

# TALKING ABOUT FOOD SYSTEMS

## A paradigm shift?

Food systems rely on intact ecosystems, clear regulations and legal frameworks from farm to fork.

Linking producers with consumers for healthy diets is the backbone of a sustainable and viable market system from local to global level. But what kinds of actors are involved and in what way? Our author depicts the challenges and requirements of their interaction in this context.

By Joachim von Braun

Reaching the target of zero hunger by 2030 seems to be more challenging today than it was in 2015, when the Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted. In fact, the number of people suffering from hunger has not declined but increased over the last four years. Whereas hunger is highly correlated with poverty, the problem is not limited to low-income countries; a significant proportion of households in middle- and high-income economies lack access to sufficient or healthy food. Poor diets are an increasing concern, too. They are responsible for one in five deaths among adults, more than any other risk factor, and they put a critical social and economic burden especially on vulnerable populations.

### Food systems need to be clearly conceptualised

Food systems currently fail many people and ecologies. It is often neglected that a (food) “system” defined without its boundaries is just a fuzzy term without any conceptual meaning. To understand food systems and their failures, we first need to be clear about system boundaries and spatial dimensions – i.e. global, regional, national and local. A global perspective is useful, one example being that taken by the “Planetary Boundaries” approach, which tries to define a safe operating space for humanity within environmental boundaries in the context of Earth system processes. But this approach does not guarantee sustainable food systems, because whereas planetary boundaries may not be violated, major regional and local





Photo: Jörg Böhling

ecologies are being destroyed and nutrition for large parts of the world population remains insufficient. Rather, a disaggregated approach to social and environmental impact assessments is needed. Moreover, within the food system, we need to look into the entire range of actions and actors involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal of food products, their interconnected activities and their linkages with economic, social and natural environments. Food systems approaches consider issues pertaining both to sustainable production and sustainable consumption, to delivering healthy and nutritious diets with minimal environmental impact. The food systems approach is different from traditional food and agriculture sector analyses or value chain concepts. It is a paradigm shift.

### **Challenges and opportunities in modern food systems**

Food systems are exposed to multiple challenges, including demographic pressure, shifting consumption patterns, climate change, environmental degradation and agricultural policies that distort international trade in food products. At the same time, well-designed food systems present many opportunities for their actors, for instance expanding markets, a widening of food choices, increasing the importance of food quality and food safety in the production process and the expansion of off-farm employment for local populations. However, in order to both deal with existing challenges and take advantage of new opportunities, food systems require a fundamental change, especially in terms of investment, research and innovation, standard setting and preservation of natural resources. The global scale of these issues, particularly in terms of climate impacts and food safety, does not permit fragmented initiatives of various actors to come up with sustainable solutions. Stakeholder cooperation is necessary; this cannot just be based on good will, but requires governance of incentives and regulations.

### **Towards multi-stakeholder action for sustainable food systems**

A concerted action of relevant stakeholders is required to reach the scale and momentum necessary for inducing large-scale change and impact. Multi-stakeholder platforms (MSPs) are a means of implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), as emphasised in SDG17 – partnerships for the goals. Indeed, by bringing together various stakeholders with

even conflicting interests, MSPs can be a forum for consultations and, as such, they have the potential to overcome conflict and create synergies. The economic rationale for MSPs is also to correct for market failures in food systems, including power and information asymmetries, environmental and health externalities and suboptimal allocation of resources leading to inequalities in food and nutrition security.

MSPs may enhance the delivery of public goods – and certainly, since many of the challenges and factors related to food systems, including food security itself, present public goods aspects, they require collective action and coordination. In this regard, MSPs have various functions, ranging from resource mobilisation, knowledge generation and sharing, capacity building and standard setting to the actual implementation of policies. Broadly speaking, MSPs play an important role in pooling any types of resources that are either necessary or helpful in solving global, regional or local food system problems.

### **Financing food systems**

Mobilising financial resources and enhancing investment is a particularly important case for MSPs in food systems across the world, but particularly so in low-income countries, especially in Africa, where the financing gap is still staggering. Research by the Center for Development Research (ZEF) in Bonn, Germany, has demonstrated that foreign direct investments in the African food and agriculture sector amounted to about USD 48 billion between 2003 and 2017. The analysis also shows increased dynamism in investments for food and agriculture in Africa. MSPs can help not only to mobilise new resources, especially from the private sector, but also to reallocate existing resources more appropriately and target them towards food and nutrition security.

Multi-stakeholder platform effectiveness depends on design and context. MSPs can be a potentially powerful tool in addressing food system functioning.

The diversity of actors in the food systems and the complex interactions between them call for a high level of inclusiveness if the interests of all relevant groups are to be covered. At least three clusters of groups of actors are to be considered: the public sector (government), the private sector (small and large scale enterprises) and civil society representing consumers and their interests such as initiatives to improve nutrition as well as the environment.

### **Engaging governments, private sector and civil society**

Governments should adopt a four-part approach: treatment, prevention, promotion and regulation. It is important for governments to engage in basic responsibilities and public goods related to the functioning of food systems. These include information and monitoring, regulating business activities, trade policy, food safety and investments in research and development in the food and agriculture sector. Governments need to consider accountability and transparency within each multi-stakeholder initiative. Affordable and sustainable food safety systems need to place great emphasis on incentivising and facilitating farm and food business compliance via regulations and safe operating practices as well as greater public accountability mechanisms. These functions are highlighted in recommendations based on a recent international conference on food safety and healthy diets by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) in the Vatican in 2018.

MSPs should mainly be a matter of private sector actors, not of government. The private sector actors include the food outlets, retail industry, food processing and increasingly also the related logistics and information service industries.

Being part of the private sector, farmers, through their organisations, need to be directly involved in MSP processes, as their role in the proper functioning of food systems is fundamental. Often, farmer organisations are not considered a partner, because in emerging economies, farmer organisations are frequently not strong or partly depend on the government. The discourse on farmers needs to change in such a way that they are considered as entrepreneurs rather than as subsistence producers who are unable to influence the food system processes.

Civil society groups – locally and internationally – can play an essential role in empowering and representing the interests of marginalised or vulnerable communities by monitoring market actors and mitigating detrimental impacts. To increase their negotiating power, civil society groups need to boost cooperation and coordination amongst their own actors who, on their own, are not able to attain scale and impact of their actions. This will also prevent a patchwork of isolated, small-scale initiatives. Instead, it ensures comprehensive change, especially if collaboration with governments and other partners is enhanced in



Soil erosion in Burkina Faso caused by climate change and inappropriate agricultural practices results in less arable land for food production.

Photo: Bettina Flitner/laif

parallel. The inclusion of marginalised groups is crucial to achieving equity and justice in providing results and to avoiding potential negative distributional consequences of actions undertaken within MSPs. Otherwise, there is a risk that MSPs might reinforce existing power asymmetries between various stakeholders, in particular between the private sector and local communities and populations, but also within the different actors of the private sector itself, especially in places where micro and small businesses are under-represented – in favour of multinational companies.

In addition to that, the contribution of the research community should not be undervalued. Research can play an important role in generating knowledge, providing evidence and monitoring, and advising all stakeholders on how to achieve the desired objectives within MSPs. The InterAcademy Partnership (IAP), which brings together 140 national and regional academies from around the world, recently offered an interesting model to facilitate research and evidence-based policy engagement across borders and disciplines. The IAP has developed a common food systems approach to assess the situation with respect to food and nutrition security and sustainable agriculture, as well as linkages to health and environmental issues, thus identifying knowledge and regulatory gaps, and prioritising the policy actions needed through multi-stakeholder

consultation in the different hemispheres and at global level.

Efficient platforms are the ones that have inclusive bottom-up processes, but where governments facilitate actions by creating sound frameworks and providing related public goods, such as information, food safety, or environmental and social standards. Such a combined bottom-up/top-down approach seems to be the most promising one, since besides aiming at a common overarching objective, all groups of stakeholders are motivated by their own specific goals and interests.

#### **Multi-stakeholder cooperation by combined public and collective action**

MSPs need leadership as well as participation. These can be conflicting features and root causes of failure. Moreover, MSPs with accountability, transparency and inclusiveness as discussed above are not free of charge, yet their costs should be regarded as an investment in sustainable food systems. Thus, cost/benefit considerations make more sense than just stressing simplistic concerns about expensive MSPs. It would be wishful thinking to assume that all the stakeholders that should participate can be easily convinced to appropriately share in the costs of MSP. Free riding on the expected benefits of MSP is a problem. To overcome

that constraint, public action by governments is required, as well as collective action by sub-groups of partners. Research for instance by Ostrom has identified the tremendous opportunities of collective action to deal with complex economic systems. As food systems are such complex systems, this crucial role of collective action applies to them as well. Multi-stakeholder initiatives are inherently transaction cost-intensive since decision-making at multiple levels can be very demanding in terms of effort, time and financial means. Therefore, it is crucial for all stakeholders in MSPs, but in particular for governments that coordinate such processes, to design frameworks and conditions that will combine public policy actions with collective actions, in order to reach high benefits with minimum costs through optimal institutional designs and functioning. This volume of Rural 21 provides new insights on the related “how to”.

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