

# Transforming Food Systems

## Directions for Enhancing the Catalytic Role of Donors

A WHITE PAPER BY THE GLOBAL DONOR PLATFORM  
FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This white paper by the Global Donor Platform for Rural Development (GDPRD) charts directions for how donors can support food systems transformation to follow up on the United Nations Food Systems Summit (FSS) and accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It builds on work that the GDPRD has completed over the past two years as contributions to the Summit process.

Global donors (bilateral agencies, financial institutions, development banks and philanthropic foundations) have a critical role to play in helping to leverage change in food systems through the investments they make, the innovations they support and the international and multi-actor collaboration they enable. Achieving a transition to sustainable food systems will require deep structural changes in societal understanding, in how markets function, in public policy and expenditure, and in processes of innovation, all of which are influenced by power relations and vested interests. To be effective, donors will have to focus on interventions that create the enabling conditions for systemic change, are responsive and adaptive to rapidly changing circumstances, and tackle the political economic barriers to sustainable and equitable development.

The need for profound changes in food systems – the **why** of food systems transformation – has been unambiguously laid out with backing from heads of state and numerous civil society, business and research groups. High ambitions have been set for **what** is needed to deliver on healthy diets, zero hunger, decent earnings for all food system actors, the preservation of biodiversity and ecosystems, and climate change adaptation and mitigation. However, to realize these ambitions will require much more attention to the **how** of food systems transformation to ensure practical and feasible pathways for action, particularly at national and local levels.

The analysis for this paper leads to three overarching implications for donors:

- **Coordination, alignment, integration and coherence:** Food systems transformation will not be achieved without coordination among actors, alignment of investments and initiatives, integration across sectors and a commitment to policy coherence.
- **Tackling the structural barriers to change:** To be effective in supporting food systems transformation, donors will need to pay more attention to the structural barriers and enabling conditions for change, and the associated power dynamics of differing stakeholder interests.
- **Adopting a systemic approach:** The FSS has made explicit the importance of a systems approach in addressing food-related issues and development

challenges. This means accepting and working with the complexity and uncertainty inherent in intervening in human and natural systems and managing in a flexible, adaptive and learning-oriented way.

There is widespread acknowledgement that the Summit was very successful in putting food systems on the international agenda, engaging numerous interest groups (though not all), and having heads of state articulate the need to transform food systems to achieve the SDGs.

Commitments for change were made by over 230 organisations or groups and over 100 members states put forward national pathways for transformation. However, some actors, depending on their view of the purpose of the Summit, remain concerned that no clear global level road map and commitment for change emerged.

While much of value has been achieved by the process leading up to the Summit and by the Summit itself, maintaining momentum and reaping the dividends from this will be highly dependent on the effectiveness of coordinated follow-up action.

In this context, Section 4 of the paper details actions that can be taken by donors across the following seven areas:

- Strengthening coordination among donors and other actors to support national pathways for food systems transformation
- Mobilizing responsible investment in food systems from the public and private sectors
- Promoting engagement of private sector actors and value chain innovation for sustainable development
- Supporting policy innovation
- Investing in research and data systems
- Strengthening governance for food systems transformation
- Strengthening universal social protection mechanisms, disaster preparedness and emergency relief programmes.

Donors have a particular responsibility to help ensure that food systems transformation is underpinned by attention to inclusion, non-discrimination and human rights, to ensure benefits for all those who live in poverty, suffer from hunger and malnutrition, are in vulnerable situations or experience marginalization. Donors will need to orient their support for food systems transformation to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, calls for building back better and greener, the United Nations Climate Change, Desertification and Biodiversity Conferences (UNFCCC COP26, UNCCD COP15 and CBD COP15), and the Nutrition for Growth Summit, considering guidelines and recommendations from the Committee on World Food Security.

Drawing on the directions presented in this white paper, the GDPRD will support the donor community to follow up the FSS through informal liaison, initiating focused work on priority themes and knowledge-brokering.

