

Game Changing Solutions for Food System Transformation

A transformation of food systems, and the policies governing them, is urgently needed to deliver healthy diets for everyone across the world, and to do so sustainably. This paper identifies some game-changing and systemic solutions drawn from the Global Panel’s recent report ‘*Future Food Systems: For people, our planet and prosperity*’¹

The transition from a food system that harms people and the planet, to one that is resilient and nourishes everyone will require myriad coordinated actions, operating at multiple scales, and tailored to local conditions. [The Global Panel’s recent Foresight report](#) lays out some priorities for action. A number of cross-cutting game changers stand out because of their importance and far-reaching implications. These need to be priorities for governments and all other stakeholders from the start.

1. A fundamental shift in how policy decisions are made

Decision-making needs to be informed by the latest science and technical evidence to be cost-effective. This is required to resolve difficult trade-offs, prioritise transition steps, and to nuance individual actions in the light of individual circumstances. Three game changers are:

- A. **A step change in science and evidence to better support sustainable food systems transformation.**
This is needed to: address major gaps in the evidence base, particularly relating to LMIC contexts where evidence of ‘what works’ is often limited; establish a common science base that is recognised as independent, is widely trusted, and freely available to all countries; and to develop consensus around contentious areas of policy. The idea for a creation of *an IPCC-like organisation or platform* for sustainable food systems has been discussed in recent years, offering a way to promote consensus around the science, highlight priority information gaps, stimulate new research and modelling, and promote evidence-based best practice focused on achieving effective food system transformation. This idea is gaining wide support.
- B. **Food-based dietary guidelines (FBDGs) are enhanced and repurposed so that they are actively used to inform all-of-government policy decisions.** FBDGs, when they exist, are typically used to inform consumer choices. However, they also need to inform policy decisions in all relevant areas of government – from trade to infrastructure development, to health and the environment. Without this, different parts of government risk pulling in different directions, rather than working together.

¹ Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition. 2020. *Future Food Systems: For people, our planet, and prosperity*. London, UK.

FBDGs also need to be reassessed and updated in the light of the latest science, to embody issues of sustainability as well as dietary health.

- C. **New measures of ‘success’ in food system reform are used to frame policy decisions.** The failure to properly account for true worth of human health and the natural environment in policy decisions relating to food systems, is both a market failure and a widespread institutional failure. Unless addressed at the outset, this will continue to distort or impede progress in food system reform.

2. Key challenges are addressed head-on

The Global Panel’s recent Foresight report identified major challenges where progress is happening far too slowly, or even going in the wrong direction. Healthy diets remain unaffordable to nearly three billion people, locking them into lifetimes of disadvantage and inequality. There is a massive shortfall in the production of nutrient-rich foods that would be needed for everyone to access healthy diets – less than a third of the fruit and vegetables required are grown, for example. Food systems are locked in a spiral of decline with the environment. Worryingly, many populations are shifting their food choices in favour of less healthy options, as incomes rise and lifestyles evolve. And the COVID pandemic has exposed the considerable fragility of food systems to shocks. All of these constitute systemic failures in food-system policy. Three game changers are:

- D. **Food prices are rebalanced through careful application of incentives and disincentives.** This has the potential to simultaneously address challenges of affordability, availability, consumer demand, and sustainability. Current price subsidy regimes, for example, act to discourage the production and affordability of nutrient-rich foods relative to staples. Modelling conducted for the Global Panel’s Foresight report has shown how relatively modest shifts in subsidies could have substantial benefits in terms of affordability, as well as health and environmental outcomes. Carefully targeted taxes on certain products that do not support healthy sustainable diets can also serve to realign (reduce) costs of nutrient-rich foods for the poorest consumers.
- E. **Consumption of sustainable, healthy foods is promoted in public facilities.** Public settings, such as schools, childcare centres, nursing homes, hospitals and correctional facilities and all other canteens of public institutions, have the potential to play a major role in ensuring that people can make healthy food choices. This would contribute to the prevention of the 8 million annual deaths currently caused by unhealthy diets.²
- F. **International trade policies are reformed.** A new focus is needed on promoting resilience of food systems, and accessibility and affordability of foods essential for healthy diets. While not usually designed to achieve health, nutrition, or environmental goals, trade mechanisms present a substantial opportunity. Many instruments relating to trade can help shift the menu of food available domestically as well as their relative prices – including formal trade agreements, appropriate tariffs, and food safety regulations. Also, the COVID pandemic illustrates the vital importance of policies that keep trade flowing during times of stress.

3. The transition is adequately resourced

² <https://www.who.int/news/item/12-01-2021-who-urges-governments-to-promote-healthy-food-in-public-facilities?s=09>

The transition of food systems will inevitably incur costs before the benefits can be realised. These costs will likely manifest in all domains of the system, from production, through to trade, food processing, retail, and consumption. It is therefore necessary that the distribution and impacts of these costs are identified, understood and managed effectively. Put simply, it is essential to have clarity from the outset on how the transition steps will be resourced. Funding the transition is likely to be a particular challenge for LMICs, many of which were severely financially constrained even before the COVID pandemic. Clarity about resourcing will be doubly important - not just to ensure that reform can move beyond political aspiration, but also so that the transition does not further widen the gap between LMICs and HICs. Fortunately, much can be achieved by refocussing existing resources – for example, via D, E and F above. However, this will not be sufficient. The following additional game changers are therefore proposed:

- G. **Incentivise the private sector to realign its resources to deliver healthier diets and to do so sustainably.** The public sector cannot reform food systems alone. It needs to work in partnership with businesses which operate within the food system. However, while already contributing much, the many diverse commercial actors too often pull in directions that are not conducive to health or to the sustainability of food systems. This is incompatible with the necessary reform agenda and must change. It is important for governments to incentivise businesses to make a much wider range of nutrient-rich foods universally affordable to the considerable number of families at the ‘bottom of the pyramid’. More generally, a comprehensive framework for food-industry engagement needs to be established.
- H. **Establish a dedicated Global Financing Facility for food systems transition.** Specific proposals should be worked out over the coming months with a view to securing political agreement and national commitments for change at The United Nations Food Systems Summit. Such a facility would mobilise multilateral resources to support and incentivise increases in domestic resources aimed at making food systems more resilient, and diets more sustainable and healthy. An important priority would be to support LMICs in their transition, recognising the severe financial constraints in which many operate. Such a facility also has the potential to catalyse reform where there is a mismatch between the actors who need to resource change, and those who stand to benefit.
- I. **Realign donor policies towards supporting reforms which promote the achievement of both human health and sustainability of food systems.** An important priority should be the protection of the poor during the transition by refocusing social safety nets, and to ensure that the transition is ‘just’. This recognises that the poor will be least able to cope with fluctuations in availability and price of foods that may occur during this time. Other priorities would be to promote the availability, accessibility and affordability of nutrient-rich foods through the food value chain – from research, production, through to consumer choices.

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