



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

STORIES OF AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS CHANGE

*Insights from Côte d'Ivoire, Cambodia,
the Pacific, Guatemala and Albania*



Funded by
the European Union

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the Pacific, Guatemala and Albania*

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The stories form part of the Systems Change Learning Programme of FAO's Agrifood Systems and Food Safety Division, which aims at supporting transformative change towards the achievement of food security and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The programme assists leaders and change agents within and outside FAO in their efforts to: (1) promote a systems approach through shared understanding and capacity for systems thinking and doing; (2) make the case for a systems approach through building narratives and sharing knowledge and experience; and (3) advance systems change by creating windows of opportunity with immediate potential.

The stories were coordinated and written by Esther Wieggers and Stefania Fumo. Overall guidance was provided by Corinna Hawkes and Karel Callens.

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Côte d'Ivoire. Mahama Zoungrana, Zana Ouattara and Kadeyenin Kei (FAO), Ambroise N'Koh (cocoa and coffee producer), Pauline Zeï (Inades-Formation), Thierry Zoue (Félix Houphouët-Boigny University) and Amon Marc Tanouh (Bandama Equitable Society Cooperative).

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FOREWORD

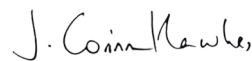
Agrifood systems have a huge proven potential to contribute to better production, better nutrition, a better environment and a better life, and thus to all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, in spite of this potential and the significant efforts made to deliver on the SDGs, performance has not translated sufficiently into long-lasting and beneficial impacts, and in various instances has had negative unintended consequences across geographies and population groups. It is therefore imperative that we re-assess the global challenges we face and our efforts from a broader agrifood systems perspective.

The need to shift towards new ways of thinking and working is implied in the growing conversation around agrifood systems, systems approaches and transformation. While increasingly used, these terms are far from being universally understood. Furthermore, there are many differing perspectives on the kind of transformation being sought and how such change can be brought about.

In an attempt to ground the global agrifood systems discourse in specific realities, demystify some of the terms involved and make sense of what they mean at country level, the Agrifood Systems and Food Safety Division of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has documented a series of country experiences. These are drawn from the FAO-European Union (EU) Policy Facility under the Food and Nutrition Security Impact, Resilience, Sustainability and Transformation (FIRST) Programme and the Sustainable Food Systems in the Mediterranean (SFS-MED) initiative funded by Italy's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

The five stories in this series illustrate the varied ways in which FAO accompanied governments, civil society organizations and other development partners on a journey of agrifood systems transformation in Côte d'Ivoire, Cambodia, the Pacific, Guatemala and Albania. They recount the changes observed by different partners at the system level in their countries – in terms of mindsets, power dynamics, relations and structures – and explore the factors that enabled these changes and the obstacles to further process.

While the FIRST and SFS-MED programmes both have a limited duration, work on moving the systems agenda forward at country level is continuing. We hope that these tangible examples and diverse narratives will contribute to unpacking the agrifood systems and transformation narratives at country level and demonstrate the value and practical application of a systems approach in different contexts.



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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|----------------|---|
| ACF | Alliance of Champions for Food Systems Transformation |
| CARD | Council of Agricultural and Rural Development |
| CFAF | African Financial Community franc (Central Bank of West African States) |
| CIHEAM | International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies |
| CONASAN | National Council for Food and Nutrition Security |
| COP27 | 27th Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change |
| ESF | Agrifood Systems and Food Safety Division of FAO |
| EU | European Union |
| FAO | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations |
| FIRST | Food and Nutrition Security Impact, Resilience, Sustainability and Transformation |
| FPFNS | Fiji Policy on Food and Nutrition Security |
| FSN | Food Security and Nutrition |
| GDP | gross domestic product |
| GIA | Group of Supporting Institutions |
| IFPRI | International Food Policy Research Institute |
| INCOPAS | Instance of Consultation and Social Participation |
| INSTAT | Albanian Institute of Statistics |
| IUCN | International Union for Conservation of Nature |
| MAGA | Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Food |
| MSPAS | Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance |
| NCD | non-communicable diseases |
| NGO | non-governmental organization |
| NSFSN | National Strategy for Food Security and Nutrition |
| PIFR | Pacific Island Food Revolution |
| POLSAN | National Food Security and Nutrition Policy |
| PRIMA | Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area |
| RASP | Rural Association Support Programme |
| SCI | Sustainable Cocoa Initiative |
| SDGs | Sustainable Development Goals |
| SESAN | Secretariat for Food Security and Nutrition |
| SFS-MED | Sustainable Food Systems in the Mediterranean |
| SINASAN | National Food Security and Nutrition System |
| SNCD | National Sustainable Cocoa Strategy |
| SPREF | Forest Preservation, Rehabilitation and Extension Strategy |
| SUN | Scaling Up Nutrition Movement |
| UFM | Secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean |
| USD | United States dollar |



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INTRODUCTION

CONTEXT: THE FIRST AND SFS-MED PROGRAMMES

About the FIRST programme (2015–2023)

The FAO-EU Food Security and Nutrition Impact, Resilience, Sustainability and Transformation (FIRST) programme worked in over 30 countries to strengthen the policy and institutional environment for investments in food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture. By design, the programme was an open EU-FAO partnership aimed at bringing about policy change that added value to the decisions, investments and actions of the European Union (EU), governments and FAO at country and regional levels. A network of Policy Officers embedded in government institutions and working closely with the EU Delegation and FAO Representation played a central role in facilitating policy change.

The programme design focused on developing space and time for reflection and exchange across countries, catalysing joint learning from diverse experiences, taking a flexible approach and leveraging emerging windows of opportunity to change course.

Over time, FIRST evolved from a more traditional focus on policy formulation assistance to one centred on promoting the agrifood systems agenda at country level in alignment with the SDGs. This included supporting governments and their development partners to gradually adopt elements of a systems approach.

About the SFS-MED initiative (2021–2024)

The Sustainable Food Systems in the Mediterranean (SFS-MED) initiative functions as a forum for multi-stakeholder dialogue and collaboration, a network for strengthening knowledge sharing and capacity building, and a catalyst for regional cooperation on priority themes for sustainable agrifood systems transformation in the Mediterranean.

Its goal is to create a community to leverage and share the knowledge, experience and skills of agrifood systems actors across the Mediterranean region as they implement regional, national and local efforts to transform towards more sustainable food systems.



Nebaj, Quiché province, Guatemala – Maria Cedillo, 22, is a coffee taster
© FAO/Santiago Billy

Funded by Italy's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, SFS-MED is a partnership between FAO, the International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM), the Secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), and the Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area (PRIMA). It is an affiliated project of the Sustainable Food Systems Programme of the One Planet network.

STORIES OF SYSTEMS CHANGE

The five stories presented in this publication offer real-world and relatable examples of gradual transformation towards a systems approach. They focus on experiences from Côte d'Ivoire, Cambodia, the Pacific, Guatemala and Albania:

- **Côte d'Ivoire.** The first story examines the use of a systems approach to achieve multiple outcomes – social, economic and environmental – in the cocoa sector, a key contributor to the national economy.
- **Cambodia.** The second story recounts efforts to assist the government in steering the ongoing transformation of the country's agrifood systems, using a systems approach to change ways of thinking about and acting upon complex and interrelated challenges with a view to enhancing inclusivity, resilience and sustainability.
- **The Pacific.** The third story expands the food security and nutrition narrative to include other perspectives and voices in Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, focusing on the use of a systems approach, the trade-offs involved and the integration of civil society into national dialogues.
- **Guatemala.** The fourth story provides an example of how to navigate a complex political landscape to bring about change in ways of thinking about food security and nutrition challenges.
- **Albania.** The last story illustrates the use of a systems approach to bridge the rural–urban gap to achieve equitable, resilient and sustainable food systems.

These stories are told from the perspective of the story-holders and present a picture of the countries involved at a particular point in time. The storytellers reflect on their country's efforts in terms of what worked, what did not and why. As the purpose was to lay the foundation for changes to achieve the SDG 2 targets, the stories centre on one or more of the transformative changes in terms of mindsets, power dynamics, relationships and structures.

SIMPLIFYING AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS LANGUAGE

The stories included in this document illustrate how countries are gradually moving away from linear ways of thinking and working towards adopting elements of a systems approach aimed at steering ongoing food systems transformations in the direction of greater social, economic and environmental sustainability.

A systems approach

Adopting a systems approach involves understanding the system from a specific entry point. For example, the story from **Côte d'Ivoire** looks at how the cocoa sector contributes to the wider challenges of poverty, child labour, unequal income distribution, climate change, food insecurity and malnutrition, and environmental degradation. Implicit in this approach is a need to see beyond immediate and circumscribed problems to understand the complex web of relationships, political economy issues and different mindsets that contribute to the current situation. This helps to understand the root causes of the problem, recognize potential trade-offs, identify enablers of change and political, institutional and/or financial blockages, and determine the roles played by different sectors and stakeholders in the system.

Adopting a systems approach entails bringing together a variety of actors and listening to diverse voices to arrive at a collective vision and shared goals, then identifying the roles and responsibilities of each actor in achieving them. In the story from **Cambodia**, for instance, because no significant progress was made in achieving the targets for SDG 2, the country took a step back and in close consultation with different stakeholders reflected on three questions: Have we understood the problem correctly? What is preventing our policy efforts from achieving greater impact? What needs to be done differently? By involving actors from different sectors in this participative consultation process, the country was able to acquire a more complete understanding of the situation and identify answers to these critical questions.

Implementing a systems approach also means recognizing that many and different stakeholders are involved in how the system works. Each brings distinctive interests and holds varying degrees of power, all of which impacts the question of whose views and voices are heard. There is thus a need to foster the inclusion of all views and voices, especially those who are traditionally excluded – such as citizens, Indigenous Peoples, women, youth and smallholder farmers – and to enable their meaningful participation in decision-making on actions, investments and policies. An



A man cuts the branches of a shade tree for a coffee in Santa Evelina, Cotzal, Quiché © FAO/Santiago Billy

example of such an approach is found in the story from **the Pacific**, which illustrates how a strategic partnership with a popular television programme, using plain language understood by a wide audience, helped to engage citizens in nationwide debates on food systems.

Soft skills are essential to navigate the complex web of different interests, power relations and ideas. As highlighted in the story from **Guatemala**, this requires strong facilitation capacities, an ability to build trust, investment in relationships and strategic partnerships, and a willingness to work with champions to resolve differences, navigate areas of friction, reach compromises and develop shared visions.

Using systems approaches also means facilitating the process of engagement and working in learning-oriented ways. The story from **Albania** illustrates the significance of continued support to create inclusive spaces in which people feel heard and empowered to voice their concerns and ideas. It also underlines the importance of boosting agency for actions adapted to the local context and taking time to carefully design networked learning through joint reflection.

Transformative change


Redirecting ongoing food systems transformation towards greater sustainability means altering how the system behaves, and changing the underlying relationships, power dynamics and mechanisms that make it perform in a certain way. This includes mindsets and power relations as well

as policies, institutions and resources. These mindsets or worldviews are influenced by traditions, beliefs and socio-economic structures.

The impact of a shift in mindsets and power relations cannot be readily quantified in numerical or statistical terms, and its effects on the ground will often only become visible in the longer term. Such shifts are nonetheless essential to move a country's entire system, from production to consumption, into a different gear – from fragmented to collective action, from top-down to participatory decision-making, from inefficient and degenerative systems to sustainable alternatives.

This kind of transformation can be compared to a farmer switching from input-intensive monocropping to a more agroecological approach. While it will take several seasons for the soil to regenerate and for a new, healthier ecosystem to flourish, it is the farmer's decision to switch from one method to another that is of significance.

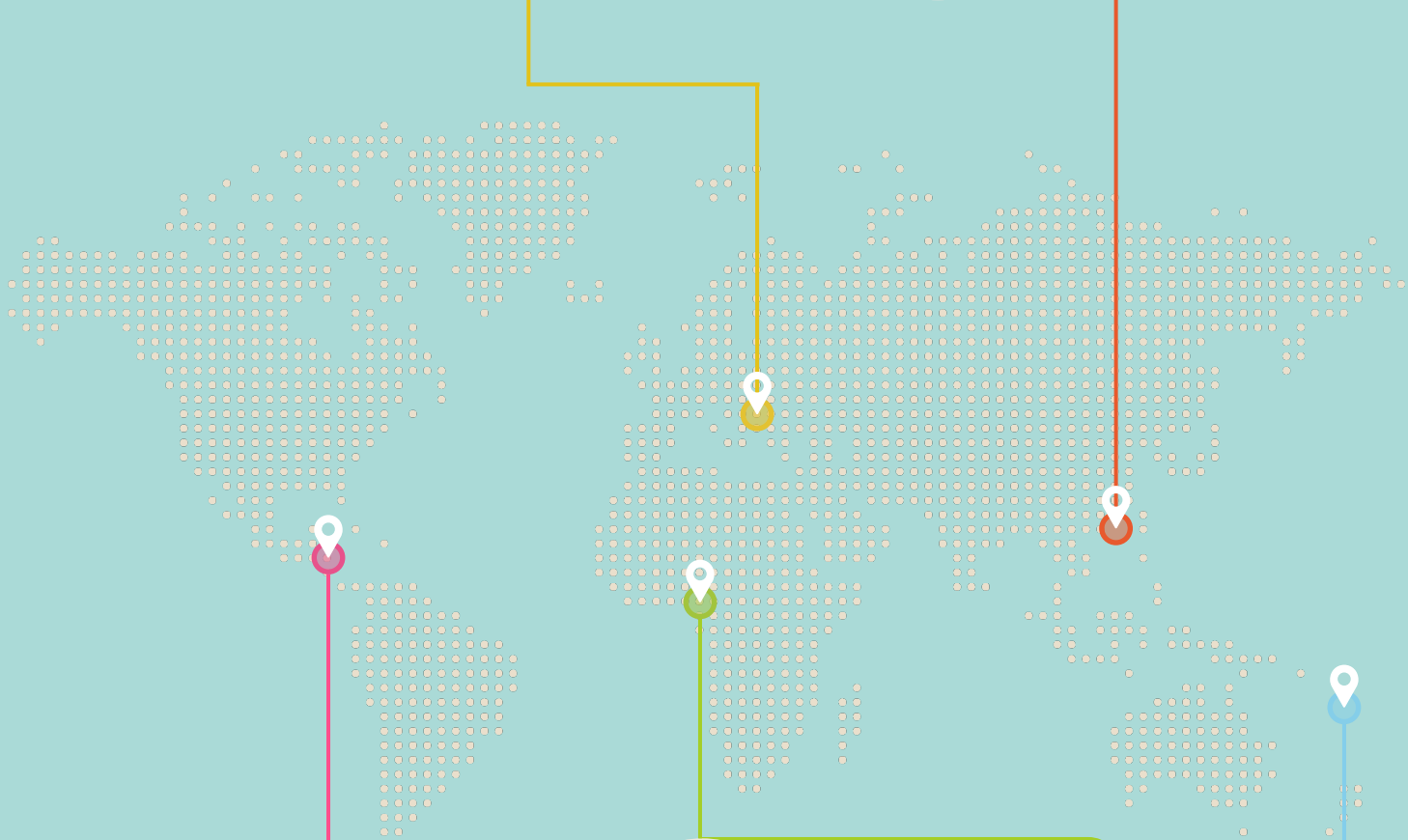
As these five stories illustrate, transformative change is not always a headline-grabbing, numerically quantifiable entity, but its significance within the local context cannot be underestimated. However, an outcome considered transformative or desirable for one person or country, may not be perceived in the same terms by another, depending on the context, position, perspective or values. The important thing is to overcome division and agree on the form this transformation should take, and how all parties can work together to bring it about. ●



Albania: investing in agritourism as an engine for shared prosperity



Cambodia: making agrifood systems more inclusive, resilient and sustainable



Cocoa sector reform as a gateway to food systems transformation in Côte d'Ivoire



Guatemala: crafting new and more inclusive food security and nutrition policies



Supporting policy change to address complex food security and nutrition challenges in the Pacific



Cocoa tree © FAO Côte d'Ivoire

Adopting a systems approach for economically, environmentally and socially sustainable cocoa value chains

COCOA SECTOR REFORM AS A GATEWAY TO FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE



CONTEXT: THE DARK SIDE OF CHOCOLATE

Côte d'Ivoire is the world leader in cocoa bean production. In 2020, Côte d'Ivoire produced over 2 million tonnes equivalent to 45 percent of global production (Republique de la Côte d'Ivoire, 2022).

Cocoa farming contributes about 15 percent to the country's gross domestic product (GDP) (IDH, 2023), and is practised largely by small-scale farmers. According to the Côte d'Ivoire National Statistics Institute and the Coffee Cocoa Board, a government body that sets farm gate prices, almost 6 million of the country's population of around 27 million depend directly or indirectly on the cocoa value chain for their livelihoods (FAO, 2021).

Low revenues are at the core of social and environmental challenges

While cocoa farming is a keystone of the national economy, its sustainability is jeopardized by low revenues for producers, which in turn lead to deforestation and child labour.

Ambroise N’Koh, an award-winning cocoa and coffee producer who practises agroforestry on his 50-hectare organic farm, explains in more detail:

In Côte d’Ivoire, most smallholder cocoa farmers live below the poverty line because the farm gate price is very low: a grower with 2 hectares yielding 300 kg of cocoa beans per hectare sells them at CFAF 1 000 (USD 1.65) per kilo. With two harvests per year, he earns around USD 1 000 a year. This means his income is USD 83 per month. You tell me how a father is going to feed his family and send his children to school – not to mention cover the operating costs of his farm – on USD 83 a month.

Market power remains concentrated in the hands of a few large companies, resulting in unequal distribution of revenues along the value chain. Cocoa-producing countries such as Côte d’Ivoire currently receive 6 percent of the price paid by chocolate consumers, down from 16 percent in the 1980s (Republique de la Côte d’Ivoire, 2022).

According to Pauline Zeï, Director of the Côte d’Ivoire office of Inades-Formation, a pan-African network present in ten countries in West, East and Central Africa, small-scale growers and family farmers lack the capacity to negotiate with buyers and are dependent on the prices fixed by the Coffee Cocoa Board. She elaborates:

The vast majority of Ivoirian growers depends on the price fixed by the government. I think it is the marketing system in Côte d’Ivoire that needs to be questioned. Work needs to be done at this level in terms of advocacy, so that reforms are adopted to improve prices for cocoa producers.

Cocoa harvesting is highly labour intensive: each pod must be picked and opened individually to extract the beans, which are then exported to make chocolate. Due to low revenues, growers are unable to offer decent working conditions and often turn to child labour to harvest the beans.

The main factors at the heart of the social sustainability issue are volatile cocoa prices on international markets, and low and unstable revenues for growers, who also lack access to basic social services and financing and are unable to afford a qualified workforce.

Low revenues among growers are compounded by difficulties they encounter in accessing credit following the closure of



Cocoa pods © FAO Côte d’Ivoire

the National Agricultural Development Bank, which used to provide direct financing.

The remaining banks perceive the sector as risky, and the financial products they provide are not appropriate for the needs of small-scale farmers, very few of whom have bank accounts or sufficient savings to qualify for loans.

Deforestation and climate change

As a consequence of low revenues, many cocoa farmers try to boost their income by increasing production levels, often by expanding into forests where the land is more fertile.

In 2021, forest cover in Côte d'Ivoire amounted to 2.97 million hectares, or 9.2 percent of the total land area, down significantly from over 20 percent forest cover in the 1960s (Republique de la Côte d'Ivoire, 2022).

This deforestation trend is compounded by shifts in both temperature and rainfall levels due to climate change, and the related increase in disease incidence which has affected cocoa production in recent years. According to Ambroise N'Koh:

The three major challenges for the sector are: climate change, which farmers are experiencing without having contributed to it because the majority do not even own an engine; the farm gate price which is a pittance; and the transformation of the sector on a national level.

Cocoa by-products: a largely untapped potential

Low revenues also mean that many smallholder producers lack the financial means to process cocoa by-products. Approximately 75 percent of the fruit – including the husk and the pulp – is discarded after the beans are extracted, and is usually left in the field (Mendoza-Menese, Feregrino-Pérez and Gutiérrez-Antonio, 2021).

Poor infrastructure and lack of access to technology to collect and process cocoa waste discourages farmers from collecting this waste for transformation into viable products, as the associated high costs outweigh the benefits. Ambroise N'Koh offers an alternative:

A possible solution would be to introduce a circular economy model that uses post-harvest cocoa waste: you can make jam, vinegar, soap, juice, sorbet, oil, herbal tea, even biofuel from it. This would bring additional resources to farmers and create many green jobs for youth in rural areas. There are a lot of investments to be made for these unemployed young people.

Pauline Zeï has observed the emergence of new value chains based on cocoa derivatives.

There are small-scale local processors who are making cocoa powder, soap, butter and cosmetics, and other actors have appeared who are selling these products. These activities are bringing in complementary revenues, which people are using for themselves or for their households. What's also interesting is that these value chains involve women. For example, we have the case of a cooperative that set up a small soap-making business, and it employs about ten women. There is a real opportunity here to foster these value chains, and the support of the state and technical and financial partners is needed so that these small initiatives can take their place in the cocoa economy on a sustainable basis.

CONSUMER PRESSURE FOR REFORM AND THE EU GREEN DEAL

Rising pressure from consumers in developed countries is translating into pressure to ban cocoa imports that are not economically, environmentally and socially sustainable. This includes the European Union, the largest consumer of Ivorian cocoa, which imports 67 percent of total production, and where chocolate manufacturers now insist on certification of the origin of cocoa beans (Republique de la Côte d'Ivoire, 2022).

The impact of policies and legislation under the European Green Deal, which aims to make the Union climate-neutral by 2050, affects cocoa producers and exporters across the globe.

In 2020, the European Union launched the Sustainable Cocoa Initiative (SCI), a mix of budgetary support and dedicated projects aimed at ensuring a decent income for farmers, fighting child labour and trafficking, and strengthening forest protection and restoration in West African cocoa supply chains (European Commission, 2020).

The 2023 EU regulation on deforestation-free products stipulates that products and raw materials whose production resulted in deforestation after 31 December 2020 cannot be sold in or exported from the European market. The regulation specifically mentions cocoa among a list of seven commodities that make up the largest share of EU-driven deforestation. The other six are: palm oil, soy, wood, coffee, cattle and rubber (European Commission, 2023)

Traceability and digitalization are important elements of this reform as all cocoa exporters are required to collect detailed information about their operations to prove that their beans are not linked to deforestation.

Professor Thierry Zoue has been teaching food security and nutrition at Félix Houphouët-Boigny University since



2012. “These new regulations”, he explains, “mean growers must deliver cocoa that is traceable from production to consumption. Which is not easy for them, given that they don’t even have decent revenues.”

The Coffee Cocoa Board has carried out a geolocalized census of all cocoa producers, coupled with distribution of a producer’s card, which is now a requirement for selling cocoa beans (Abidjan.net, 2023). This effort, which cost 6.5 billion francs (USD 10.7 million), has resulted in the registration of close to 1 million growers and 3.2 million hectares of plantations (Republique de la Côte d’Ivoire, 2023).

According to Professor Zoue, while “the government has taken action to support small-scale farmers in terms of traceability, identifying the producers and geolocalizing their farms has demanded a significant investment.” He notes, however, “that this process is supported by the European Union and by all stakeholders”.

ADOPTING A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO TACKLE MULTIPLE CHALLENGES

The FIRST Programme started working in Côte d’Ivoire in 2017. It provided support for the transformation of the cocoa sector, moving beyond the linear “farm to fork” model and the prevailing focus on increasing production, jobs and profits, to achieving a better balance between economic, social and environmental outcomes.

Mahama Zoungrana served as FIRST Policy Officer from 2017 to 2022 and now supports the implementation of the EU SCI in Côte d’Ivoire. He explains:

We had to better understand how the cocoa sector contributes to the wider challenges of poverty, child labour, income distribution, climate change, food insecurity and malnutrition, and environmental degradation. We also looked at how they are interconnected and what is blocking the different actors – consumers, producers, the private sector, authorities – from changing their behaviour towards these issues, and how to move forward jointly. A coherent policy framework supported by effective partnerships and investment was necessary to address the multidimensional challenges faced by the sector.



Drying cocoa beans © FAO Côte d’Ivoire



Mr and Mrs Akalé at their cocoa plantation © FAO Côte d'Ivoire

To make this goal a reality, FIRST facilitated multi-stakeholder discussions and policy formulation processes that involved academia, civil society, cocoa processors and exporters, researchers, technical and financial partners, and the ministries of water and forests, agriculture and social protection. These actors worked to collectively articulate a new strategy and build a national narrative that would truly contribute to reforming the sector, empowering family farmers and protecting the environment.

According to Pauline Zeï, who represented the National Platform for the Defence of the Rights of Cocoa Producers during the multistakeholder dialogues,

FIRST helped facilitate dialogue between the Cocoa Platform and the government [and advocated for] cocoa to be placed at the centre of the national dialogue on food systems as a catalyst to promote food security, poverty reduction and the agroecological transition.

Such efforts to enhance the cocoa value chain are now seen as a catalyst for jointly moving forward the country's food systems transformation agenda, as they imply working on multiple outcomes and helping to introduce the circular economy, green jobs and agroforestry. As Mahama Zoungrana explains,

The systems approach really helped forge a broader vision that can embrace all the external elements, both positive and negative, that make up the environment around a

value chain in order to build something of lasting value. Adopting a systems approach also helped open our minds by looking at the interconnections between the different challenges – getting out of the commodity focus and looking at the different aspects that touch people's lives: climate, income and children's education. Cocoa was perfect for this, because it combines the social and environmental aspects with the fight against poverty.

THE NATIONAL SUSTAINABLE COCOA STRATEGY

Accompanied by FIRST, Côte d'Ivoire elaborated a National Sustainable Cocoa Strategy (SNCD) to "improve the revenue and wellbeing of producers and to combat child labour and deforestation in the cocoa value chain" (Republique de la Côte d'Ivoire, 2021: 4). These three challenges were seen as interconnected, as the Strategy makes clear:

We cannot permanently solve the issue of recourse to family labour and the extension of agricultural plots to the detriment of forests without addressing the challenge of the poverty of the producers and improving their life and working conditions.

Because poverty, child labour and deforestation are seen as interdependent, the SNCD calls for coordinated action by "all stakeholders concerned" and the leveraging of existing platforms such as, the Joint Action Framework of the Cocoa and Forest Initiative, the Ghana-Côte d'Ivoire Cocoa

Initiative and the National Monitoring Committee to Fight Child Trafficking, Exploitation and Labour.

The SNCD was devised by a multi-sectoral working group set up in 2019 and consisting of the prime minister, the first lady's cabinet, and the ministries of Employment and Social Protection, Water and Forests, Justice and Human Rights, Interior and Security, Defence, Environment and Sustainable Development, Commerce and Industry, Agriculture and Rural Development, and Family, Women and Children, as well as the Coffee Cocoa Board.

While developing the SNCD, the working group looked at challenges along the entire value chain and assessed inputs collected during the Côte d'Ivoire-EU Dialogue launched in January 2021, in the context of the country's 2030 vision.

The working group also aligned its policy reform with the European Union's SCI. The SNCD and the associated plan of action were adopted by Côte d'Ivoire's Council of Ministers in 2022.

WHAT CHANGED: FROM A TOP-DOWN TO AN HOLISTIC APPROACH

The reform of the cocoa sector sparked a more holistic and inclusive approach to agrifood systems transformation in Côte d'Ivoire. With the participation of producers, consumers and civil society, a new national narrative emerged – one centred on the empowerment and well-being of family farmers as the precondition for environmental sustainability, and the elimination of child labour.

This narrative was summarized by Amon Marc Tanouh, Organization Manager at the Bandama Equitable Society Cooperative:

Sustainability will only be achieved when producers receive a decent income from their labour.

FIRST's efforts to support the government, convene dialogue and empower agents of change from civil society and the private sector helped to shift the national dialogue. As Mahama Zoungrana explains:

In Côte d'Ivoire, the approach to value chains used to be top-down. For example, until recently, forestry technicians fulfilled their conservation mandate by trying to prevent people from entering protected areas, [while] the agronomists' approach was to advise people to cut down trees to make way for farms.

Cocoa farming has been the number one driver of deforestation in Côte d'Ivoire since 1960, followed by rubber trees and other crops. We had to do something urgently to stop this degradation.

A key change occurred with a shift in the approach itself, which became more holistic as the debate around agrifood systems opened people's minds to new ways of looking at the problem. As Professor Zoue points out,

The principle of the systems approach [became] visible through the creation of multi-stakeholder platforms and the implementation of activities to minimize negative impacts on the environment and on the health of producers.

When we look at the strategic axes of the SNCD, we find the framework of the systems approach through the thematic axes, which concern farm productivity, cocoa quality, the marketing system, processing, the living and working conditions of producers, and the professionalization of producer organizations. In principle, I think the systems approach was taken into account.

In addition, this approach has inspired other agricultural value chains, such as those in the cashew nut, rubber and palm oil sectors. According to Zoue,

These sectors have also created platforms for multi-stakeholder dialogue, bringing together the public and private sectors, NGOs and producers, where everyone intervenes to move the discussion forward. The systems approach adopted by the cocoa sector was therefore a catalytic element.

PARTNERSHIPS GOING FORWARD

By engaging with a broad range of stakeholders in this journey, FIRST contributed to improving the coherence and alignment of several agencies and stakeholders whose current and future financing for the cocoa sector now amounts to approximately EUR 1.2 million. The SNCD thus functions as a policy reference point for several financial partners for the period 2021–2027.

New windows of opportunity for innovative partnerships and farmer empowerment beyond 2022 have also been opened, especially with the European Union through the SCI.

REMAINING CHALLENGES

Changes in mindsets and behaviour take time, and Côte d'Ivoire is no stranger to the risks of deforestation. The country is a signatory to the ten-point New York Declaration on Forests,



in which countries commit to, among other things, “support alternatives to deforestation driven by basic needs (such as subsistence farming and reliance on fuel wood for energy) in ways that alleviate poverty and promote sustainable and equitable development” (Forest Declaration Assessment, 2024).

Subsequently, the country launched a Forest Preservation, Rehabilitation and Extension Strategy (SPREF) aimed at achieving forest cover of over 20 percent of the country by 2030.

According to an official note in May 2022, “Côte d’Ivoire wants to put a stop to deforestation caused by agriculture, and has launched a high-intensity reforestation effort that led to the planting of over 36 million trees between 2019 and 2021” (Republique de la Côte d’Ivoire, 2022).

However, governance remains a challenge, with insufficient application of existing laws and regulations, a lack of monitoring and surveillance capacity to combat illegal logging, and unclear definitions of the boundaries of classified forests.

In addition, the estimated cost for implementation of the SPREF is FCFA 616 billion (USD 1 billion), against an existing budget for the Ministry of Water and Forests of around FCFA 36 billion (USD 60 million) in 2022, according to official government documents (Ministère des Eaux et Forêts, 2018, 2022).

Deep-seated change also implies costs for smallholder producers. For example, cocoa farmers will need ongoing financial and technical support and capacity building if they are to successfully transition to agroforestry and comply with the new national and international regulations on sustainability.

As N’koh succinctly points out:

How are small farmers going to plant extra trees when they do not have enough revenue or workers to replace their sick cocoa trees?

Pauline Zeï elaborates on the obstacles to smallholder producers and the way forward:

For us, the farm gate price is an essential element. It really needs to be revised upwards if we want to attain the fair revenue objective, which is vital to the growers. This is the number one challenge, and we are calling on industrialists as well as national regulators to work so that growers can have fair, equitable prices and not have to settle for the occasional bonus. They need to be accompanied so that they can become green growers.

As yet, the adoption of the SNCD has not been succeeded by the multi-stakeholder consultations required to implement it in a participatory manner.

Financing SNCD interventions also represents a challenge. The private sector expects certain structural reforms to be in place before committing resources, and commitments from technical and financial partners are not yet sufficient to cover all necessary actions for implementation of the SNCD.

In terms of child labour, trafficking is a transboundary issue and combating it will take concerted action across borders.

Pauline Zeï affirms the importance of these obstacles but also the potential for change:

The challenges are enormous, so we need to keep strengthening the dialogue between the government and civil society and continue to professionalize the producer organizations, so that sustainable food systems can be built in Côte d’Ivoire.

The future of the cocoa sector can be very promising for Côte d’Ivoire if all these initiatives are well implemented in a coherent way.

By engaging with stakeholders along the value chain, the government has obtained comprehensive knowledge of the challenges that need to be overcome in order to bring about sustainable cocoa farming in Côte d’Ivoire. Technical and financial partners have also been mobilized to play their part by aligning interventions and financing in support of reforms initiated by the government.

To achieve greater impact, it is also essential that coalitions with other actors, such as the private sector – including agricultural cooperatives – and civil society, work alongside the government on a collaborative basis based on trust. According to Mahama Zoungrana,

Some results are already visible, starting with stakeholders’ awareness of the urgency of reversing the trend by abandoning sectoral and vertical approaches in favour of more holistic and transformative approaches to agrifood systems.

Cocoa represents a lever for other sectors that are key to the economic development of the country. The reforms in this flagship crop therefore represent an entry point to broaden the debate on the sustainability of the agricultural sector in Côte d’Ivoire. ●

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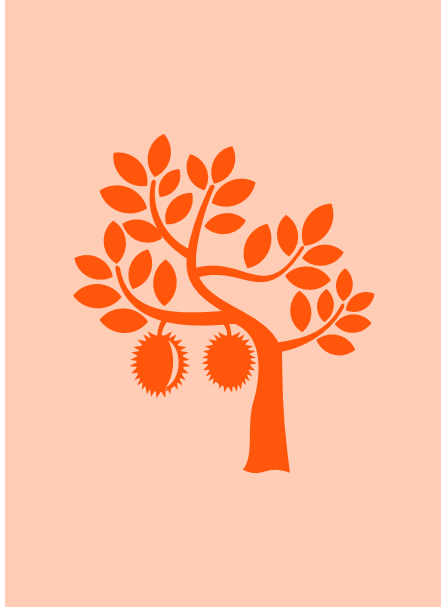
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Night market ©FAO/Joaquin Barata

Policymakers change their ways of thinking and working to tackle complex and interrelated challenges, using a food systems approach

CAMBODIA: MAKING AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS MORE INCLUSIVE, RESILIENT AND SUSTAINABLE



CAMBODIA'S ONGOING FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

Cambodia has experienced strong economic growth over the past two decades, reaching lower middle-income status in 2015 and setting its sights on attaining upper middle-income status by 2030, according to the World Bank.

This growth has led to an ongoing transformation of the country's agrifood systems, both negative and positive. On the one hand, the country has made significant inroads in the fight against hunger and severe malnutrition, while the poverty rate declined from 33.8 percent in 2009 to 17.8 percent in 2019/20 (World Bank, 2023).

On the other hand, a significant proportion of the population have been left behind: nearly one in five Cambodians, most of them residing in rural areas, live

in poverty. Another 15 percent are near-poor and at risk of falling into poverty in the event of shock. The country is experiencing a massive reduction in stunting but no change in wasting, while overweight and obesity rates are increasing rapidly. According to the 2021–2022 Cambodian Demographic and Health Survey, 4 percent of children aged under 5 are overweight, while 6 percent of girls aged 15–19 and 33 percent of women aged 20–49 are overweight or obese (Karamba, Tong and Salcher, 2022).

The country also faces challenges linked to strong population growth and rural–urban migration, especially among youth. In addition, Cambodia is one of the most climate disaster-prone countries in Southeast Asia, with increasingly frequent and intense floods and droughts.

NEW WAYS OF THINKING AND WORKING

To redirect this ongoing transformation of the country’s agrifood systems, Cambodia’s Council of Agricultural and Rural Development (CARD), which holds the mandate for policy formulation, strategic planning and technical cooperation for food security and nutrition, took a step back in 2019 to reflect on current ways of thinking about these challenges.

Dr Sok Silo, General Secretary of CARD, explains:

The questions we asked ourselves were: Have we understood the problem correctly? What is preventing our policy efforts from achieving greater impact, and what needs to be done differently?

FIRST was instrumental in accompanying us in this process, and in helping us arrive at a new way of thinking about the problem.

This change involved a shift from a sectoral to a multi-sectoral perspective – from examining the issues solely through the lens of agriculture to addressing them in partnership with many more sectors, institutions and stakeholders – in an approach called food systems thinking (UNEP, FAO and UNDP, 2023).

HE Silo explains the rationale behind this approach:

The understanding now is that if future diets are to meet nutritional, social and environmental needs at the same time, every policy must deliver multiple outcomes – from public health and safe, healthy food to inclusive economic development and sustainable agriculture.

In order to develop these policies, CARD adopted a participatory way of working to identify key policy design

gaps and implementation bottlenecks as well as opportunities and investment priorities for accelerating progress towards SDG 2. This involved bringing all stakeholders to the table including representatives of a broader range of government ministries, academia, consumers, youth and the private sector.

The twin-track approach

One example of how this change in thinking resulted in a shift in policy is the twin-track approach.

Initially, under the 2014–2018 National Strategy for Food Security and Nutrition (NSFSN), policy development in Cambodia consisted of different ministries proposing activities covering all aspects, but without clear acceptance of responsibilities, commitments to action or establishment of joint priorities.

For CARD, coordinating these sector-specific priorities posed a challenge because resources were allocated and actions were implemented by separate ministries and agencies that operated independently. Recognizing that sector-led contributions are vital to achieving food security and combating malnutrition, but also that specific sets of priorities require joint action and coordination, CARD adopted a twin-track approach for the 2019–2023 NSFSN.

This approach separates sector-led contributions – agriculture, water supply and sanitation, education, health, and commerce and industry – from a smaller subset of joint priorities: healthy diets, food value chains, food safety and fortification, community-led nutrition, social assistance, disaster management and climate change, and water, sanitation and hygiene.

CARD formed a multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral task force to operationalize each of the joint priorities and provided overall coordination. It also advocated for funding for food security and nutrition activities, reported on contributions made by these sectors to broader impacts on food security and nutrition, and ensured that cross-cutting issues – gender, environmental safeguards and leaving no one behind – are addressed in both sector-led and joint priorities of the NSFSN.

A key element of the twin-track approach is good governance. This includes effective coordination at all levels, engagement with the private sector and civil society, collaboration among development partners and tying into the country’s ongoing process of decentralization.

Building relationships across agencies and between ministries and institutions was a crucial aspect of this shift,

with the underlying aim of collective progress towards achievement of the SDG targets for 2030.

KEY FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO CHANGE

The importance of a shared narrative

The twin-track approach signalled a paradigm shift from silos to systems thinking. This change in perspective was underpinned by a shared narrative on broad systems change. By bringing different people and perspectives together, FIRST accompanied a process of unpacking complex concepts while fostering a better understanding of the current situation within the broader food system.

Anna-Lisa Noack, who served as FIRST Policy Officer in Cambodia and Myanmar from 2018 to 2022, explains in more detail:

Cambodia has boasted incredible economic growth, and some people are being left behind but it's much more complex than that. For example, we're seeing a massive reduction in stunting but no change in wasting and a huge increase in overweight and obesity rates.

Our work was about helping key people [involved] in that transformation process – government, the private sector, civil society organizations, the public – to reflect on where things are not going in the right direction and helping them to think through how best to deal with that, together. It was about prompting questions like: What barriers do people face in accessing healthy diets? Who do we mean by “those left behind” and in what way are they being left behind? What can each sector do to address those barriers to healthy diets or support those who are most left behind?

The answers to these questions can only be arrived at by putting different people together and listening to each other in order to exchange perspectives and gain a more complete understanding of the situation.

Another important aspect was to build a shared narrative in Khmer, the national language of Cambodia. Iean Russell served as FIRST Policy Officer in Cambodia from 2016 to 2022, and explained some of the challenges inherent to this task:

At first, we had to be careful about using English words like “food systems transformation” because the Khmer interpretation was that we were advocating for revolutionary change. Instead, we had to introduce new concepts with care and try to avoid the intricacies of debate around English terms when it is the Khmer language that forms the basis of the common narrative. This also meant

ensuring that technical jargon did not obscure the meaning for general audiences.

Working with champions

A crucial part of this process was to identify and work with champions with the power to convene other decision-makers. This enabled the FIRST Policy Officer to gain the trust of various government partners. Building this trust meant taking the time and effort to nurture relationships with high-level figures who were willing to champion the food systems agenda. Anna-Lisa Noack elaborated:

We often think about organizations, but it's about the people in organizations – those who drive the other people who make up the organization. Institutions are made up of individuals and the more things get repeated and done, they more they become part of the fabric of the institution. But until that happens, any transformation must have a ripple effect on individuals.

Such champions may move on, but if the foundations have been laid properly the changes made will outlast them. As Noack explained:

Once you have a common narrative that people can trust, that is crisp, accessible and can easily be told and retold, it doesn't matter if champions leave. People come and go, but the narrative remains.

Using opportunities to bring different perspectives together

FIRST was instrumental in leveraging opportunities such as the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit, and the dialogues that preceded it, to reach new stakeholders and bring more partners on board.

Acting as an invisible convenor, FIRST played a leading role in developing capacities for the preparation and conduct of inclusive online discussions and virtual break-out groups. More than 30 national dialogues were held in which over 2 000 participants from government, development partners, the private sector and civil society shared and explored their experiences, challenges and ideas.

Joaquin Barata, a FAO Food Security and Nutrition and Sustainable Agriculture Specialist who served as a FIRST consultant, recounted his experience of these discussions:

The dialogues and the summit were a real turning point. We were able to reach more actors at government level as well as ministries and agencies who we couldn't usually access. All the organizations, all the agencies were working as one. There were no individual agendas – we were all pushing in the same direction.



Vegetable market ©FAO/Joaquin Barata

The preparations for the UN Food Systems Summit enabled Cambodia to be seen as an early adopter on the global stage, sharing lessons learned with other countries and being recognized for leading the way forward. Food system approaches and joint actions to strengthen food security have gained significant traction in Cambodia thanks to the extensive food systems dialogues in 2021, CARD's leadership in bringing stakeholders together and buy-in from different partners.

CHANGE IS ONGOING

Widening the circle of stakeholders involved in the dialogue

Building on the foundations for a multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approach led by CARD – which also became the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement Focal Point for Cambodia – different stakeholders in the food system were brought to the policy table to evaluate issues and define a way forward together. CARD has played a vital role in facilitating this dialogue, and as a result of its involvement, relationships with civil society organizations, the private sector, development partners and UN networks have strengthened.

Bringing in the new generation

Cambodians aged under 30 make up 58 percent of the population, according to the country's 2019 census (National Institute of Statistics, 2020). These young people are the consumers of the future, with new aspirations, tastes and habits compared to those of their elders. They have money to spend on food, increasingly live in crowded urban spaces and tend to go out to eat.

Recognizing this reality, CARD developed innovative approaches to engage with youth and promote awareness of how Cambodia's current food system is impacting nutrition through a series of events across the country. These included a Youth Nutrition Camp and workshops on food systems and healthy diets organized for young people in eight provinces.

Joaquin Barata helped organize the nationwide youth events as part of the FIRST team:

We identified Cambodia's youth as a key entry point for food systems transformation. Creating spaces where young people could show their enthusiasm, dedication and innovative thinking proved that this approach is not a choice but a necessity. Working hand in hand with Cambodia's youth was an inspiring journey that pushed us to think outside of the box.

CARD also recognized the necessity of listening to the voices of young people and integrating them into policymaking processes. Youth played a central role in the national dialogues that preceded the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit, with higher percentages of young women participating than young men. This suggests that youth are an entry point for women's engagement and providing them with opportunities within the food system.

This theory was confirmed by Bormey Chhun, 25, who is a recent university graduate and youth engagement lead at Helen Keller International, a non-profit organization that focuses on nutrition and health care.

Bormey Chhun leads the nationwide network of 60 Youth Nutrition Champions initiated by Helen Keller International. Many of the Youth Champions are university students, and for the most part, women. Their role is to engage with youth, for example as peer-to-peer educators or as speakers who enter high schools to talk to teenagers about healthy diets.

"We want to prioritize women, because there is not enough gender balance in terms of social activities", commented Ms Chhun.

One of the concerns raised by Cambodian youth at the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit was that fast food is cheap, ubiquitous and delicious, while organic foods are expensive and harder to find. Among their proposals to remedy this imbalance were higher taxes on unhealthy foods, coupled with measures to make fresh, nutritious and affordable food available to all.

As a result of these dialogues, empowerment of youth, women and vulnerable groups is now the second priority of Cambodia's 2030 National Roadmap for Food Systems for Sustainable Development.

Investing in those left behind

The 2030 Roadmap builds on the Royal Government of Cambodia's track record of investing in those left behind. For example, the government has established a Council for Social Protection and a 2016–2025 National Social Protection Policy Framework. Then, in June 2020, among other stimulus measures to counteract the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, Cambodia rolled out a cash transfer programme that reached 700 000 poor and vulnerable



Vegetable market ©FAO/Joaquin Barata

households, the first time that such a programme had been implemented at scale.

Research has shown that this policy had a very real impact on people's lives, especially on single female-headed households. Several recipients told UNDP in a survey that the transfers "kept us from starving", and allowed them to repay debts, send their kids to school and access health care. The programme also had a dampening effect on the country's pandemic-related recession (UNDP, 2022).

FIRST: A DIFFERENT KIND OF PROGRAMME

FIRST was not a typical programme. A partnership between governments, FAO and the European Union, it aimed at strengthening the policy and institutional environment to increase the impact of investments in food security and nutrition. Its underlying philosophy was to add value to what its partners were doing and to help them apply a different approach to their work.

FIRST worked on a solid basis of trust within this partnership, which allowed it to operate independently and flexibly, addressing issues and harnessing opportunities as and when they arose. This trust was bolstered by the perceived neutrality of FIRST policy officers within government by a wide range of stakeholders with sometimes divergent interests.

The flexibility and adaptability of FIRST to changing political and working environments proved to be key in supporting the Cambodian government during its transition to food systems thinking.

THE OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

Real generational change is taking place in Cambodia: the new prime minister is a former youth leader, and the newly elected government's Pentagon Strategy reflects many of the positions that different partners have been advocating over the years in terms of human capital development, food systems and nutrition.

The country is also cementing its leadership role at the international level. In the follow-up to COP27, in recognition of the effort the country put into the UN Food Systems Dialogues and subsequent actions, Cambodia was invited to join the Alliance of Champions for Food Systems Transformation (ACF), which was launched formally at COP28 in December 2023.

The NSFSN 2024–2028 will carry forward the twin-track approach. While still evolving, the Strategy offers an opportunity to address unfinished business and to implement lessons learned, for example by making joint priorities more actionable through the establishment of clearer mandates, roles and responsibilities for different stakeholders.

Further gains could be yielded by capitalizing on the momentum generated during the national food systems dialogues, for example by creating platforms for vulnerable groups and youth to voice their concerns and be heard in policy processes.

Iean Russell commented on the importance of foregrounding these often unheard voices:

Much more can be done to engage youth by creating spaces for joint and inclusive decision-making, giving young women and men a greater voice, promoting the understanding of food systems for healthy diets among rural and urban youth, and linking these to employment programmes, vocational training and education. The same is true of private sector engagement, which remains a critical area of work ahead.

Efforts to steer the transformation of Cambodia's food systems so that it becomes more inclusive, resilient and sustainable could be stimulated further by working with think tanks to generate independent analyses, including on the trade-offs and co-benefits of addressing climate change, environmental and nutrition objectives.

Fostering acceptance and uptake of these analyses by the public sector, and brokering related discussions between government and different stakeholders on future diets that meet nutritional and social needs but are also environmentally sustainable, might be a good next step to continue and deepen the dialogue on food systems over the long term. ●

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Expanding the narrative to include other perspectives and voices in Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, using a systems approach

Hybrid coconut tree, Samoa © FAO/Jeanette Van Acker

SUPPORTING POLICY CHANGE TO ADDRESS COMPLEX FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION CHALLENGES IN THE PACIFIC



THE FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION NARRATIVE

In the Pacific Island Countries of Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, whose populations together number approximately 1.9 million inhabitants, diets have been shifting from traditional foods such as banana, breadfruit, coconut, fish, and taro to cheap, imported foods such as tinned meats, instant noodles, sugary beverages, and alcohol (Burkhart *et al.*, 2021).

Fisheries represent a source of livelihood for many inhabitants, but fish is expensive for most local consumers. Meanwhile, lettuce, cabbage and other fresh vegetables need to be imported at certain times of year, and have become seasonally unaffordable for many people.

This situation stems from a combination of market liberalization and policy decisions to focus on export crops, which generate good incomes for farmers as well as revenue for governments.

More recently, local agriculture has experienced a shortage of seeds and fertilizers due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This conflict has increased the existing dependency on imported foods.

Pacific Island Countries have also experienced a rise in foreign direct investment in local food manufacturers of heavily processed foods, which create jobs and generate government revenue.

Meanwhile local producers, most of whom are small in scale, face an uneven playing field. The logistical difficulties of transporting their produce to market in their archipelago nations, coupled with a lack of facilities to preserve it in hygienic conditions compliant with food safety norms, limit their access to potential customers such as hotels, restaurants and retailers, for whom it is more convenient to stock imported, heavily processed foods than fresh local ones.

Additionally, Pacific Island Countries are experiencing devastating impacts from climate change. These include

rising air temperatures and sea levels, altered precipitation patterns, changing ocean salinity and acidity, and increasing frequency of extreme weather events such as storms, floods, droughts and heatwaves.

The combination of export-oriented agriculture and dependency on imported foods makes these countries particularly vulnerable to climate-related loss of land and livelihoods, spikes in food prices and supply chain disruptions.

As a result of all these factors, in the Pacific Islands region incidence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) due to unhealthy diets is among the highest in the world. In Fiji, the most populous of the three Pacific Island Countries, with over 900 000 inhabitants, obesity affects one in three adults, and is especially prevalent among poor women in urban areas (Nasokia, 2024).

Clearly problems of malnutrition and food security in this region are complex and can no longer be addressed solely on a sectoral basis. Just as food security is not just an agricultural issue, obesity and NCDs are not merely health problems.



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The PIFR team © Pacific Island Food Revolution (PIFR)

FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE

The efforts of the three Pacific Island Countries to understand and address the connections between agrifood systems, climate change, consumer choices, food prices and NCDs were accompanied by the FIRST Programme.

FIRST helped to challenge prevailing paradigms, tabled new topics, brokered fresh evidence, and introduced new voices and perspectives, bringing together many different stakeholders to examine issues, challenges and opportunities through a food systems lens. Itziar Gonzalez, who served as FIRST Policy Officer in the Pacific from 2016 to 2022, explained:

In the Pacific, we helped to catalyse a process that was already taking place: different sectors were already talking to each other. FIRST brought monitoring, continuity and systematization. We showed a way of landing concepts from theory to practice, providing very concrete tools that decision-makers can use every day.

It became clear that to solve complex food security and nutrition problems, different sectors must incorporate nutrition into their objectives and work together to make sure that everyone has sufficient safe, healthy food to eat.

Furthermore, the way in which this food is produced had to be environmentally friendly, resilient to extreme weather events and provide equitable livelihoods. In other words, Pacific Island Countries needed to adopt a food systems approach to policymaking.

Such policymaking had to be informed by data and evidence, stem from inclusive dialogues with a diversity of stakeholders, be funded adequately, and implemented in a coordinated way by multiple government ministries and agencies.

INVOLVING CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE PUBLIC IN THE DEBATE

FIRST introduced other voices and included a more diversified set of actors in the discussions around agrifood systems transformation, using the many national dialogues that preceded the 2021 UN Food System Summit as an opportunity to reach out to civil society and academia, including in Australia and New Zealand.

For example, FIRST worked with the Consumer Council of Fiji to organize a panel discussion that focused on how universities, consumer groups and the media can engage actively in this collective dialogue.

Another example was a partnership created with *Pacific Island Food Revolution (PIFR)*, a reality TV show about cooking that focuses on affordable, uncomplicated traditional dishes based on readily available local products, featuring an inclusive cast in terms of age, gender and sexual orientation.

Filmed in Fiji, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu and broadcast on prime-time TV, *PIFR* quickly garnered a huge following, with major public figures such as the President of Fiji, the Prime Minister of Samoa and the Crown Princess of Tonga all making guest appearances.

PIFR founder and executive director Robert Oliver MNZM, an award-winning author and chef who specializes in Pacific cuisine, explained the reason for the success of the format:

We reconnected people with the great possibilities in their own homes, their own grandma's knowledge and their own culture, and it felt good. It isn't just about the food, it's also about a revival of identity. The TV show is like a heartbeat that created a fantastic social momentum.

PIFR also has a significant presence on social media, where it disseminates videos and infographics about food – where it comes from, what it contains, and how it affects health and the environment.

Oliver describes the overall *PIFR* approach as “the promotion and advocacy and restoration of the original Pacific food system and cuisine, which is valuable not just in terms of health but also in terms of mitigating climate change, economic development and cultural conservation.”

Among the virtues of *PIFR* is that it makes the connection between food systems and their climate-related implications in terms that everyone can understand, and offers simple, actionable ways for individuals to do their part for personal, family and environmental health. This in itself is empowering.

The reasoning behind this nexus is that local food requires local agriculture, which is generally practised in a traditional, organic way. Local cuisine therefore rejuvenates indigenous farming methods and at the same time cuts down on imported food, with its associated production and transportation emissions. As Oliver points out:

*Everyone in the Pacific, no matter who you are, understands that climate change is the issue of the moment. What I've observed, and this is true for the NCD crisis as well, is that people feel powerless and overwhelmed by the news and the numbers. And the governments are feeling the same. And what we're saying through *PIFR* is – you*

PACIFIC ISLAND FOOD REVOLUTION **THE TRUE COST OF FOOD**

- Support local farmers
- Promote local resilient food systems
- Celebrate local cuisine & local foods
- Reduce food imports
- Promote healthy lifestyle
- Local solution to a global problem!
- Increase risk of obesity & NCDs
- Increase imports & foreign dependency
- Loss of local food systems
- Increase in carbon emission & climate impacts
- Increase food wastage
- Do we really need this?

© Pacific Island Food Revolution (PIFR)

can do something yourself. Any practical solution you offer and bring into people's homes is a form of empowerment.

According to Oliver, systems thinking is embedded in food because it intersects with tourism, health, climate change and cultural heritage.

We can bring all these sectors with us through our social approach to reviving valuable Pacific food systems, which did really well for a long, long time. The indigenous varieties have been through it all, and they're the ones that do best.

A SHIFT IN NARRATIVE...

The COVID-19 crisis highlighted the precarity of local food systems in Pacific Island Countries and their dependency on the outside world.

The pandemic also brought other kinds of change: women spoke out more due to food insecurity in the home, and governments, the private sector and development partners fielded new apps and technologies to service isolated rural communities.

These upheavals in turn led to an attempt to look more broadly at how the entire food system and its drivers play a key role in malnutrition in all its forms. It also sparked a search for untapped opportunities whose potential had not yet been harnessed – for example, using agroforestry and ridge to reef approaches to produce food in diversified and sustainable ways.

...founded on high-quality data

Underlying this shift in narrative was the collection and updating of relevant data and its use to generate solid analysis, using language and tools – such as key messages and policy briefs – that stakeholders can easily relate to and adopt as a basis for policy dialogue.

For example, FIRST worked with the Fiji Agriculture Census of 2020 to incorporate age and gender-disaggregated data. This shift increased the visibility of actors who may be potential game changers in agrifood systems, notably women and youth, who make up a significant part of the rural population.

Other examples include FIRST's efforts to partner with academia to conduct food systems assessments and provide support for the monitoring and evaluation work of Fiji's Ministry of Agriculture.

TRADE-OFFS: ECOLOGICAL, INDUSTRIAL OR BOTH?

FIRST also helped focus the conversation on managing trade-offs to achieve multiple goals – a topic that had not previously received much attention at the regional level. Dori Patay, a University of Sydney researcher who consulted with FIRST in the Pacific, explained the process:

We took a holistic perspective and looked at the entire food supply chain – from crop cultivation, fisheries and livestock to food processing, distribution and retail, to consumption. Trade-offs occur all along this chain and governments must deal with them. This is a very complex and difficult thing to pull off.

Investing in one area might generate economic benefits but produce poor health and environment outcomes. Conversely, investing in another area might provide social and ecological benefits but not economic ones.

An example of such a trade-off lies in farming, where the governments of Pacific Island Countries and some development partners have privileged intensive, export-oriented cash crops such as cocoa, coconut, kava, palm oil, sugar and taro. This approach has its upsides and downsides. Farmers earn good incomes relatively quickly, but their diets become less diverse. They sell their crop mostly for export and use the money to buy food for their families at the supermarket.

The intensive methods of cash cropping also deplete the soil. In addition, one extreme weather event can wipe out entire plantations – a lack of resilience that can leave farmers with no income as well as no food. The prevalence of these methods has increased in recent years, a trend that “exacerbated during COVID, when a lot of people lost their jobs and turned to cash crops”, as Dori Patay explained.

On the other end of the same continuum are traditional Pacific farmers who practise agroforestry and agroecology to grow a mix of fruit and nut trees and vegetables, using nature-based pest control and allowing fallow periods between crops. These environmentally friendly methods provide diverse, nutritious foods and are more resilient because the mix of plants ensures that some species will survive an extreme weather event. The downside is that the short-term revenues they bring are insufficient to pay the bills, buy medicine and send children to school. Dori Patay elaborates:

These kinds of trade-offs happen all along the food supply chain. At the end of the day, the agro-industrial and agro-ecological approaches are on opposite ends of the

scale. The reality is that people need money as well as food security, health and protection against climate change. So, what we need is a balance, one that does not privilege one extreme over the other, but instead offers a mix between the two.

The key to making this happen is governance: the ability to bring different government agencies with their varying mandates and objectives to the same table to discuss trade-offs and agree collectively on strategy. This also includes the need to understand the power dynamics in the region.

According to Patay, “the food systems space in Pacific Island Countries includes multinationals, development partners and large neighbouring countries with different interests”. In this context, as Itziar Gonzalez explained, “trade-offs are not black and white. We presented a continuum of options, and showed the results of each so that policymakers could make informed decisions”.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR MULTISECTORAL POLICYMAKING

When FIRST launched in 2016, the policymaking dialogue around food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture was the purview solely of agriculture and health ministries. By the time it wrapped up in December 2022, the narrative had shifted to agrifood systems transformation. This broader discussion involved many more ministries, agencies and institutions as well as academia, civil society and the media.

Vinesh Kumar served as Permanent Secretary for Agriculture in Fiji up until 2023. According to him,

FIRST was instrumental in providing policy guidance, having a pragmatic approach, bringing all the stakeholders together and working with them to create networks. We believe these are very strong platforms and networks, which we will capitalize on.

One example of how this shift in thinking was reflected in policymaking is Fiji’s Policy on Food and Nutrition Security (FPFNS), which brings together the ministries of Agriculture, Education, Health, Heritage and the Arts, Industry, Trade and Tourism, Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, and Youth and Sports to address the NCDs and growing anemia and obesity issue in the country.

The FPFNS, which is to be submitted to Cabinet, is a whole-of-government policy designed to cascade down to programmes and practices that will optimize healthy lifestyles, prevent and reduce NCDs, and combat

environmental degradation. Approval of the FPFNS will be a big first step and will set the stage for the coordination of multisectoral efforts to improve food security and nutrition for the people of Fiji.

Another example is Vanuatu’s Good Food Policy 2020–30, the main objectives of which are to promote affordable, nutritious and sustainable diets based on local food that comes from climate smart agriculture, and to reduce the consumption of unhealthy imported products.

Vanuatu’s Good Food Policy represents the shared commitment of the ministries of Agriculture, Health, Trade, Internal Affairs, Education, and Land and Natural Resources as well as the private sector, civil society organizations, and other government agencies and partners. The island nation is in the process of establishing a Food Systems Council to coordinate its implementation.

THE WAY FORWARD

Despite these achievements, Pacific Island Countries still face an uphill battle. One challenge is duplication of efforts, which in turn are not spread across the entire food system. For example, according to Patay,

There is a lot of attention to food production, especially cash crops, but limited attention to distribution or retail. If you look at production but don’t sort out the supply chain all the way to market, all you end up with is more food waste. This is not going to solve issues of poverty, health or environmental degradation.

The governments of Pacific Island Countries have recognized the need for better policy coordination and coherence across food system actors and sectors and are asking development partners for guidance on how to set up multisectoral governance structures. This will enhance the ability of Pacific Island Countries to successfully address the many interconnected challenges they face as they strive to provide affordable, diverse, nutritious and sustainable food for all. ●

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From food aid to a systems approach for structural, long-term change, placing family farmers at the centre

Coffee cherry harvest, Santa Evelina, Quiche province, Guatemala © FAO/Santiago Billy

GUATEMALA: CRAFTING NEW AND MORE INCLUSIVE FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION POLICIES



GUATEMALA'S FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION GOVERNANCE SYSTEM

Steering the ongoing agrifood systems transformation towards greater sustainability requires collective action by a broad range of stakeholders: government and civil society, producers and consumers, the private sector and academia. Each has distinctive interests and holds varying degrees of power, which in turn determines whose views and voices are heard.

In general, priorities for investing in agrifood systems tend to vary according to different political agendas. Understanding existing governance and political economy contexts is thus key to bringing about change in the food system. This

includes mindsets and power relations as well as policies and resources.

In the case of Guatemala, 10.5 million out of the population of around 18 million were moderately or severely food insecure on average in 2020–2022, according to FAO (2022). Successive governments have supported collective action to improve food security and nutrition (FSN) through multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder coordination mechanisms at the municipal, departmental and national levels.

The country's FSN challenges are addressed through a legal, regulatory and programmatic framework, with a rights-based approach that consists of two laws: the 2005 Law on the National Food Security and Nutrition System (SINASAN) and the 2006 National Food Security and Nutrition Policy (POLSAN).

The governance system is composed of four bodies: the National Council for Food Security and Nutrition (CONASAN), the Secretariat for Food Security and Nutrition of the Presidency of the Republic (SESAN), the Consultation and Social Participation Body (INCOPAS) and the Group of Supporting Institutions (GIA), which includes United Nations agencies, embassies and development agencies from various countries.

INCOPAS was created under the SINASAN law as a communication channel and participatory space where representatives of ten sectors can make FSN-related proposals. The sectors are: Indigenous Peoples, family farmers (campesinos), women, trade unions, business, the Catholic Church, Evangelical churches, academia, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and professional associations. INCOPAS' budget is earmarked mainly for administration and is incorporated into the SESAN budget.

CONASAN is the national policy and decision-making body. It is chaired by the Vice President of the Republic and consists of representatives from eight ministries, three central government secretariats, one municipal body, five INCOPAS organizations and two business sector entities. Decisions are taken by vote, with each member allotted one vote per representative. The government holds a comfortable majority. In the case of a deadlock, the Vice President of the Republic casts the deciding vote (FAO, 2024).

A COMPLEX REALITY

Despite having a sound institutional structure on paper, Guatemala has faced several obstacles to translating this commitment into real change on the ground.



Farmer holding green peppers, Talquézal, Guatemala © Pep Bonet/NOOR for FAO



As in many other countries, implementation of intersectoral coordination has been obstructed by political instability, a high turnaround of personnel, unequal distribution of decision-making power, weak dialogue between policymakers and those implementing decisions on the ground, and lack of resources at the local level (FAO, 2024).

To bridge the gap between a country's institutional FSN architecture and its effective implementation, compromises need to be made in favour of a shared vision. This requires the ability to navigate power asymmetries, lack of trust between sectors and actors, and friction between different stakeholder interests.

DIFFERENT VISIONS OF FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION

Policymakers were aided in their efforts to tackle complex and interrelated FSN challenges by FIRST, which was active in Guatemala from 2017 to 2022. The programme started by conducting governance and political economy assessments and diagnostics to better understand why, despite years of high-level commitment to reduce food insecurity and malnutrition, progress was slow.

FIRST helped the government reflect on how it had framed the country's FSN problems, locate gaps in policy design, and identify political, institutional and financial bottlenecks that prevented it from achieving meaningful impact for its population.

This involved an iterative process in close consultation with stakeholders across multiple sectors. Technical inputs were provided by the European Union, FAO, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement (SUN), covering a range of perspectives: gender, institutional development, financing, nutrition, political economy, poverty and more.

FIRST found differences among stakeholders in the conceptual understanding of FSN. This translated into a tendency to consider food insecurity and malnutrition as a problem existing mainly in a specific region (i.e. the so-called *Corredor Seco* or Dry Corridor) that could be resolved through food aid, rather than perceiving it as a structural poverty-related issue requiring a multisectoral, multi-stakeholder approach. In addition, chronic malnutrition was regarded mainly as a health issue and was addressed primarily by the Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance (MSPAS).

José Valls Bedeau, who served as FIRST Policy Officer from 2017 to 2019, spoke about this disconnect:

When I first arrived in Guatemala, talking about food insecurity was almost synonymous with talking about food assistance, and it was difficult to shift the dialogue to salaries or employment or equal participation in value chains.

Finding entry points to facilitate change

The key governance challenge therefore involved changing mindsets within government institutions, and then finding ways to deepen the level of interaction among all actors in order to stimulate a genuine dialogue between decision-makers and those implementing policies on the ground.

To do so, FIRST adopted a flexible approach, working with SESAN at the policy level, with the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Food (MAGA) at the operational level, and with INCOPAS at the advocacy level. The programme monitored the political landscape to identify emerging windows of opportunity to bring about change.

Ricardo Rapallo, former FAO Representative in Guatemala and current FAO Senior Governance and Policy Officer, underscored the impact of the programme:

FIRST prepared the ground for actions that are being taken now. The vision of the current authorities allows them to take advantage of much of the work that was carried out during the six years of the programme

A MILESTONE: A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO UPDATING THE NATIONAL FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION POLICY

One concrete window of opportunity was the decision taken by the Secretariat for Food Security and Nutrition during the previous government to adopt an inclusive and participatory process to updating the 2006 National Food Security and Nutrition Policy. This resulted in the development of the 2022–2037 POLSAN, which was carried over by the new government.



Luis Alfredo Nufio harvests tomatoes in Talquezal, Guatemala © Pep Bonet/NOOR for FAO

To support SESAN during this process, FIRST helped convene national consultations. These drew over 4 200 participants from civil society, the business sector, international development agencies and SINASAN institutions. FIRST also facilitated coordination at the territorial level through departmental and municipal FSN commissions, and tabled evidence on the FSN situation in the country – its underlying structural causes, its effects on different segments of the population, and its links to existing legal and juridical frameworks.

The 2022–2037 POLSAN was approved by the National Council for Food Security and Nutrition, and functions as a permanent strategic framework for FSN cooperation between the public sector, civil society and international development agencies, as well as a key pillar of the country's national food systems agenda.

In a first for Guatemala, the updated POLSAN refers explicitly to the promotion of sustainable food systems as a main objective in the quest for universally accessible, healthy, nutritious, sufficient and culturally relevant food. It also contains specific cross-cutting actions on climate change as well as wages, salaries and food advertising. Ricardo Rapallo commented on this process:

The authorities recognized the value of the POLSAN, [which was a direct continuation of the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS)]. It contains a roadmap for the next ten years and introduces the notions of food systems transformation. This represents a concrete contribution by FIRST, after a participatory process with more than two years of discussions.

The updated POLSAN signalled a paradigm shift in the country's approach to FSN, from emergency interventions, mainly consisting of food deliveries to alleviate acute malnutrition, to long-term integrated engagement.

According to Moncayo, the Guatemalan government also increased its financial commitment, with the public budget allocated to FSN increasing from 5 billion quetzal (USD 640 million) to 10 billion quetzal (almost USD 1.3 billion).

A SECOND MILESTONE: INCOPAS PRIORITIZES FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

Recognizing that food systems transformation requires policy dialogue and meaningful participation inclusive of all views and voices, FIRST worked with INCOPAS to promote civil society participation and representation in decision-making venues. For example, it supported the development of instruments by INCOPAS to increase its

capacity for management, advocacy and participation in dialogues with SESAN.

Gabriela Lima, who represented the NGO sector during her 2021–2023 tenure as INCOPAS coordinator, recalls:

At that time, not everyone was an expert in food security and nutrition, and we were able to train each of the sectors in the subject and, above all, in the legal and political frameworks that govern FSN in our country, so that we could be very clear about our functions.

FIRST also helped INCOPAS implement the activities outlined in its 2018–2022 Strategic Plan, and facilitated dialogues and workshops between the ten sectors to formulate the Strategic Plan for 2023–2027. As with the updated POLSAN, the latest INCOPAS plan also makes the food systems approach a priority for action. According to Lima,

Each sector has its own interests which may respond specifically to one of the aspects or components of the food systems approach. Those [within INCOPAS] who represent the women's sector are interested in how we can provide quality services for women and address related structural causes, and those who are farmers [are interested] in how we can create value chains so they can market their products more easily. Each of the sectors [within INCOPAS] contributed [to our joint vision], and perhaps because of the orientation we received from FAO, we went very much towards the food systems approach.

Marco Moncayo, who served as FIRST Policy Officer from 2019 to 2022, also spoke about the new plan:

At the end of 2022 we received the updated INCOPAS plan, and it was impressive, because it talks about food systems through a civil society lens.

A THIRD MILESTONE: THE MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, LIVESTOCK AND FOOD MOVES ITS FOCUS AWAY FROM FOOD AID

FIRST helped MAGA to broaden its vision on FSN from an emergency perspective to a sustained focus on smallholder farmers and the structural challenges they face. Chronic malnutrition, traditionally the responsibility of the Ministry of Health, was integrated into this new vision, which adopted a multi-sectoral and multi-dimensional approach.

This shift entailed moving away from visible short-term benefits to a longer-term commitment that extends beyond the four-year lifespan of a sitting government. For example, in 2016, 80 percent of the MAGA budget was earmarked



Isabela de la Cruz Medina, 22, picks coffee cherries with her family, Santa Evelina, Quiché province, Guatemala © FAO/Santiago Billy

for food deliveries, with the number of families receiving those deliveries used as the indicator to measure success. Collaboration with FIRST led to the adoption of a new indicator: the number of households with improved access to food.

To facilitate this shift, FIRST promoted reflection within MAGA to develop a plan for its institutional strengthening and supported the implementation of the institutional reform plan. It achieved this by mediating dialogue between different units within the Ministry and among senior leadership, fostering a convergence of efforts and interests around FSN.

This shift in vision – from delivering food to vulnerable households to improving rural families’ livelihoods so that they can afford to buy food – is also reflected in more recent policy support requests by the Ministry. For instance, the Vice Minister of Rural Economic Development, Nick Kenner Estrada Orozco, has requested FAO support to design a policy on inclusive and sustainable value chains. Former FIRST Policy Officer Marco Moncayo explained further:

We are now working on a strategy that engages with women, youth and Indigenous Peoples. So far, we have

working groups for avocado, cardamom, cocoa, coffee and honey. For example, we are talking to the National Coffee Association to come up with a strategy for a sustainable coffee value chain that complies with EU import rules, such as zero deforestation and the circular economy. This work will help promote strategic investments through the Hand-in-Hand Initiative in Guatemala. We will also work with MAGA and the Ministry of Economy to support sustainable practices on livestock, maize and beans.

SOFT SKILLS TO NAVIGATE COMPLEX SITUATIONS AND FACILITATE MEANINGFUL CHANGE

FIRST contributed to strengthening the country’s FSN governance system by fostering a shared vision for tackling complex issues. This vision evolved from a medium-term outlook whose implementation period coincided with four-year government terms, to a longer-term one involving several periods of government and aligned with the SDGs. It also supported MAGA with its contribution to the new national FSN agenda, focusing in particular on enabling greater civil society participation in the formulation of these policy instruments.

Despite an institutionally complex context, FIRST's efforts proved effective because it understood the governance and political economy issues that were rendering the country's FSN system ineffective.

During two successive administrations, FIRST Policy Officers functioned as a fundamental part of the FAO team in the country, working with patience, perseverance and flexibility to mediate and facilitate dialogue between election candidates, incoming and outgoing technical cadres, and elected officials.

This was possible thanks to FIRST's capacity to build, in close coordination with the FAO National Office, trusted relationships and positive dialogue with the country's FSN bodies and all relevant actors, and from there to forge broad-based consensus towards shared goals.

The relationship was quite informal. FIRST never took centre stage but rather accompanied different partners in their efforts and helped to introduce higher level topical goals, such as an agrifood system approach, climate change and migration, into policy discussions. Marco Moncayo recounts:

Our office was in the Food Security Secretariat building, so we had front row seats to what the institution was doing. This meant understanding tensions, power asymmetries, different political interests and where there was mistrust.

Being located within a state institution allowed FIRST to maintain an open channel of dialogue with the sitting government, while at the same time advocating for the country's FSN system to become more inclusive. Moncayo elaborated:

Working with MAGA and SESAN was key to keeping our neutrality and maintaining a systemic perspective. It also helped all the stakeholders, including civil society, to see that we were there to support a process and the final result, and not their individual organizations.

OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE: REMAINING CHALLENGES

Decision-makers do not need to become experts to understand agrifood systems and their trade-offs, but policy dialogue does need to be well-designed, supported by evidence and facilitated to bring in a diversity of views to generate joint learning, shared knowledge and action by all concerned. Such processes are context-specific and take time.

One challenge that remains concerns civil society. While FIRST contributed to strengthening INCOPAS and its relationships and roles within SINASAN, it has yet to reach its full potential. FAO Governance Expert Marco Mezzera assessed the value of INCOPAS in the context of FIRST's work in the country:

I was positively impressed that INCOPAS exists because this kind of mechanism is a missing link in many countries. It was designated by law, which is really significant in terms of the understanding that to address food security and nutrition, you need to institutionalize the presence of civil society in your decision-making and policy planning mechanisms at the national level.

Civil society in Guatemala is committed to making INCOPAS stronger, according to Gabriela Lima, who also called on development partners for continued support:

I think it is clear to civil society that we need to work harder and strengthen INCOPAS more, because it is a legally won space in which the needs of Guatemalans can be expressed and channelled. I would urge international partners to continue supporting processes that strengthen the capacities of civil society. Democracy in Guatemala is not mature yet and it requires strengthening. Civil society must associate and work together to better understand its key role as social auditor and its capacity to generate proposals based on the realities that each one of us has experienced.

Progress in this area has been made, but short-term projects cannot be expected to catalyse long-term change. Moncayo emphasizes that "What is needed is continuity: the same type of accompaniment and a similar kind of policy support (as FIRST provided), but over the long term".

This continuity is being assured with EU support. Informed by the results of six years of work in the country, a new programme with a policy support component modelled on the FIRST approach was launched officially in 2023. It focuses on the implementation of multisectoral policy instruments to address national FSN issues and will engage directly with the different sectors represented by INCOPAS to strengthen civil society further. ●

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ALBANIA: INVESTING IN AGRITOURISM AS AN ENGINE FOR SHARED PROSPERITY



SEIZING THE POTENTIAL OF TOURISM AS A DRIVER OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT

In recent years, Albania has experienced a significant increase in tourism thanks to its beautiful natural sites, uncontaminated landscapes, wealth of biodiversity and a rich culinary tradition based on diverse agricultural products. This growth has been accompanied by government policies that promote the conservation of natural resources and biodiverse systems. An example of this effort is the establishment in 2023 of the Vjosa Wild River National Park, the first of its kind in Europe to be protected by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

In 2020, industries related directly to tourism contributed 3.1 percent (INSTAT, 2021) to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), while the sector's total contribution – including wider effects from investment and the supply chain – was about 17 percent, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council (USAID, nd). Incoming tourist flows more than doubled in under a decade, from 4 million in 2016 to 8.4 million in January–October 2023, while INSTAT (2024) data show that over 10 million foreign citizens entered the country in 2023 (Euronews, 2024).

Albania's domestic economy and infrastructure are being stimulated to meet the higher demand of this increasing number of tourists, who are seeking quality local food and related services. Fostering the agritourism sector is one way to address this demand, in particular by creating new market opportunities and leveraging its potential as a driver of rural development.

Most agritourism facilities in Albania are based on the farm-to-fork model, with working farms also equipped with restaurants offering traditional cuisine. Conserving agrobiodiversity, protecting indigenous plants, and promoting sustainable and traditional agricultural and food manufacturing practices have therefore become an integral part of the agritourism approach.

Promoting sustainable agritourism among urban consumers will catalyse the development of food systems that provide nutritious food grown through environmentally friendly methods, while also generating opportunities to drive economic expansion and improve incomes and livelihoods in rural areas.

THE RURAL–URBAN GAP

Although agriculture makes a significant contribution to the national economy, accounting for 19.3 percent (INSTAT, 2021a) of GDP and 33.8 percent (INSTAT, 2021b) of the total employment rate, the majority of Albania's economic output is generated by its cities. In 2022, Tirana and Durrës, the two largest municipalities, contributed 43 percent and 10 percent to GDP, respectively. Overall, urban production is around 11 times greater than rural production (World Bank, 2017), while the population living in cities is only 1.3 times that living in the countryside.

Infrastructure and an adequate labour force are insufficient in rural areas, where an estimated 85 percent of the country's cultivated land is made up of small family farms with an average size of 1.2 hectares (FAO, 2020). These constraints lead young women and men to migrate to cities or other countries in search of economic opportunities.

In addition, the ageing farm population is struggling to keep up with technological innovations and changing consumer preferences, and despite exemplary cases of agri-entrepreneurs modernizing their production practices, the majority of locally grown products still face obstacles to meeting safety and quality standards as well as the demands of the market.





Women from a production cluster showcase products grown and prepared at their agritourism farms during a traditional festival in Katundishtë, held in August 2023. © FAO

ALBANIA'S VISION FOR CHANGE

In the wake of the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit and in an effort to close the rural–urban gap, Albania’s government elaborated a national pathway that lays out its vision for the future – one of shared prosperity driven by cohesive efforts from all food systems actors to improve rural livelihoods, food security and productivity; deliver safe, quality food that promotes consumer health and wellbeing; and increase the country’s capacity to adapt to climate change.

To achieve this, the national pathway lays out a set of priorities for the next decade: to develop agritourism and short value chains as drivers of rural development; to establish an effective system of food safety, veterinary and plant protection; to guarantee the sustainable use of natural resources and environmental protection; and to promote climate change mitigation and adaptation.

WHY A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO TACKLE AGRITOURISM CHALLENGES?

Agritourism lends itself to a systems approach because it brings together many interrelated sectors: agriculture, tourism, infrastructure, marketing, food, culture and local economies. The systems approach is about bringing together different sectors, stakeholders and disciplines to arrive at a common understanding of the key blockages to change as

well as emerging opportunities for growth, and to jointly devise and implement a set of interrelated actions that can achieve multiple outcomes.

These outcomes include entrepreneurial diversification, branding and marketing local food products, promoting environmentally friendly agriculture, preserving local biodiversity and food traditions, empowering women as innovative agribusiness managers, increasing agricultural literacy and more.

A systems approach also means foreseeing and mitigating potential unintended consequences, such as the impact of increased tourist traffic on local residents and natural resources, or competition between farms or other related businesses.

ACCOMPANYING ALBANIA TO BRIDGE THE RURAL–URBAN GAP

Starting in 2022, FAO accompanied Albania in its agrifood transition, applying a systems approach through the SFD-MED initiative.

As a first step, the SFS-MED project convened local dialogues in the municipalities of Belsh, Permet and Shkoder. These brought together agritourism entrepreneurs, male and female farmers, micro-finance institutions, municipality

representatives, agricultural extension service providers and vocational training institutes including culinary schools.

Together, these stakeholders reflected on challenges and opportunities and identified ways to upgrade Albanian agritourism through collaboration across their respective sectors and disciplines. The collective goals were to generate income and produce more diversified foods in environmentally friendly ways.

The dialogues created a safe and inclusive space in which people felt heard and empowered to voice their concerns and ideas in a publicly recognized platform. This approach fostered a newfound willingness among diverse stakeholders to navigate their differences, engage in meaningful dialogue and explore how they could collaborate more effectively.

For example, one realization that emerged from these dialogues was the need for close collaboration between vocational schools, agrifood businesses and rural communities to equip local youth with the skills to become the agrifood innovators of the future. As dialogue participant Eldi Ceko explained:

The younger generation has the right attitude to implement better business models, but they lack experience and financing opportunities to start businesses.

Ceko runs the ABA Centre, which provides business consulting and advisory services for farmers as well as an online platform and workshops, training and practical demonstrations in the field.

At the same time, this process showcased how national-level processes can be grounded in territorial realities, with greater accountability and agency at the local level. Thanks to these dialogues, participants worked together to synthesize their inputs into a national roadmap for food systems transformation, using agritourism as an entry point.

The roadmap includes improved land tenure schemes, mandatory training to guarantee service quality and environmental standards, support for branding linked to designation of origin labels, and efforts to mitigate climate change through, for example, renewable energy, afforestation and the use of drought-resistant plant varieties.

This collective vision was shared with the government at a national consultation co-chaired by the Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, the UN Resident Coordinator and the FAO Representative in Albania. The consultation was attended by the Ministry of Tourism and Environment as well as representatives from academia,





Farmers attend a training session on vegetable seedling production and disease management. © FAO

agrifood business operators, civil society, government agencies and the UN.

Irfan Tarelli, General Director at the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and National Convenor of Albania's UN Food Systems Summit, underlined the importance of these dialogue-driven consultations at this meeting:

The interventions we heard today confirmed that considering agritourism as a vehicle for food systems transformation is a priority, given the importance of both tourism and agriculture for our economy. Albania's food system can be transformed if we are able to innovate, for example through new partnerships, upgraded technologies and creative educational models.

As a cross-cutting area, agritourism can help us coordinate efforts across different institutions. I welcome platforms like today's dialogue and the various dialogues that preceded it, which helped unite all stakeholders and guide them into prioritizing multiple issues and sustainability dimensions. Platforms like these enable a continued conversation and communication between public agencies, donors, civil society and business operators.

This process highlighted the significance of building bottom-up and top-down consensus to stimulate collaboration among stakeholders. It also showed the importance of

facilitating connections between people, sectors and levels of governance in order to establish a shared sense of direction that is grounded in the local context.

SHARED LEARNING THROUGH CLUSTERS AND MORE

The SFS-MED project also facilitated shared learning and enabled networking beyond the meeting room. For example, the project piloted one of the actions identified in the collective roadmap, bringing a group of agritourism entrepreneurs together to form a production cluster in order to enhance their methods, improve product quality and connect with neighbouring farms to supplement each other's produce.

It did so by linking them with agronomists in the form of a local NGO called the Rural Association Support Programme (RASP) and a seed bank. Cluster members, located in the area of Permet, received training on sustainable farming practices including reduced water and pesticide use, organic composting and drip irrigation. They also received support to organize open days at their farms in a bid to seek clients collectively instead of individually.

These open days were instrumental in establishing connections between rural suppliers and urban consumers, while raising

awareness about sustainable farming and local plant varieties and food products.

In another example, the SFS-MED project organized a study tour to the southern Puglia region of Italy, where Albanian agritourism entrepreneurs learned how their Italian colleagues combine organic farming with tourism, to offer traditional cuisine based on locally sourced ingredients.

The visit also included meetings with representatives from the local Italian government and development agencies, who illustrated the importance of a conducive legislative and institutional environment to support collaboration between agritourism entrepreneurs.

WHAT IS STARTING TO CHANGE?

For many participants, these local and national dialogues marked the first time that they had come together to discuss agrifood systems. This motivated them to leave their niche sectors and envision new pathways to sustainable development. Eldi Ceco from the ABA Centre highlighted the importance of this approach:

I learned that agritourism entrepreneurs need to act as guides for farmers in their area, [offering advice on] how to produce, what to produce and when it will be needed. [Farmers] should combine their business with the small family businesses around them. This happens already, but it's sporadic; we must push this more as a business model because there is agritourism potential everywhere in Albania's rural areas.

The Lile family farm and restaurant, located near the Bënja Thermal Baths in the Vjosa Wild River National Park, is an example of a virtuous leader in the local area. Their clientele hail from all over Albania as well as Italy, Germany, the Russian Federation and the United States.

The Liles grow their own fruit and vegetables and serve them in their highly successful country restaurant, which features traditional Albanian and Greek cuisine. The Liles also make wine, gliko, a traditional fruit preserve, and raki, a distilled liquor that is popular in the Balkans and the southern Mediterranean. Products not made or cultivated by the family are bought from other farmers, including “milk, cheese, potatoes, maybe eggs when we don't have them”, as Fabja Lile, 18, explains.



Foreign tourists visit a stand showcasing local products during an open day in Katundishtë village, Këlcyrë, Përmet. © FAO



Tourists and farmers harvest local vegetable varieties from the garden at Lile farm. © FAO

The Liles have received support from RASP, which provided training on irrigation techniques, reducing pesticide use, composting, networking with other farmers, and increasing their visibility through labelling and showcasing products at fairs. Fabja elaborates:

They helped us, but not just with material things like building a greenhouse so we can grow vegetables year-round, they also helped expand our minds. Until this year, my parents ran their business all on their own. We didn't know this kind of help was available. Now we are more hopeful and more open to learning from other organizations.

Another significant change is the recent establishment within the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of an agritourism department tasked with liaising with the Ministry of Tourism and Environment to implement joint actions. The collective roadmap could become the backbone of this department.

OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

The SFS-MED pilot activities demonstrated that when smallholder farmers and agri-entrepreneurs adopt improved production and business practices and cooperate

in clusters, they can access more profitable markets and offer safer, higher quality products. The feedback from the field indicates positive outcomes from the activities: the participants' livelihoods improved and their methods became more sustainable.

To sustain and support the ongoing transformation, there is a need for continued application of a systems approach to connect stakeholders from different sectors and transcend silos, both at the policy level and in the field. This means identifying champions with national and local visibility who can provide leadership and advocacy.

Conversations with ministries and local funding agencies are ongoing to mobilize resources to implement some of the priorities in the collective roadmap. These include setting up clusters between the Tirana market and small agritourism farms offering safe, local products.

Another option that could yield gains for agritourism is to promote climate-smart, digitally connected pastoralism to safeguard mountain biodiversity and improve the lives of shepherds and their communities through tourist itineraries. ●

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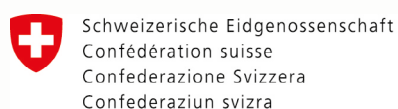
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