Policy coherence and food systems transformation

Whenever the implementation of (international) development agendas is at issue, the need to improve the coherence of policy interventions is stressed. But what exactly does this refer to? And what are the challenges countries face in this regard? Comparing the examples of Malawi, Nigeria and Ethiopia, our author discusses these questions, also with view to national pathways to transform food systems.

By Livia Bizikova

In 2021, the United Nations Secretary-General convened the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) to advance progress on food systems transformation and towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As part of this process, over 100 countries submitted their collaboratively-developed national pathways for food systems transformation. A review of these national pathways showed that they tend to focus on high-level priorities, and that they lack specificity with regard to the policies and actions needed to transform the food systems of individual countries. Coming up with these is difficult because doing so requires addressing economic constraints, policy contradictions, inconsistencies and trade-offs across the diverse policy areas relevant to food systems transformation. Guidance documents intended to assist countries in developing their national pathways stress the importance of improving the coherence of policy interventions, but provide limited direction about specific policy coherence issues countries typically face and the challenges in addressing them.

What is policy coherence?

There are several definitions used to describe policy coherence. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2019) guidance on integrating SDGs into national policy-making stresses the importance of policy coherence across sectors and institutions, while the United Nations framework for food system transformation to accelerate the transition to sustainable food systems (UNEP, 2019) refers to policy coherence as ensuring "… consistency, comprehensiveness, and harmonious-compatible outcomes across policy areas and sectors without compromising the integrity of policymakers' goals". Based on this high-level guidance, we consider the following three dimensions of policy coherence:

■ horizontal coherence addressing inconsistencies, trade-offs and gaps in related policies across different sectors such as agriculture, education, environment and others,
■ vertical coordination and coherence addressing efforts to harmonise policies and actions from the national down to local levels and thus across spatial and administrative boundaries, and
■ temporal coherence addressing the allocation of resources over time and sequencing implementation in the short, medium and longer terms.

There are a range of methodological approaches to assess policy coherence, such as scoring and ranking, trade-off assessment as well as quantitative modelling across policy priorities and planned actions. However, this is an emerging field, so methodologies are still evolving and approaches are often chosen on a case-by-case basis, and in relation to the quality of available documentation.

Horizontal and vertical coherence

Ideally, all national and sub-national policies should be aligned and consistent with the policy objectives identified in national food systems transformation pathways. This would ensure horizontal coherence between national pathways and all related strategies and policies, for example in sectors such as agriculture, environment, health, business development, education and employment. However, ensuring coherence across different sectoral policies and strategies can become an enormous exercise requiring significant analytical, negotiation and resource capacities (time, effort and expense) for policy-makers. Therefore, we suggest focusing on policies and strategies in a narrow subset of directly-linked policy areas covering (see upper Table):

■ agriculture and rural development, agricultural modernisation and promotion strategies including both crops and livestock,
■ nutrition and food security strategies including social protection policies, national dietary guidelines, nutritional improvement and food security programmes,
■ climate change, climate resilience and disaster management strategies such as National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), Nationally Determined Contributions under the Paris Agreement (NDCs) and green economy strategies.

Moving beyond these policy areas of critical importance, additional elements could include overall SDG strategies (if available), those focused on educational development, public health policies linked to nutrition and labour market policies affecting employment and compensation.

Coherence challenges can also arise from poor coordination between national, sub-national and local policies and priorities, which leads to inefficiencies and misdirected resources. However, such vertical coherence has proven to be very difficult to achieve in the case of the SDGs, where linkages to the sub-national level are limited (current SDG localisation efforts mostly focus on cities instead of rural areas). Improving capacities of agencies at both the national level (for horizontal coherence) and sub-national levels (for vertical coherence) could help improve policy consistency, harmonise priorities and align actions to better support implementation, with benefits across sectors.

National pathways – consistent with country policies?

National food systems transformation pathways were developed in a consultative manner and reflect the priorities of governments and non-governmental stakeholders. To transform food systems, priorities identified in national pathways should become integral elements of national policy and strategy design. The national pathways that were submitted typically reflect existing national policy priorities such as supporting climate-smart agriculture, improving food security, improving nutrition and building farmer capacities. But some relevant existing national policies were not reflected in them (see examples in lower Table).

In Malawi, Ethiopia and Niger, for instance, increasing the size of livestock herds is rec-

Examples of strategies and policies with critical relevance to ensure coherence in three selected countries			
	Malawi	**Ethiopia**	**Nigeria**
Agriculture and rural development	Agricultural Investment Strategy (2018) National Agricultural Policy (2021)	Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP II – 2015-2020)	Agricultural Transformation Agenda (ATA) (2013) Agricultural Promotion Policy (2016)
Food security, nutrition and healthy diets	The Social Protection Programme (SPP) (2021)	National Nutrition Program (2013) Seqota Declaration (2018) Nutrition Sensitive Agriculture Strategic Plan (2016) National dietary guidelines (2022)	Social protection policy (2022) National dietary guidelines (2006, 2013)
Climate change, resilience and disaster management	National Resilience Strategy (2018) Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) (2021)	Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) (2021) National Adaptation Plan (2019)	Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) (2021) National Agricultural Resilience Framework (2015) National Adaptation Plan Framework (2021)

ognised as a priority policy objective. Here, livestock development is seen as important to address nutritional challenges, strengthen livelihoods and diversify agricultural development. Supporting livestock development while also meeting greenhouse gas emissions reductions targets requires improvements in animal health services and feed quality. In this regard, these countries recently introduced policies to address climate change adaptation and resilience by, for example, supporting farmers' adaptive capacities, nature-based solutions, infrastructure, access to financial services and markets, and emergency preparedness. Very few aspects of these recent climate change adaptation priorities, especially those focused on supporting farmers' skills and practices and access to inputs, are included in the national pathways.

Policy coherence also means that existing policies supportive of food systems transformation and sustainability should be prominently featured in the national pathways. In the context of these three countries, we can mention efforts to reduce food waste and loss as well as food safety and standards. These policy initiatives, which are already underway in some countries, have a low profile, limited political support and few resources. In some cases, they are not emphasised in the national pathways, while in others, they appear in national pathway documents but not in national policies. Explicit integration in national pathways would provide additional impetus to move existing policies forward and highlight gaps where policy frameworks are missing (see lower Table).

Temporal coherence

Achieving temporal coherence requires balancing considerations of urgency, synergy and appropriate sequencing of interventions that build on each other, all while considering available resources. For example, national pathways identify measures related to food security, nutrition and land restoration as well as weather forecasting and surveillance to better anticipate climate disasters. Depending on the local context, investments in forecasting and surveillance may be a higher priority from an urgency and synergy perspective to enable farmers to make long-term investments in cultivation practices or restoration with greater security. These priorities would need to be reconciled with policy implementation and capacities at national and sub-national scales, as part of the efforts towards horizontal and vertical coherence.

Regarding sequencing, there is often need to strengthen key institutions as a foundation for better stakeholder decision-making throughout the agricultural sector. One common recommendation in national pathways including those of the three countries considered here is to set up or significantly improve institutions such as a land registry, agricultural finance and trade services, as well as environmental and disaster monitoring and management. These actions might require considerable efforts and resources but are intended to enable other stakeholders to operate more effectively and efficiently so that they can better drive and respond to other policy initiatives.

Shared priorities across countries and opportunities for support

Finally, we observe that there are similarities between priorities outlined in the three countries, and it should be possible to develop common programmes for donor support, regional initiatives and related capacity-building on issues such as food safety and standards, food loss and waste, options to reduce GHGs from agriculture and institutional development. Similar programming, or regional collaboration in these areas, would also allow learning across countries that aim to address similar priorities.

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Examples of gaps in policy coherence (in red) between the national pathways and existing national policies and strategies in the three countries							
Country and documents	**Crops**	**Livestock**	**Food safety, standards**	**Value chains**	**Water availability**	**Food waste and loss**	**GHG reduction**
Malawi							
National pathway	Included	Limited	Included	Included	Included	Included	Limited
National policy	Included	Included	Limited	Included	Included	Limited	Included
Ethiopia							
National pathway	Included	Limited	Included	Included	Limited	Limited	Included
National policy	Included	Included	Included	Included	Included	Included	Included
Niger							
National pathway	Included	Limited	Included	Included	Limited	Limited	Limited
National policy	Included	Included	Limited	Included	Included	Included	Included
Source: based on the submitted national pathways to food system transformation for the three countries							

References: **www.rural21.com**