

## POLICY NOTE

# Tackling environmental challenges through food systems governance

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Food systems are a major driver of the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution – and are also part of the solution. Food systems governance requires new approaches to drive the transformation of food systems towards greater environmental sustainability, equity and food security. This policy note presents the findings of a study on the links between transformative food systems governance – that is, governance arrangements that are inclusive, innovative and integrated – and environmental agendas (IIED & UNEP, 2023). Drawing on seven case studies of multi-stakeholder mechanisms (MSMs), the study found that these initiatives are advancing environmental agendas through integrated policymaking on sustainable food systems. They are also contributing to the development of environmental policies, including on climate change, through inclusive cross-sectoral dialogue and awareness raising. This note presents insights from the study into how food systems can help advance environmental agendas.

According to the latest scientific reports, the world is facing a triple planetary crisis of climate, nature and pollution (Willett et al., 2019; UNFCCC, 2022). These environmental challenges cannot be addressed without attention to food systems, which contribute to 21–37% of anthropogenic global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (IPCC, 2019). Food systems are responsible for 60% of biodiversity loss across terrestrial, freshwater and marine ecosystems (IPBES, 2019). They are also a major contributor to water and soil pollution, often relying heavily on agrochemicals, antibiotics and plastics; they generate around a third of terrestrial acidification and over three quarters of eutrophication in aquatic ecosystems. These environmental impacts are undermining the capacity of ecosystems to produce food (Benton et al., 2021). Food systems are also failing to provide affordable, safe and nutritious food for all. In 2021, 828 million people were undernourished (FAO et al., 2022). It is estimated that 11 million lives are lost annually due to risks associated with suboptimal diets, such as those high in sodium and low in whole grains and fruit, while a third of all food produced is lost or wasted – representing 8–10% of global GHG emissions (GBD 2017 Diet Collaborators, 2019; FAO, 2013).

### Key points

**National and sub-national governments (for example, city councils) should support transformative governance arrangements**, such as multi-stakeholder mechanisms, alternative food networks, and co-management of natural resources, to catalyse transformations towards sustainable food systems.

**Sustainable food systems multi-stakeholder mechanisms (SFS MSMs) can help countries tackle the triple planetary crisis** of biodiversity loss, climate change and pollution by integrating environmental issues into food systems policymaking and integrating food systems issues into environmental policies.

**SFS MSMs should bring together different sectors and actors**, including environmental NGOs, the private sector and civil society associations to influence the uptake of environmental agendas.

**SFS MSMs can help connect policy** at national and sub-national levels, and mainstream environmental agendas in national strategies, for example, the national pathways to sustainable food systems emerging from the UN Food Systems Summit.

**Food systems issues should be integrated into Nationally Determined Contributions and National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans** in order to address environmental challenges using food systems as an entry point.

Food systems are thus one of the key levers for addressing the triple planetary crisis, achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and maintaining temperature rise below 1.5°C in line with the Paris Agreement. SDG2 on 'Zero Hunger' includes targets on ensuring environmental sustainability and resilience to climate change. The UN Food Systems Summit in 2021 recognised the importance of agroecology, and some countries like Switzerland and Indonesia have integrated environmental issues into their national strategies for sustainable food systems. At the same time, the 2022 Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework requires countries to "ensure that areas under agriculture, aquaculture, fisheries and forestry are managed sustainably, in particular through the sustainable use of biodiversity" by 2030, and to "eliminate, phase out or reform incentives, including subsidies, harmful for biodiversity" by 2025 (Convention on Biological Diversity, 2022).

## Poor governance has resulted in unsustainable and inequitable food systems

In the past, food issues have been addressed through a siloed approach to policymaking that failed to address the complexity of interrelated challenges, resulting in unprecedented pressure on natural resources and a failure to provide everyone with healthy and nutritious diets from sustainable food systems. Another weakness of current food governance is the imbalance of power in favour of large corporations and the limited participation of civil society (Hospes and Brons, 2016). There is broad international consensus that countries need to adopt a systems approach to food if they are to successfully tackle intertwined, persistent and worsening problems of food insecurity, climate change, resource degradation, poverty and health (see the box below on the food systems approach). Food systems governance needs to ensure an inclusive, joined-up approach that brings together different sectors, actors and voices in society, as well as different levels of government, and takes into account key drivers, such as changing food consumption patterns and urbanisation (up to 70% of food is consumed in cities (FAO, 2017)).

MSMs can provide a space to deliberate, co-create and implement collaborative and coordinated food systems policies and help countries tackle the triple planetary crisis by integrating environmental issues into food system agendas. In 2021, the One Planet Network Sustainable Food Systems Programme (OPN SFSP) commissioned ten case studies of outstanding MSMs working on sustainable food systems at national and sub-national level (Alliance of Bioversity & CIAT, UNEP and WWF, 2021). The research revealed that these governance mechanisms have led to the inclusion of environmental sustainability in the key topics addressed and in the majority of food policies developed with their participation. The MSMs also contributed to the inclusion of food topics in other agendas and policy processes, in particular on climate change and territorial and urban development.

This policy note aims to support national and sub-national policymakers, as well as international governance actors, to advance environmental agendas through innovative food systems governance arrangements, and develop integrated and inclusive policies aimed at transforming food systems towards increased sustainability. It examines lessons from the OPN SFSP case studies of MSMs and how they contributed to the environmental agenda. The study entailed a survey and interviews with focal points and stakeholders of the MSMs, and a targeted literature review to explore other examples of transformative food systems governance at different levels (Nicolini et al., 2023).

### The food systems approach

Food systems are a set of activities linking production, processing, distribution and consumption. A food systems approach can enhance synergies and manage trade-offs between different objectives, to improve human health, planetary health and economic prosperity (UNEP, 2016).

## Transformative food systems governance is key to addressing environmental challenges

Analysis of the academic literature highlighted the need to transform the way food systems are governed to address environmental, as well as social and public health, challenges. Below we highlight four key messages from the literature:

- 1. In order to transform food systems to benefit the environment, governance needs to change.** The transformation of social-ecological systems, such as food systems, towards increased sustainability – as well as other outcomes including food and nutrition security and the elimination of poverty – requires **transformative** governance. This is typically understood to combine four features or approaches:
  - **Integrative governance:** collaborating across different places, sectors and levels of governance, combining governance instruments, and integrating key issues (for example sustainability) across different governance areas
  - **Inclusive governance:** increasing participation of citizens, stakeholders and those most affected in decision making, as well as groups who are often excluded, such as women and young people, as well as Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs)
  - **Adaptive governance:** the capacity of governance to successfully adapt to change, which is relevant in the context of climate change and environmental change
  - **Pluralist governance:** recognising diverse knowledge and value systems, including Indigenous and local knowledge.
- 2. The shift to a systems approach to food governance has been important for integrating environmental dimensions** with other food system outcomes related to food security, health and livelihoods. Food systems are increasingly defined in a holistic way, rather than just being thought about in terms of food security. Environmental sustainability and the sustainable use of natural resources have therefore also become a central aim of food systems governance. Systems approaches to governing food are thought to be more effective for tackling environmental challenges such as climate change.
- 3. More evidence is needed on the link between food systems governance and environmental outcomes on the ground.** Gathering more data and agreeing on how to measure and evaluate the impacts of governance could help make the case for food systems governance in other arenas – for example, within international environmental fora such as the UN climate change conferences and the Convention on Biodiversity.
- 4. Working with and learning from IPLCs is essential.** Integrating diverse communities, groups, perspectives, value systems and knowledge can support the transformation of food systems towards sustainability. The participation of IPLCs in particular, and of stakeholders and citizens more broadly, can increase the effectiveness of natural resource management and the long-term resilience of food systems.

## How multi-stakeholder mechanisms are advancing environmental agendas and policymaking

Multi-stakeholder initiatives have ‘transformative’ potential – with many exhibiting inclusiveness and integration across different places, sectors and levels of governance. They are incorporating environmental issues into their work, helping to develop environment-related policies and promoting environmental agendas. The study analysed seven of the MSMs case studies compiled by the OPN SFSP: Antananarivo Food Policy Council; Eat Right India; Gent en Garde Food Policy Council; the French National Food Council (CNA); La Paz Municipal Food Security Committee; Los Angeles Food Policy Council; and Quito Agri-Food Pact. Five of these are sub-national and focus on urban centres.

The composition of these MSMs varies considerably, including representation of civil society and marginalised groups, but most include different sectors (for example, agriculture, urban planning, health,

education, environment) and different kinds of actors (for example, public sector, academic institutions, NGOs, private sector, civil society). This is important because studies of food system multi-stakeholder platforms have found citizen, consumer and private sector actor inclusion to be limited in many cases (Herens, Pittore and Oosterveer, 2022). All of the MSMs studied have mechanisms in place to ensure principles of 'good governance' – such as transparency, trust and accountability – are adhered to, but a smaller number have conflict resolution mechanisms, and even fewer have a means of dealing with power imbalances (Alliance of Bioversity & CIAT, UNEP and WWF, 2021).

The study found that different kinds of stakeholders are influencing the uptake of environmental agendas within food system MSMs. In the case of France and Quito, producer associations pushing for action on agroecology and sustainable agriculture influenced the agenda. In Quito, representatives of the agroecology movement (for example, rural farmers' associations) managed to get food sovereignty and agroecology included in the MSM's plan, despite opposition from industry. Government actors, mostly at sub-national level, have ensured inclusion of environmental topics in the work of several MSMs, as convenors (Gent en Garde) or participants (Antananarivo Food Policy Council, Quito Agri-Food Pact and the French National Food Council).

The study revealed **six key insights** into how MSMs for sustainable food systems are advancing environmental agendas:

- 1. The MSMs studied are advancing policymaking on environmental issues, including on climate change, sustainability and recycling.** Many of them are addressing environmental challenges through the creation of policies on sustainable food systems; some of them are also contributing to the development of environmental policies, for example on climate change and recycling.
- 2. The environmental agenda is being advanced by facilitating cross-sector dialogue on environmental issues.** By definition, these governance mechanisms bring together actors from within and across different sectors to collaborate on complex issues. As a result, they are helping to tackle environmental problems by facilitating connections between people working on food and environment.
- 3. These governance arrangements are having direct and indirect impacts on the triple planetary crisis,** through their convening power, policy influence and engagement with local action on food systems and the environment. However, the impact pathways are not always easy to demonstrate. Environmental co-benefits are sometimes implicit in the work of MSMs through their work on sustainable food issues, rather than being the primary objective of a policy or intervention.
- 4. Food loss and waste, urban agriculture and sustainable diets are popular entry points for tackling environmental problems among the case studies.** Although there are many food systems challenges with environmental dimensions, the multi-stakeholder initiatives studied appear to be tackling some more than others. However, it is important to note that there was a bias in the study towards MSMs working in cities (which likely explains the popularity of working on urban agriculture, for example).
- 5. The motivation to address environmental issues is embedded in the mission of the MSMs and bolstered by citizen, media and political agendas.** Most of the initiatives studied have adopted a systems framing in which environmental sustainability is a key pillar and part of their vision. Public opinion on environmental issues, amplified by the media, is also influential in creating an enabling environment for MSMs to campaign around issues such as climate change.
- 6. MSMs are raising awareness of the connections between food systems and the environment, and the environmental dimensions of food systems.** Through their interactions with the public, governments and the media, they are showing how food systems and environmental issues are connected. Individual members also spread messages about food and the environment from MSMs to their organisations, networks and sectors.

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This policy note contributes to the goals and efforts of the One Planet network's Sustainable Food Systems Programme (OPN SFSP) to support countries to achieve food systems transformation and the Sustainable Development Goals by creating and disseminating knowledge in the area of multistakeholder governance mechanisms for sustainable food systems. The note and related report were developed under the aegis of the Sustainable Healthy, Inclusive, Food System Transformation (SHIFT) initiative, implemented by UNEP with financial support from the Government of Norway, which aims to enhance the adoption of a food systems approach by decision makers in countries and institutions through integrated governance, policies and actions in sustainable food systems, with a global advocacy and outreach component.