governance by highlighting the connections, given that often UN agencies “are the ones talking nutrition in the ministry of agriculture, knowing that the ministry of agriculture and nutrition are not talking to each other”. Along with opportunities to support nations to build their understanding of the connections, global level bodies could also provide guidance to countries on mapping the diffuse range of policies which impact food systems, and on examining how coherent they are with one another. The research community also has an important role in providing the evidence of “what will work, what has been tried, what the trade-offs are” (see Brief on Tensions).

“Everyone has a different definition of what a food system is”

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Notes

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